

# My Body is a Poem on Fire: From Burning to Writing as a Practice of Freedom

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SHYAM PATEL (HE/HIM)

“A distinction must be made between that writing which enables us to hold on to life even as we are clinging to old hurts and wounds and that writing which offers to us a space where we are able to confront reality in such a way that we live more fully. Such writing is not an anchor that we mistakenly cling to so as not to drown. It is writing that truly rescues, that enables us to reach the shore, to recover.”

— bell hooks, *remembered rapture: the writer at work*

## Writing as a Practice of Freedom

At the age of eighteen, I read *Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks and it reached me in a way that I could never imagine. Almost twelve years later, it is still hooks’ scholarship and writing that provides me with the sustenance to believe that I, too, can write. That, in its own way, writing can be a practice of freedom. It is for this reason that I open with a passage from one of hooks’ evocative works, to preface the way in which writing rescues me. In the past, however, I have come to writing by way of culling my own body to tell a story. Perhaps the extraction by the colonizer has imparted on me an articulation of the self as a singular mode—that of a colonized subject. This degeneration of viewing my body as only and wholly oppressed is wanting. It archives me as a text that collapses into history as trapped in a state of unfreedom. Despite this harrowing reality, the ‘subject’ so-to-speak, in this case my racialized body, is not merely abject. This realization reaches me in the foundational work of feminist authors and scholars who offer newfound ways of writing the body and the self. Their pushback of what Frye (2000) calls a double bind, wherein oppressed peoples are imprisoned to undesirable options, invigorates in me a similar sense of unbinding to write freely and openly.

In this piece, I consider Ahmed’s (2017) call that the personal is theoretical. Expounding on this premise that my own body is a site of theorization, I drift in the words of Trinh (1999), not simply writing the body as/with theory but through the body. In that, I seek to examine how feminist theorization frames writing that is personal, triggered in memories of the body, and then contextualize how the location of “I” emerges from the feminist theorizing of a ‘male’ body, namely, my own. In that brief tracing, I want to remain careful and considerate to not be uncritical and unreflective, considering that bodies of men, and to some extent male-passing or masculine-presenting peoples, have historically been forces of domination and oppression. I acknowledge that such bodies are not more or similarly oppressed to other bodies. Instead, what I hope to articulate is that patriarchal and sexist thinking manifest bodies, among men as well, in a dangerously flawed and harmful manner, and that feminist theorists, particularly women of colour who have employed

writing as a mode of discursive intervention and mobilization (Townsend-Bell, 2012), provide me with the groundwork to be more engaged and reflective in my own scholarship.

### **(Re)reading the Male Body through Feminist Scholarship**

For Trinh (1999), “we write-think and feel- (with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts” (p. 258). In this emergence of the body as theory, there is the performative formation of gender that is constituted over time, which penetrates what is written. According to Butler (1988), the body, as a stylized of repeated acts, is formed by how it is culturally defined by said acts. As such, the author contends that feminist theory seeks to examine the cultural and political structures that take form in how the body is constructed—the ways in which it is performed—vis-à-vis gender. In non-Western cultures, Menon (2012) argues that this binary of bodies as ‘male only’ and ‘female only’ takes form through so-called modernity. For bodies a part of the Global South, such a binary requires the examination of other binaries that are constructed, especially that of caste and race. In writing, that interrogation is not always without its contentions. As Trinh (1989) mentions, “writing the body in theory sometimes chokes to the breaking point” (p. 43). In the mechanics of writing, there is what the author calls both an engagement and disengagement in the master discourses. So, even in the extrication of the male gaze (or any other dominant gaze), there is a tendency to fall into the trap of gazing at an entity, such as the body, through the very gaze that is being deflected (Patel, 2021). It is not only the male body that does so because masculinity is not only held in the reservoir of the male body (Reeser, 2010). It punctures all bodies. To write about the body, then, means to write in that entangled space. Feminists also write knowing that patriarchal and sexist thinking strangle writing. In that admission, it means to always write while dialoguing with something else (Reeser, 2010), in this case, rupturing the confines of the male gaze and being scrupulous in not reflecting it. This engagement vis-à-vis writing has been a consistent tool among feminists (Townsend-Bell, 2012).

