

## Doing Beauty as African Feminists: A Conversation between Aleya Kassam, Fatma Emam, Valérie Bah and Yewande Omotoso

Four feminists from different parts of the continent converse, electronically, about their own beauty practices: Aleya Kassam (33, Kenya); Fatma Emam (33, Egypt); Valérie Bah (29, Benin and Haiti); Yewande Omotoso (35, Nigeria). Moderated by Simidele Dosekun.

**Simidele Dosekun (SD):** Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this conversation and for your patience while we figured out how to make it work. The first set of questions I want to pose is about what you do or do not do: what beauty practices do you engage in, from head to toe (e.g. makeup, hairstyling, dieting/exercise, hair removal, manicures, pedicures, tattooing, etc.)? What do you not engage in? Are there any practices you actively resist and, if so, why?

**Fatma Emam (FE):** Actually I practice almost all of them, but when I feel like indulging myself. Some days I feel okay to have hairy arms or messy eyebrows [and] I get comments from fellow women, family and friends. Once my boyfriend noticed a hair on my chin [and pointed it out] and I replied with “I am ok with my body, however it is.” I think the [beauty] act itself is not problematic but imposing it is the problem. I sometimes do tattooing to assert my Nubian identity; that is part of our culture.

**Yewande Omotoso (YO):** Fatma, I’m curious whether it’s always been that way or when it ‘began’. I ask because it’s changed for me over the years and I get the sense it’s still in flux. As a feminist I think it’s important to think about the question over a period of time versus just in the time the question is asked. I remember the first time I removed all the hair on my legs (which wasn’t much); I was 12 and I used ‘no-hair.’ I was in Nigeria and curious. Then nothing for a few years. In South Africa I read *Cosmo* magazines and didn’t

understand the technique of air-brushing. The ideal of beauty presented was impossible but I wanted it. But I've never done make-up, possibly 'cause my mother didn't. I actually don't like make-up. I don't like the idea of having to 'make-up' a face when I already have one! I want my lips to be the colour they are. I often find people less attractive with their faces made up.

But the hair removal thing has followed me. I've waxed (I no longer do), I've shaved (I occasionally do now, as in every three or four months). I've never had boyfriends who've insisted on it, not sure I'd be into someone who did. I am indoctrinated though, because I do feel more feminine when my legs are hairless and I think that's a problem – that femininity has been so pegged. I really want to resist these notions of femininity even while being a victim of them.

About three years ago I bought mascara – this I enjoy and use on special, going-out occasions. But I've had the same stick for three years, so...! My friends bought me lip gloss, never actual lipstick, which I can't stand. I love what eye pencil does to my eyes but too lazy to do the labour. No base – feels too much like hiding my actual skin. These days I've started doing pedicures and manicures. I've always loved these but not always had the money for it. It might fade away as a thing I do, but currently I do it for fun, I like it (haven't always). Long answer, not even sure I've covered all facets as it's a big question. I'll stop here for now and listen to others.

**Aleya Kassam (AK):** Hair removal has always fascinated me. As an Indian girl, hair removal has been an integral part of my beauty routine, and my wardrobe is planned around what time of month it is; the longer it has been since I have waxed, the longer my hemlines become! On the one hand I resent the imposition on my time on having to arrange waxing appointments, and yet I definitely feel more beautiful hairless. It has an almost ritualistic aspect. We had to wait till we were 13 years old before we could wax, and the first time is always done at home with older aunts and sisters there with you to talk to you, make jokes and take your mind away from the pain. Later on, you are left alone, and what parts of your body you want to wax are up to your discretion.

I have had the same waxing lady coming to my home for years, and when I first started doing a bikini wax, I wondered if I was normal down there... after all, who would have told me if I was? And so I think an interesting relationship develops between your waxing lady and yourself, a very intimate one, where you learn about your body and even sex. It is also very interesting, because

the waxing lady is black Kenyan and I am brown Kenyan, and so you learn about this from a different cultural context.

