



ON BEAUTY

## Huma Abedin Doesn't Look at Paparazzi Photos of Herself Anymore

"I didn't necessarily like what I saw and it was sad. That is not a healthy mental place, but I was there."

By Ama Kwarteng

Welcome to On Beauty, a series where we take a deep-dive look into one person's relationship to beauty, how that relationship has transformed over the years, and how they experience being seen. This week, we're talking to Huma Abedin, Hillary Clinton's chief of staff. Born in the United States and raised in Saudi Arabia, Abedin served as Vice Chair of Hillary for America in 2016, was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff at the US Department of State in 2009.

I spoke with Abedin at the Miraval Berkshires Resort & Spa. Below, in her own words, she discusses how growing up in a multicultural environment shaped her view on beauty, moving from behind-the-scenes into the spotlight, her first memoir Both/And: A Life in Many Worlds, and more.



Photo: Brigitte Lacombe

I grew up in a very multicultural, multiracial environment. I thought Saudi women were some of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen and they're mostly veiled when we were outside. But then I would walk into these weddings and women would unveil themselves and it was like a peacock parade of beautiful women. To come from South Asia originally, there's really a culture there where beauty was very specific: tall, fair, and lovely. If you were a girl in [India or Pakistan] that's what you aspired to be. Growing up, I remember my cousins would rub [whitening] cream on their skin. And my Turkish friend, Anita, would do the opposite; she would sit in the sun for hours.

The most beautiful girl in our school was my Nigerian best friend, Fatima. Her and her two older sisters were the hottest girls in school. My concept of beauty wasn't singularly based on the idea that you have to look like a European supermodel. We were in a melting pot. It's not like the majority of people around us were Saudi [even though we attended school in Saudi Arabia]. Everybody was from different spaces and places so you could really accept beauty for what it was. In some ways, I look at someone and think, *that's a beautiful person* rather than thinking, *you should be lighter, you should be darker, you should be taller.*



Photo: Getty Images

When my parents immigrated to the United States in the '60s they had this notion that they would assimilate to their new community while holding true to the cultural and religious values important to them. I still marvel at seeing photos from 1965 where my mom's in a sari and my dad is in his Indian nehru jacket. That's something they passed on to me. I didn't realize it growing up, but it was a gift. I always felt confident being who I authentically was and I didn't have any shame around that. Maybe there were times where people did a double take or didn't necessarily accept me, but I never felt it.

My parents always made sure that they were appropriately dressed and my father wore a suit jacket. There's something to that immigrant mentality, the notion that you're the best of the best from our own communities sent to go [to America] to pursue higher education or professional development. You want to represent in the best possible way. My mother's big thing was our hair being brushed. If my hair looked too wild for her, it was completely unacceptable.

I have noticed that in this country, at least, if you are considered beautiful, it's a double-edged sword. On one hand, it's easier to get certain things done, to get certain answers, to get into certain spaces. On the flip side, I have also found that there was an assumption that if you're considered attractive or you are well-dressed, that perhaps you don't have the intellectual or professional capacity to get the job done.



Photo: Getty Images

In the past, I've been singled out for being well-dressed or attractive and it was a very awkward transition for me. I was always the awkward, gangly one. No one ever stopped and said, 'You're so beautiful.' The first time somebody said that to me, it was an interesting space to be in. Then I began to resent it because I noticed people weren't taking me seriously. I felt like I had to prove myself. I knew I was never the best at anything, I was never the smartest or the prettiest, but I was prepared to work harder than anybody else. And I did that with intention and purpose. I gained the confidence to do my job over time.

I've always liked fashion and I've always liked wearing nice clothes, but I never felt pressure to look a certain way while working at the White House. I wanted to present well, but that was not just in terms of my physical appearance, it was always in how I interacted with people. The only moment I do remember is when I started seeing paparazzi photos of myself and looking at them and thinking, 'Oh, I look big.' I didn't necessarily like what I saw and it was sad. That is not a healthy mental place, but I was there. I remember it was a struggle. So I stopped looking at pictures of myself.

[When I started working for Hillary Clinton] I was very behind-the-scenes and I liked that. To some extent, with this book tour, I'm trying to push my boundaries. When I was a teenager, I was loud and I liked to perform and I would read my poetry in front of a room full of adults. Then I lost my dad and losing the person who taught me to have that confidence had the effect of me shrinking myself into a space that was comfortable. The very first profile written about me was in the *New York Observer* and that set the stage for people to ask, 'Who is this mysterious woman?' Because I was so silent, people could project whatever they wanted to onto me. For many years, I was whatever you wanted me to be. And it was very positive until it wasn't. One of the reasons the book has been so liberating is that it's the first time I'm stepping into the light myself and sharing my story, my beliefs, how I was raised, and where I came from. I think it takes away all of that mysteriousness, but I think that's a good thing. Embracing your power, your identity, who you are, is now more important than ever before.