For the male body, the patriarchal and sexist gaze both reinforces dominant and oppressive perspectives of masculinities. In one manner, it affords privileges to some more than others. Bodies that are able-bodied, cis, heterosexual, male, thin, and white (or even passing as any of these identities) are born or birthed at some point as privileges. For example, Indian families steeped in patriarchal and sexist thinking favour the arrival of a male child (Rawat, 2014), whereas the female body is framed as disposable. While patriarchy privileges the bodies of men, as is the case with the patriarchal manifestation of Indian and other men, it also sterilizes any emotionality. Patriarchal manhood as such requires men “to surrender their capacity to feel” (hooks, 2014a, p. 130). While the author specifically considers this in relation to Black men, this sense of reverberating the “manly” facade is damaging to all men of colour and all bodies of men. We are not only denied feeling, but we are all also inscribed by colonial markers that terrorize the body and the self. For example, Arab men are mischaracterized as being terrorists and such thoughts are reinforced by the media (Taylor, 2021). This view of all Arabs and Muslims, including all those assumed to be both or either of the two, as being terrorists, is a dangerous ascription to the body. Unfortunately, these false views are prevalent across communities. In queer communities, the “no fats, femmes, or Asians” caveat is rampant (Liu, 2015). It inscribes a “singular queer community” that does not examine discriminations and oppressions (Conte, 2018). In that, there is a formation of what and how the queer body should “look” like, wherein white bodies prevail dominant—a dominance not necessarily in numbers but rather in dictating “who gets to be a ‘good’ queer” in the community. For gay men of colour, this can lead to experiences of sexual racism (Han & Choi, 2018). Such discrimination and exclusion only compound when other oppressions intersect, and the view of the

dominant, namely whiteness, remains intact. According to Conte (2018), this singularity leads to “[h]omonormative formations in queer spaces [that] have marked the fat, femme and/or racialized queer body as ‘unwanted’ and ‘undesired’” (p. 26).

Countering such hegemonic thinking, it is often the writing of feminists who have written about the “undesirability” of historically oppressed bodies that has foregrounded mapping the body in radical ways. Taylor’s (2021) emphasis on radical self-love forms much of that work. To embrace the body as such, West (2017) focuses less on convincing herself of her self-worth and more on rejecting the [negative] messages that society forges on her. It is an act that requires the self to stop apologizing for the body (Taylor, 2021). Writing can be a space to trace that journey. It is, as Toni Cade Bambara imparted, an act of language (Trinh, 1989). In that language, texts can take form about the body or through the body. Cixous (1992) argues, however, that the body is already a text. According to the author, “[h]istory, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body. I go where the ‘fundamental language’ is spoken, the body language into which all the tongues of things, acts, and beings translate themselves, in my own breast, the whole of reality worked upon in my flesh...recomposed into a book” (p. 52). For feminists, the body is birthed in writing, and as such, the bodies of men are also texts that are made and in making. The foundation of this assemblage is socially constructed in being antithesis to all that is characterized and performed as feminine. In a patriarchal system, this is performed in “doing” masculinity. Over time, men develop a fear of the feminine (Kierski & Blazina, 2009). They deem, rather pejoratively, “gay” and “girly” as undesirable (Oransky & Marecek, 2009). Although men also gaze at the bodies of women, they fear being ascribed to the very patriarchal and sexist markers they instill and uphold. To be feminine, however performed gender happens to be, is an act of infanticide to the so-called male body and even its psyche. So, for feminists, the body, including the bodies of men, lends itself to a composition of scholarship and writing.