Beauty acts I actively resist: 1) Straightening my hair regularly. I have learned to love my hair and refuse to change it to fit into other people's definitions of what it should look like, which is odd considering I am willing to remove my body hair because of society's perspective on beauty. My also-general beautification philosophy is that I want to look like me... so I don't want to do anything to myself that makes me look drastically different. I also hate spending time on long beautification rituals... I would so much rather be spending that time gobbling up a book. 2) When we were younger, if we spent a lot of time in the sun and got much darker, my grandparents would make a mixture out of chickpea flour that we had to scrub our faces with to lighten them. I actively, aggressively refuse to do that anymore, and resist the assertion that the lighter your skin the more beautiful you are. Interestingly, in my language, Gujarati, to be 'rupari' is 'to be fair,' and the word is interchangeable to mean 'beautiful.'

**SD:** Fatma, going back, when you say you practice all of them, can you give some examples. Also what kinds of comments do you get from family and friends?

**FE:** For dieting, I was playing handball and stopped for school requirements so I gained weight. That happened in 1999 and since then I have been on a diet or sort of system of eating to lose weight because I gained a huge amount after stopping sports. I wear size 18. As for the comments, my mum forced us to relax our hair when we were younger, me and my sister. I have stopped now and I am doing this cause I am comfortable with myself and I hate to follow orders.

**SD:** Val, what about you? What practices do you engage in or resist? I'm interested also in what you all think about Fatma's comment about not engaging in certain practices because she's 'comfortable with herself'? Would you also frame your decision to not do certain beauty things in terms of a sense of comfort or acceptance of yourself?

**FE:** I want to add something: that one of the comments I get is that I look 'more African' than 'regular Egyptian.' We have a problem with identity politics in Egypt, between being Arab and being African.

**Valérie Bah (VB):** It's interesting that body hair removal has come up over again. I wonder why that's such a central part of female beauty standards?

Is it linked to infantilising women, or making us more aerodynamic or what? I jest... I have tried most hair removal methods: wax, lotion, razor, threading, electrolysis, laser, nuclear warfare. Everything goes: the legs, the toes, the knuckles, etc. And I have the healthiest moustache you've ever seen, which I hide with all my might. Like you, Aleya, hair removal began as a rite of passage when I was in my early teens, except it was alone in the bathroom with a razor I stole from my dad, so nothing as glamorous as a gathering of aunts.

Now makeup: I have embraced it since my mid-20s, the whole gamut, from lipstick to the ever expanding eyebrow. Yewande, I agree with you about 'makeup face.' Wearing it feels like donning a mask approximating my actual face, not more beautiful or younger, but just more... more. In fact, I wear so much of it, and so consistently, that I worry about the implications of having my funeral makeup done by a mortician. Will they get the colours right? Will they overdo my eyes? I should probably tattoo instructions on my buttocks!

In all seriousness, I feel some guilt when I consider the internalised oppression and consumerism that inform these grooming compulsions. This might seem contradictory, but I don't think it has much to do with self-esteem or being comfortable. It seems that the whole 'natural beauty' thing is just another bait that aims to reel us onto the roller-coaster of comparison and inadequacy. It's so fitting that Maybelline asks 'Maybe she's born with it?'

Finally, it may have been easier and faster to start by naming the beauty practices that I resist, since there aren't many. These include whitening and hair straightening; I guess things that are linked to achieving 'whiteness.' Come to think of it, it's funny that my beauty practices would actively resist white supremacy, but not 'ideal womanhood.'

YO: I like the point about internalised oppression. I feel this relates to the question of comfort. I'm not sure how we consider 'comfort with self' in a world constructed the way ours is. What is the quality of that comfort, really? The 'perfect' version of every aspect of our bodies has been decided for us, down to my cuticles, which the lady at the salon tells me I have too much of and I must apply oil each night. If we really inventory the amount of doing we 'must' do, I just wonder about the notion of comfort. I mean, if I lived alone in the world and didn't have to contend with the billboards and the messaging, I would think everything about me is absolutely fine (no cuticle oil required). But against what's been decided not only as beautiful but in many cases as normal – I think that's another thing, we're discussing beauty

but there is a lot in the practices that has been normalised, making it even more dire! So the comfort is always in opposition to all the noise about what ought to be done.

