

Vidya Balan

"I will not be different to be ACCEPTED"

Marie Claire brings together Vidya Balan with designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee to create a special fashion moment. Amid a fiery chemistry between the clothes and herself, the star gives us her most frank interview ever and reveals the truth behind her fashion crisis.

By Shefalee Vasudev. Style director: Sabyasachi Mukherjee.

Photographs by Avinash Gowarikar

She is not someone who will blow dry her hair to go down to the grocery store," says Sabyasachi about Vidya Balan. It sounds like a smart quote till I meet Vidya. Her hair is washed but not set. Her face is free of makeup. Big, oxidised silver *jhumkas* dangle from her ears and a white embroidered *salwar kameez* enhances her toned, petite frame. A cup of *chai* and feet rolled up on the sofa, she waltzes as a modern symbol of old-world charm.


Ishq mein sab bevajah hota hai (love follows no reason) – that smouldering line from the promo of her forthcoming film *Ishkiya* fades into my mind. If she is strong-headed, she makes no attempt to ensure that I take note of it. If she is vulnerable, she has made peace with it. If she is allowing an invasion into her mind, she seems ready to be attacked.

The fiery darting of her eyes makes me think she will play Draupadi better than Sita. She could be Nutan from *Bandini*, Jaya Prada from *Sargam*, Keira Knightley from *Pride and Prejudice*. Add an intense passion for acting, some memorable cinematic moments, an undisguised love for Indian clothes and a growing talent at self-analysis and you have Vidya Balan. The one who won't blow dry her hair for the grocer.

Take her to another location. An ornate set, with Sabyasachi (her designer in the forthcoming film *Pa*), styling her in antique jewellery, embroidered *lehengas*, modern bags, shoes, watches. Give her hair and makeup wizards to transform her. Yet, what looks back at you is exactly what you saw earlier. Solidity with self. Vidya Balan as a sexy bride or Vidya Balan at home in a plain white *kurta* is the same.

She tells *Marie Claire* why reclaiming her self and regaining her personal style after her downturn is in sync with a new tryst as an actor. ▶

Clothes: Sabyasachi. Jewellery: Earrings (worn as hair ornament), earrings and necklace, all Gaja Jewellers; necklace (worn as hair ornament), gold and ruby necklace, wooden bangles, ring (index finger), all Amrapali; *polki* bangles, Anmol Jewellers; ring (ring finger), Rose

A woman is the central figure, wearing a black V-neck crop top under a brown lace shawl with floral patterns. She is adorned with a large, ornate necklace featuring gold, silver, and red elements, along with matching earrings and a headpiece. The background is dark and moody, with a red and white floral pattern visible at the bottom right.

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AS ONE IS BORING AND LIMITING



► **Marie Claire:** From the sensuous Indian beauty in *Parineeta*, to the much criticised, half-Westernised single mother in *Hey Babyy* and now back in *Pa* sporting a contemporary Indian look wearing khadi garments, it has been a sharp zigzag in terms of your image. What is going on? A lost-and-found story of your personality?

Vidya Balan: In a way, yes. My character in *Parineeta* was who I was even before I came to Hindi cinema. That was how I envisioned myself. I grew up being proud of who I am, and not being apologetic about my choices. But with some films, I found myself doing things I never did, trying to become who I'm not. It was a slippery slope and I slid a little, but that's all in the past. I am now on a return journey, reclaiming my own self. Coming back to Indian clothes and cuts, which suit me, is a part of the same path.

MC: Were you influenced by others in the industry to wear certain clothes in films and for public appearances?

VB: Well, surely there were people who were guiding or misguiding me. Not because they were on a witch-hunt but because they did not understand better. Quite a lot of people

believe that to look Indian and be seen as one is a limiting and boring idea. And quite a few survive on reflected glory and exert their influence to keep it alive.

MC: Are you saying that you succumbed to the pressure of looking sexy, Western, girlish and glamorous, as Bollywood likes its heroines now?

VB: I disagree with sexy, glamorous and girlish being the preserve of the Western garb. To me there is no one more sensuous than the Indian woman and there is nothing more complimentary of the feminine form than Indian clothes. Having said that, I was ladylike, mature and poised even as a kid. A few films down the line, I found myself fighting against my grain to become a girl. This was strange to me because I had idolised actresses like Waheedaji, Sridevi or Madhuri who defined sensuality and grace by being

women, not chicks. But now various influences are at work. Some have to do with the way the industry wants to portray women. Others are influences of fashion, media, brands, Western style icons – where everybody is judging you by how trendy you are and what you wear. In India, being trendy means not wearing Indian clothes. I did succumb to that pressure because I thought as an actor I had the responsibility to not be boring.

MC: Does that mean that Bollywood turns female actors into babes? That there is a quicker acceptance of girls who wear dresses?