## **From Theory to the Body and Self**

### **Body Mattering and Rejecting “Body Terrorism”**

A body that is vile, that is virulent. This is how I view my body and the self that is imposed on me. That no matter what I do, the body is always there. In the words of Kate Hao, “I swallow, and my body always goes down the wrong way / lodged in my windpipe / doesn’t let me breathe without reminding me of its presence” (Button Poetry, 2016, 1:55). To view my body as foreign in its own home, with every breath as a reminder, is harrowing. For me, it is the sight of patchwork, altering shades of Brown, from one part of my body to another. It is the coarse hair that grows everywhere. At times, I find myself searching for answers to questions like “Do women find hairy men attractive?” and “Why are Indians so hairy?”. In the former, I commoditize my body and its worth to someone else finding it worthy. In the latter, I enter another form of self-hatred in wanting to rid myself of being Indian. Through this entrapment of not wanting to be “in” my body, I search(ed) through old pictures from elementary and high school, vigorously tearing apart the ones from sixth to eighth grades because I was fat during those years. In high school, I wore only long-sleeve shirts to hide the hair growing all over my chest, arms, and back. I started to dread gym class because not only was I unsightly, but I also started to smell because my body was sweating profusely. I learned that even sweat can be entangled in the politics of privilege (Waitt & Stanes, 2015). This is another blow to my Brown body, which is already ascribed as ‘curry-scented’ in another assault on the South Asian body. Such assertions remind me that this is not a ‘normal’ body.

Indeed, at least for me, a sense of guilt and shame emerge before entering the teenage years (Taylor, 2021).

In considering how I have internalized self-hatred, I come to feminist theory to make sense of the body. Like Ahmed (2002), I dwell in a process or rather processes that render(s) the body a site of racialization. It is a process, which holds against the markers of whiteness, that Yancy (2005) mentions returns the “raced” body as distorted. I enter, by way of this (dis)orientation, a doubled taxonomy vis-à-vis Bhabha’s theoretical offerings, where I engage in mimicry (Bhabha, 1984) in an (un)homely body (Bhabha, 1992). In *Longing for Possibilities*, I write about this engagement of wanting to rid myself of Brownness. I am at unease, so to speak, with what I “see” in front of me. Such forms of body image dissatisfaction can develop from childhood (Birbeck & Murray, 2006). Through film, television, and other media, there is a constant flow of messaging that devalues certain bodies as a threat to hegemonic forces. Although there is a paucity of research on children of colour and body image, especially among boys of colour, my experiences as a teacher in the classroom shed light on their struggles with being in a racialized body. An example to elucidate this comes across in discussing the “doll test” in the classroom, which has been used to showcase learned racism, including its internalization, among children. While the depth of responses shifts from the elementary to high school years, I notice students of colour have a consensus: the white doll is constructed as more desirable. Even if they do not internalize this themselves, they are able to articulate that society hammers otherwise, and sometimes those messages impact their self-image and self-worth. Drawing from Taylor (2021), these early messages also come to define my own sense of worth. Salvaging parts of me that have not succumbed entirely to that messaging, I am grateful to feminist theories for tracing those remnants. Feminists inform me in seeing theory as a form of healing (hooks, 1991) and writing as therapeutic (hooks, 2013). Using this as a basis, I now write to confront what Taylor (2021) coins “body terrorism” in the form of body shame and body-based oppression. In other words, I leverage words to grasp what has happened to me (Ahmed, 2017), and to draw closer to my experiences. In a course with Dr. Pat Palulis on the language arts in the fall semester of 2018, putting theory into practice, this journey emerges in the form of a poem:

*Brown matter  
Every second  
Every minute  
Every hour  
A pilgrimage is made  
Out of my  
Brown body  
Because  
I am almost unreal,  
Unnatural,  
But let me tell you  
That all this  
Brown dripping,  
Luring,  
Seducing  
The depths of a wallflower  
Lazily hanging  
Almost coaxing to say  
I am brown*

*I am beautiful  
I am undeserved  
By some random traveller  
That will not understand  
The power of this nectar  
So subtle  
So sticky  
So sweet  
That it makes  
A whole garden  
Fall to its feet*

Reading this now, there are parts that make me cringe, especially words like “dripping” and “sticky” in the poem. I can only think of hypersexualized imagery (perhaps another piece of writing to consider). I suppose reading the body is taking me time, but I digress. But, more importantly, this poem demonstrates that I am proud of a body that is Brown and one that refuses to be colonized. As such, my writing does not only offer a “writing of the body” that is a threat to the mechanics of established canons (Trinh, 1989), it also takes pride in Browning the body from the inside. It is a rejection of body terrorism. Although gradual, I profuse being Brown as being content. I enter writing through (t)racing instead of erasing the raced body.