I know you're not specifically asking about fashion, Simi, but another thing is dress, wearing dresses as a beauty practice for instance, because for many years I did not. This wasn't conscious but I just didn't. My garb did not announce my gender and, needless to say, being skinny and not very buxom, I was mistaken for male occasionally, or at least ambiguous. I was horrified at this: the possibility of not being seen and recognised as female. I wear more dresses now. And I think this is another aspect of the conversation, the onus on women to use beauty and beauty practices to signal their gender.

So while I would say I am comfortable with myself, that comfort often amounts to not much. I still have to deal with a world that measures me in certain ways.

AK: My resistance is to the value assignment of beauty in my life. On this thought, I wrote something previously [entitled F\*\*K BEAUTY] that sums up my resistance:

<https://chanyado.wordpress.com/2015/04/13/fk-beauty/comment-page-1/>

YO: Thanks for the piece, Aleya, the title seems on point! Simi, in terms of Val's point re: 'natural beauty,' I do agree that that's just become another platform for commodification, consumerism (because we haven't talked numbers yet but money is definitely part of this, the monetary value of the beauty industry, the endless things we must do and pay for), and as far as I'm concerned, oppression. Quick thing – apparently Hugh Masekela refuses to take pictures with [black] women who wear weaves, and he'll do it publicly, i.e. if a fan comes up to him and asks for a photo, if her hair is braids or 'natural' then fine, but if she's in a weave he will refuse. Other women have spoken up and accused Masekela of 'shaming,' here rejecting [black] women because they aren't performing the so called 'natural beauty' thing.

So it's as if we're screwed either way! The hegemony is so total and all powerful and all consuming. It's so deep and been going for so long (generations and generations), it's so vast... Part of resistance for me is recognising all this and still trying to bring a level of consciousness/honesty to my choices versus thinking I'm somehow above beyond or through it.

Another thing: natural beauty almost has no meaning. In this age (and especially within the middle class) 'natural' is a commodified word. And it costs you. Natural food. Natural hair. If you check out the natural hair videos

on YouTube, the amount of labour and product involved... I'm not knocking it but even in the natural space there are these almost unattainable ideals, these amazingly impossible photos of incredible afros – it's all fine but it's still within some bigger story about beauty and acceptability. It's a different flavour of juice to the weave and heavy make-up world but still juice.

**SD:** I want to change tack a little and ask about the effort, or not, that goes into the beauty practices you've described. Fatma, right at the start of the conversation, used the word 'indulging' to describe when she engages in beauty; Val described a lot of effort, Yewande too; Aleya spoke of the time for waxing, and so on. So the question is: Is beauty work? Is it leisure? Does it depend?

**AK:** For me beauty is definitely work. I certainly do not enjoy the process, but I do enjoy the outcome. So I pick and choose. To be honest, I would so much rather be reading a great book or walking in the forest or even drinking at a bar than sitting in the salon or being waxed. It feels like a chore and sometimes I resent both the time and cost. But I love looking at my shocking pink nails or smooth legs. It feels like a necessary trial. Indulging for me would be going to get a massage or a body scrub or something like that. I certainly make my decisions based on the time it will take and the maintenance requirement – for example I would love to dye my hair, but the thought of maintaining it exhausts me! Maybe my reluctance with certain beauty rituals is less to do with some sort of ideology and more to do with laziness.

**FE:** I agree with Aleya that beauty needs effort, still the result is celebrated. I enjoy the outcome and enjoy myself.

**SD:** What about pain? There's the saying 'beauty is pain.' For me, with things like waxing, apart from thinking about the cost, inconvenience, my political ambivalence about it, slight embarrassment about lying on a table in front of a virtual stranger and exposing myself... is the pain.

**VB:** Oh, how it hurts. It's gendered labour and pain. Worst of all, I don't know how to reconcile it with my politics, as if there's a loop in my head saying, 'you're not worthy unless you do this.' Occasionally, I consider the scenario wherein I am called on some adventure or mission to a remote, fantastical location. I would probably turn it down because, sorry friends, I need to live within a certain radius of a trustworthy salon. What I'm saying is that this beauty ritual thing will probably keep me from transcending, or whatever.