VB: Absolutely. I find it very odd that if a male actor grows older, he is considered attractive but if a woman puts on a few years or kilos and she has to feel apologetic. And yes, in Bollywood, it is about becoming a babe because a babe is less threatening. An actress wearing a cotton sari on a red carpet is not accepted. If you are an intelligent woman, you are asked to dumb down. I am often told that “*tum*

sochti bahut ho (you think too much)”. I retort: “So?” Of course, I think too much because I take my work seriously!

“I WILL DO ANYTHING TO BRING ALIVE A CHARACTER IN CINEMA. I WILL DON ANY GARB

MC: So you wore clothes that didn't suit you, in fact, made you look ungainly and frumpy, to underline that you are not limited to one idea? Didn't the alarm bells ring when you would see your own photographs?

VB: I haven't spoken about this before but let me say it now – my fashion crisis, as you are calling it, was actually a parallel story of an emotional crisis. The signals were all there but I wasn't paying heed to them. I had no idea what I was wearing to which event. I was emotionally lost and I didn't really care what people were saying about me, my clothes or my lack of style. A lot of actors dress badly or are poorly styled but they get away with it. I was noticed because of an emotional uncertainty that was showing on me. If you'd given me a rag at that time, I would have worn it. My look stemmed from emotional dissipation. ►

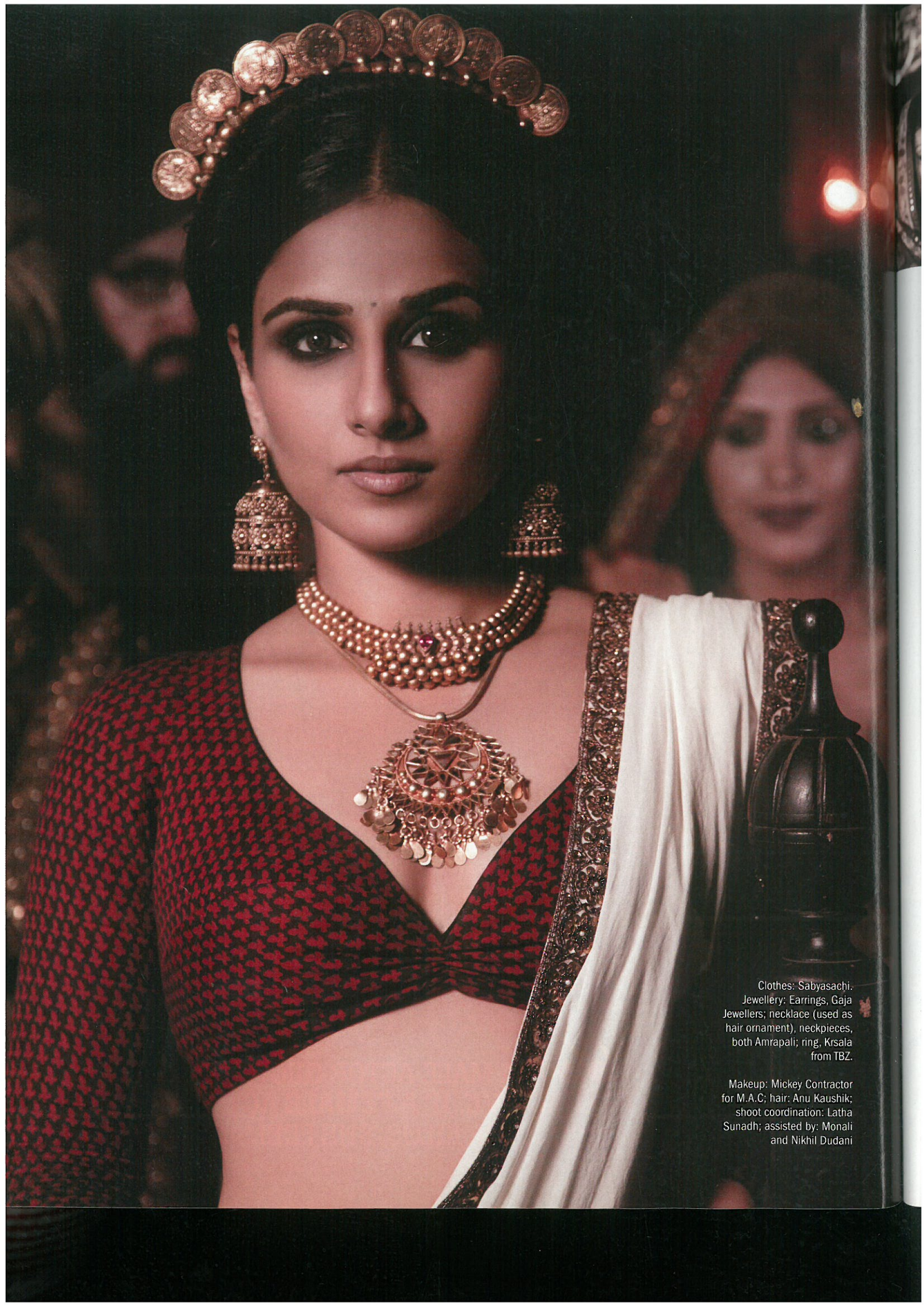
zo Om
Isko Dekho!