In intersection and parallel to this journey, this practice of freedom involves writing to heal. To heal the body that is in grief or in passing through sorrow. In 2019, the physical and spiritual spirit that is my body had been overcome by this feeling with the passing of my paternal grandmother. I turned to poetry to write about it. A year later, in another course with Dr. Palulis, I start to heal from this pain in another poem:

*my grandmother healed from the earth. she bathed us in warm water with neem leaves. she cured sore throats with honey and ginger. she sang lullabies—told us stories of our ancestors. the lyrics sealed open wounds, rested them gently in the meadow of our hearts. when we wept, she held our bodies in her arms. in her last moments, i wonder if she held us then too. i wonder if her love still carries within an endless track of soil or a river that runs into an ocean current. some days, when the quiet breeze passes, i can feel her hand fold into mine. i feel the caress of fingers, telling me the salt water of my tears is sacred. do not bury those tears. let them moisten the dry land. to heal, i cry. i let the pain and trauma heal through this ongoing ritual. somewhere, someplace nearby, i can see my grandmother crying with me. even now, she holds me like her own child, still teaching me the way of the earth.*

In sharing this poem, I demonstrate that I am not only writing with the body but through the body. I am pulling threads from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work, and I am also borrowing the words of Ahmed (2006), as I am writing a “phenomenology [that] emphasizes the lived experiences of inhabiting a body” (p. 2). The volition to write about this process stems from the emotionality that feminist authors and scholars impress upon me. Patriarchy forbids men from being familiar with feelings, from loving (hooks, 2004b). This theorization of men’s emotions is a feminist issue (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). Through that, I expand the body in writing in what it experiences and feels, and the (un)becoming of how I arrive at feminist theory to make sense of that. As Belcourt (2020) reminds me, “no one runs to theory unless there is a dirt road in him” (p. 54). This is what makes writing so important in terms of healing. To profess the body out of apology is to immerse in a life-long passage towards holding it gently, loving it. So, when I write a poem about my grandmother, I am

both processing through grief and healing the body. I am remembering that the body can be grieving and still be powerful.

But what specifically makes it so that writing about the body remains so healing? To respond to this, I draw on the words of the feminist teacher who has undoubtedly shaped much of my thinking. In *remembered rapture*, hooks (2013) writes the following: “To me, telling the story of my growing-up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die” (p. 80). When I write about the discontent of my own body, I can leave that behind in the written text. I am able to lift a burden. That does not mean that I am absolved of criticality and self-reflection, or that I am no longer hurting. What it means is that I have wept thoroughly and the later stages of weeping, at least for me, are assuaged. However, I am aware that crying, whether it be in the form of tears or weeping through writing, is gendered. Such performativity can take form in the “boys don’t cry” framing (McQueen, 2017). In adolescent boys, Oransky and Marecek (2009) explain how peer groups can ridicule open expressions of hurt and vulnerability. In having ascribed that onto my own body from a young age, I did not at first openly communicate or express my feelings. In terms of my physical body, as well, I had been reeling in turmoil from body image dissatisfaction, but I did not dare to say that out loud. Putting this into a container and thinking about it many years later, I am now weeping with emotions.

