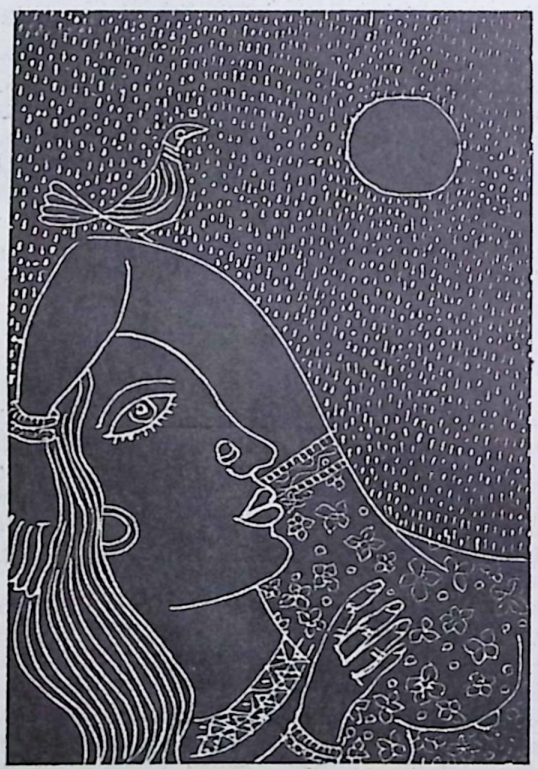
The Poetry in Women's Hair

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When you speak of women's hair, you speak of beauty. There is an element of grace in a woman which has generally sprung from the manner in which she uses her hair or arranges it in a way that brings alive in us a strong sense of poetry. In the old days, and we are speaking of the 1950s and 1960s, Bengali women, in the opinion of many men, were a whole lot more beautiful than they are today because of their long tresses. The hair often went down to below the knees, almost up to the calf. And it was sheer delight watching the owner of all that hair swinging it from one side to another, especially when after a good shower she used a towel to dry it. Nazrul was right when he promised his beloved thus, "debo khonpaye tarar phool."



Biren Shome, *Woman with Bird*, relief print, 2013.

But why Bengali women only? Across the subcontinent, women's hair was, until recently, an integral component of poetry composed on the eternal theme of love. Think back on Mehdi Hasan's *zulf ko teri ghataon ka payam aaya hai* or Mohammad Rafi's *na jhatko zulf se pani ye moti phuut jayenge.* Talat Mahmood takes the theme of hair-based feminine charm a step further with his *zulfon ki sunehri chhaon tale ik aag lagi do deep jale.* In Bangladesh, Bashir Ahmed's *tomar kajol kesh chhoralo boley ei raat emon modhur* remains a topper among songs. Robert Browning had Porphyria's lover strangle her with her long tresses. All this poetry, or call it melody, came at a time when women's hair was long, untouched by modernity. And by that we mean that certain desire on the part of subcontinental women to go western --- through having the scissors run through their long hair and having it come at par with the hair of a typical western woman.

There are women who age with grace. And the grace is defined by their hair as well. Some women, beautiful in youth, grow even more beautiful as they advance in years. Suchitra Mitra is a point of reference here. She kept her hair short; she was every inch an educated, modern Bengali woman. Her hair was salt-and-pepper, more salt than pepper. That lent her beauty exquisiteness of a kind. Feminine beauty, insofar as hair is concerned, was also part of the appeal in the writer Susan Sontag. A pronounced streak of gray gave her an appearance of a woman well-placed to deal with the world on her terms. Much the same was true of Indira Gandhi, whose trademark gray streak in her hair enhanced the beauty of her being. And gray hair, Bill Cosby informs you, is God's graffiti. Brinda Karat, a pre-eminent socialist politician in India, does not have any white streaks in her hair. It is all dark; and sometimes it appears in something of a small bun or is loose and therefore free. Karat is a hugely beautiful woman. The hair adds to her charisma.

Hillary Clinton ages into a terrifically beautiful woman, one reason being the many ways in which she uses her hair. And she knows how her hair can