Catch this glamorous shoot on Zoom in 'Planet Bollywood' at 7.00 p.m. and an interview with the picture-perfect diva on 'Face Off With Vidya Balan' at 9.30 p.m. on October 1, 2009. A Zoom exclusive!



Clothes: Sabyasachi.
Vidya's jewellery: Necklace, Gaja.
Jewellers; watch, Cartier; ring, Rose.
Extras' jewellery (left to right): Polki
necklace, Rose; pendant with ruby
strings, Minawala

“ IF A MALE ACTOR GROWS OLD IT'S
ATTRACTIVE. IF A FEMALE ACTOR PUTS ON
YEARS OR KILOS, SHE FEELS APOLOGETIC



Clothes: Sabyasachi.
Jewellery: Earrings, Gaja Jewellers; necklace (used as hair ornament), neckpieces, both Amrapali; ring, Krsala from TBZ.

Makeup: Mickey Contractor for M.A.C; hair: Anu Kaushik; shoot coordination: Latha Sunadh; assisted by: Monali and Nikhil Dudani



► **MC:** Were you seeking approval?

VB: Yes, not from the world but from one person who mattered a lot at that time. The worst thing that can happen to anyone is when a person you care for talks down to you or becomes constantly disapproving. It is important for one's self-esteem to not continue in such a relationship.

MC: How did it all come back to you? Did you get feedback? Did you read the nasty comments written about you? What made you get a foothold on yourself?

VB: I was unhappy every time I made a public appearance. Yes, I got lots of feedback, many letters, notes and voices that came back to me from fans and people who had appreciated my work. I didn't know till then that it would matter to anyone if I looked like a piece of self-destruction. But it did. And it made me sit up. It also became obvious that unlike the master strategists of the film industry, the audiences are not looking for a masked personality or a trendy wannabe. I realised that I was admired for who I am, not what I was trying to be. I came back to being myself because of my family and my faith and my fans.

MC: Didn't you feel tentative about stepping out again, risking public opinion after all the harsh words?

VB: Not at all, not even for a moment. I've always felt unconditionally loved and that gives me the courage to keep going. And criticism cannot be life defining. When I had exorcised my emotional demons, my senses prevailed. I began questioning everything around me; clothes and style are a small part of the same questioning.

MC: What does style mean to you?

VB: Timelessness, individuality. A connect with what looks good on you because of who you are. If you want names, I'd say Maharani Gayatri Devi. Rekha in her *kanjeevarams*. Gulzaarsaab. Look at him, he's been wearing starched white cotton *kurtas* and *majris* for years. That's style.

MC: Whose style do you admire among the current crop of female actors?

VB: A lot of girls look very good but I can't recall anyone with a sense of personal style.

MC: So what kind of clothes would you wear now? Do you want to restrict yourself to only Indian?

VB: I am averse to fashion that changes you and disrespects your personality with the promise of making you trendy. That homogenises everyone into one type. Since college days, I have been keen on cotton *salwars* and *kurtas*. I love to wear Indian garments with Western cuts. I recently wore a *kanjeevaram* for an event and promptly a journalist called and asked "Why did you choose to wear something older?" There we go. Saris are older? I say they are sexy!

MC: And what about being styled for films?

VB: I would do anything to bring a character alive in cinema. I will don any garb. It is only personally that I like clothes that are simple, feminine and timeless in their style.

MC: What about the female body in Indian cinema? Many Bollywood actresses resort to a serious weight-loss trip to resuscitate the interest of the audiences and industry in themselves and their work. You too have lost considerable weight and are looking fitter than ever!

VB: When I was exercising vigorously to lose weight, I didn't drop any kilos! But the day I

“ I LIKE MY CURVES AND I AM NOT ABOUT TO LOSE THEM, EITHER CONSCIOUSLY OR OTHERWISE ”

began this quest to reclaim myself, my personality and my choices, I focused on exercise as fitness and I dramatically began to lose weight. About the body, yes, there is some truth about everyone wanting to look trim. Though I must tell you, I haven't lost as great an amount of weight as is being rumoured, I have just become toned. Vilayat Hussain, my trainer, has ingrained in me the pleasures of working out and that is what I crave for these days. I like my curves and I am not about to lose them, either consciously or otherwise!

MC: What made you agree to be the *Marie Claire* cover girl for the bridal issue? Isn't this the predictable Vidya Balan?

VB: This is the kind of bride I would be in real life. Confident, probably khadi-clad (*laughs*), with belief in my eyes, but traditional enough to cover my head. I will not be different to be accepted. I am different and therefore I am me. ■

Shoot sponsored
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