The foray of these emotions that disperse from my body is a point of becoming free. I am astutely aware that men and boys are capable of feeling. To this end, Oransky and Marecek (2009) point out that the statement of “boys don’t have feelings” is not a statement that is made by boys. As per their study, “most boys said they put on a show of manly stoicism as a means to avoid their peers’ disapproval” (p. 237). Considering this, I argue that mapping the body through theory and writing is a part of practicing freedom. Encouraging myself to write, or even engaging otherwise, creates opportunities for care and relationality that transcend the body. Writing offers me the freedom to move away from the repressed state of hiding emotions. In that way, I am writing through the body, and I am also provoking life writing. Like Leggo (2000), life writing, for me, is hopeful and seeks health. It imagines a futurity of this body that breathes—one that excavates lungs from heavy suffocation, releasing repressed emotions in a gentle and loving way. My own educational journey, especially in elementary and high school, did not prepare me for this. It did not equip me nor even remotely warn me of the dangers of how oppressive structures such as patriarchy and racism can assault the body. Even though emotional distance among men is known to be connected to male dominance and sexism (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017), no such conversations occurred during those years to discuss the deference that is owed to the body and its workings. In that manner, rejecting body terrorism is powerful beyond the body as one’s entity. It is a rejection of all that is oppressive in nature, including the site of schooling, and, in turn, a reclamation of a body and its Brownness—hair, uneven patches, and everything else that writes stories of the homeland on this landscape. For me, it is writing where I come “to retrieve the body from its disembodied, denatured status and to relocate it in the subject” (Smith & Watson, 1998, p. 35), where body mattering takes place.

### **Writing the Self: Culture and Identity in the Making**

According to Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo (2018), “[w]ithout a body, there is no self” (p. 4). So, I come here knowing that the self exists as a raced body (Ahmed, 2002; Yancy, 2005), wherein writing about the self is intrinsically connected to that process. It is in the space of writing that I can think about the self, especially my culture and identity, beyond the body as a physical

reading of race. For me, this examination unfolds through the method of autobiography. It is a form of writing that evokes a particular experience (hooks, 2013). For Spivak (1992), “autobiography is a wound where the blood of history does not dry” (p. 795). In this offering, I claim the self in writing memoirs of my life’s experiences wherever and however I can. To provide an example, coming back to the first course with Dr. Palulis, I use these words to write the following bio poem:

*Shyam is not an “exotic” name for you to marginalize.  
It is the name of his ancestors—colonized,  
But fierce, grounded, personal, and resilient.  
With a father who chatters in his native Gujarati, torn as an immigrant,  
And a mother who signs softly, whispers the stories of her womb.  
Longing, yearning for his loves: family, friends, and communities  
To be unbound, unchained—to become whole again.  
What does he need? He needs to learn  
Not to survive, but to live in this world.  
In front of him, he sees a sea of whiteness,  
But he would like to see the surrounding unfold  
Between his birthplace, Canada and his homeland, India.  
Patel is his last name, and he carries it like the brown on his skin.*

Like Yancy (2005), “I write out of a personal existential context. This context is a profound source of knowledge connected to my ‘raced’ body. Hence, I write from a place of lived embodied experience, a site of exposure” (p. 215). This above poem is one such example. It captures an expanse of life writing into a few words. Such writing of poetry, especially situating the self, is a form of feminist inquiry. On this matter, Anantharam (2012) has shared the following: “The case for how bodies matter in national imaginings has been made eloquently and forcefully in the poetry of women—not only in the South Asian context but in diverse locations where border disputes reveal complicated histories of imperialism and colonialism, of subjugation, domination, and exploitation of one community by the other” (p. 4). Connecting the dots of autobiographical writing and life writing, especially in terms of the mattering of bodies and the self, it is the work of antiracist and feminist writers that elicit me to do the same.

However, writing about the self has not always been revered in education. There is a troubling imposition that the site of the self or the written “I” is relinquished as being inappropriate or unprofessional in academic spaces. In my first attempt at post-secondary education, I am informed that the “I” has no place in writing. But, despite repressing the urge to put into language the personal, I only come to this rebellion almost ten years later. By situating the personal as theory (Ahmed, 2017) in writing, I can practice freedom. In fact, in courses that I have taken in Teacher Education with Dr. Pat Palulis and in graduate studies with Dr. Heba Elsherief, it is the “I” that is encouraged in location through theory. At first, there is a trepidation that comes with this, but I come to fall into ease with it. Not that writing about the self is easy; rather, it sparks in me a burning desire. This process is possible because of feminist teachers in the classroom. They embody tenants of Shrewsbury’s (1993) feminist pedagogy. As one example, feminist teachers sustain empowerment pedagogy. They recognize the importance of experiences, including emotions of anger, discomfort, and resistance (Almansori, 2020). In doing so, the impetus of liberatory education is realized (Shrewsbury, 1993). For me, it has been locating the courage to wax the “I” against experiences with colonialism and racism, and being critical of those, that bring me closer to freedom. Powerfully,

what I hated about the “I” is now no longer a site of tension in the sense of discomfort or pain. In writing the self, I experience a rejuvenation of my culture and identity.