But on the other hand, I wonder if some of the less painful aspects of beauty rituals can be construed as ‘self-care,’ or if that’s a ruse... What do you all think?

Perhaps it’s misguided to try to establish what we should or shouldn’t do with our bodies. That seems like a fool’s errand. Beauty standards are already overdetermined by so many factors. Also, I refuse to go on quests like that of feminist writer, Naomi Wolf, who said that popular images of beauty harm women. Okay, I get it. But I think she meant white American pop culture, which, no... Frankly, I’m not having it. It seems like a way of reasserting the supremacy of those things. I don’t want to centre my pain or beauty within racism, patriarchy, or whatever system of oppression. Don’t deny my interior life.

AK: I think beauty rituals can certainly have an element of self-care. I think for me it comes down to whether I feel like I HAVE to do something, or whether I CHOOSE to do it. So having to have perfect nails all the time for me is exhausting and I would resent the pressure, but picking a weekend to get my nails done with my sister can be lovely – the process in this case is as important to me as the outcome – the spending of time together treating ourselves, and then it sure perks me up to look down and see my neon pink nails. I agree with Val about saying it is misguided to say what we should or shouldn’t do with our bodies... it is precisely when someone says I ‘should’ do something that I feel the kneejerk reaction to shove my middle finger up at them.

SD: Aleya, your comment raises the important point that beauty is not only what we do alone, say in a bathroom at home, but also in community and as a form of relating with other women, family and friends. I must say that in my personal experience I don’t really enjoy getting ‘done up’ with other women, though, mostly because it often translates for me into pressure to do more than I would want to on my own.

The last theme I wanted to touch on is related to this: it’s about who we pay to do beauty work and what kinds of relationships, or not, that we have or develop with such people. Whether hairdressers or manicurists or waxing providers, are there people you go back to regularly? Do you get to know them? Or are you precisely interested in not getting familiar? Is there some kind of intimacy or awkwardness involved in the process? (There is for me, especially with waxing!)

**VB:** Would you all agree with me that a class and race factor determines who does beauty work and how that labour is remunerated? In Montreal, where I am currently based, I go to this Latin American aesthetician who talks openly about how backbreaking her work is and how she wouldn't want it for her daughters. Lo and behold, one day I walk into her parlour and there's a 15-year old girl from the Dominican Republic who has been placed there on a full-time basis by her school administration for an 'internship' because they don't believe she can finish high school. Now, the context behind this is that some Canadian provinces encourage a two-tier education system where some are directed to university studies, i.e. professional fields, while others, mostly people of colour or from working class backgrounds, are told that they should opt for the 'trades' – air conditioning repair, plumbing, and all that. Is it that the trades are less dignified? No, but the skills sure aren't valued in the same way. So, the day the 15-year-old showed up, we were livid. The aesthetician actually got the girl's mother on the phone and said, "don't let them do this."

**YO:** Definitely there is a class issue involved, I agree, Val. It would be interesting for me if a salon had a special situation where the workers could get massages and manicures etc., this might be the case, I'm not sure. In terms of relationships [with beauty providers], I have not been doing this consistently enough in my life to have made any. Some time back in Cape Town I was consistently (in my case that is every few months, seldom monthly) waxing my legs and I got to know the lady doing it. I learnt about her son and their relationship and so on. I also shared about my own situations. I've never had a bikini wax and not really able to get past the level of intimacy required for it. Not to mention the pain!!!!!!! I don't mind engaging if they are willing and open. The conversation is seldom 'deep' though, and it is framed by the setting and the task at hand.

**SD:** I am going to suggest we end the conversation here. One thing that struck me on reading it over as a whole text is that a shared strand in the resistance to beauty norms that we talked about concerns race: resisting practices like hair straightening and skin lightening that are often seen (rightly or wrongly?) as oriented or consenting to 'white' beauty standards; so resisting precisely as *black, brown and Nubian African women?*

Thank you all again for participating!