But what really engages me in terms of writing about and through the self, shifting away from mocking, letting go of shame, a self-hatred unlatched into the past, is the shift from student to teacher. I write, as Low and Palulis (2004) do, “out of the laboured breathing of our pedagogic lives enacted in translation” (p. 15). To provide an example of how this relocation connects to the self through cultures and identities, I think about names. In a first-grade classroom, when I ask a student of colour if his name is pronounced a certain way, he becomes upset. He informs me that I should never use his home name and instead use his school name. As much as I am torn by this encounter, I am familiar with it. Across my schooling, I had bastardized my name to make it easier on the English tongue. Even worse, students of colour experience cultural disrespect in relation to their names (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). In 2018, I recall sitting in the staff room during my first-year practicum of Teacher Education, where the other teachers in the room, all white women, had laughed about a student in the school with a Chinese name that “sounded” funny in English. It made me uncomfortable and upset, but I did not say anything. It is these moments, as I am held captive in the role of a teacher, that I come to be assassinated differently. I am not only vicariously living the racism, but I am also transported into the past, where the forlorn memories of the self, recur.

It is this painful trajectory that compels me to call writing into question in the classroom. In that space, students often express to me an embarrassment of their own culture and identity. I remember a first-grade Palestinian student who had once come to school wearing a dress from her culture. She had been mocked by a few of the students, and after that, never returned to the classroom with that same pride again. These interactions emerge because of the pervasiveness of whiteness in defining culture. Kohli (2008) further advises that teaching dominant cultural norms leads “students to think less of themselves, their culture, or their people” (p. 185). Although culture can have different meanings for students of colour (Yosso, 2005), cultural racism in the classroom is present. As evidenced in the example that I provide of the first-grader, students reacted by mocking a culture that did not assimilate with the dominant culture. These articulations are not innate to children; rather, they manifest through sites of learning, including the home and school. It is for this realization, in this case parts of one’s culture, that I bring writing into the classroom as a practice of freedom. As I learn, at least from my own students, about the nature of oppression that dismembers their own lives, I think about the feminist teachers who appreciate and celebrate the “I” in writing. I similarly encourage my students to write freely and openly, even if it means reading writing that is unfamiliar to what I am used to. I am certain, as I read their work, there is breathing that takes place with the rhythmic nature of the heart (Leggo, 2000), or at some level, this is my hope.

### **Bringing the Flame to Light**

As I journey towards writing, thinking about what it means to “consume” and “produce” thoughts, I must express gratitude to feminist authors and scholars. They remind me that I am not merely a subject for extrication; rather, I am powerfully stitched from the loose ends of my ancestors, traversing to writing with a sense of (re)articulation of my Brownness in it reaching the shore—to imagining another world—one that not only dreams but sustains freedom. I am not, contrary to what whiteness suggests, a Brown man on the verge of terrorizing. Like hooks (2013), “[t]hat woundedness that I was once so ashamed to recognize became for me a place of recovery, the dark depths into which I could enter to find both the source of that pain and the means to heal”



(p. 12). Through her work, and that of other feminists, I examine my own body and self, practicing freedom through writing. When patriarchy and sexism dictate that the bodies of men must remain emotionless, I turn to feminists. Feminist theorists pinpoint the importance of emotionality among men (hooks, 2004a; hooks, 2004b). This response stems from the historical ambivalence that men have with their own emotions and that of others (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018). Rejecting that, as I embrace feminist theories that exhume the body, I write with emotionality. In fact, I can say with certainty that my body is a poem on fire. It is a body that grapples with body terrorism and the self as written in culture and identity. They, the colonizers, tried to extinguish that but the fire turned into something they did not see coming. I did not burn. I turned it into a depth of poetics. In my writing, I bring that flame to light.

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