



# Remembering bell hooks:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this appeared at the Hindu, January 01,2022

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Already reeling from pandemic-induced loss, grief and a sense of bereavement, the news of bell hooks passing left many of us bewildered. bell hooks or Gloria Jean Watkins, trailblazing author, feminist, activist, passed away on December 15, 2021 at the age of 69 leaving behind a contribution to feminist theory that cannot be easily surpassed: *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), *Teaching To Transgress* (1994), *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996), *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (1999), *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000), *Feminism is for everybody* (2000), *Communion: The*

*Female Search for Love* (2002), *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003) and *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004). Her incredible oeuvre draws on themes of feminism, race, love, capitalism and gender and interlocking webs of oppression.

In *Feminism is for everybody*, she powerfully wrote that “Feminists are made, not born. One does not become an advocate of feminist politics simply by having the privilege of having been born female. Like all political positions one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action.” As hooks was quick to note that patriarchy was not men against women but a social order that devalued everything that did not fit into hetero-patriarchal

normative of what masculine and feminine meant. At odds with reformist feminists who were organizing so that women could be equal to men in the existing system, she chose to fight against white supremacist patriarchy; against the notion that you could be feminist while being conservative or liberal. Her incisive writing pushed feminism beyond the hold of white middle-class women, and addressed those who were made to inhabit the margins. She urged women, particularly Black women, to love themselves with an unapologetic fierceness in a world out to demean them. Her writings resonated across the globe, reaching the farthest corners, in a voice that was distinctly black, and overwhelmingly woman. She wrote of love, justice, feminism, teaching, living, politics, and mounted a scathing criticism on white liberal feminism, holding those in power accountable to those they claim to represent, or erase. She hammered the last nail in the coffin of universal sisterhood when she wrote: "Privileged-class white women swiftly declared their "ownership" of the movement, placing working-class white women, poor white women, and all women of color in the position of followers."

What was it about hooks that gave her such a wide readership? If testimonies on social media are anything to go by, women of all age, location, space read her, nodding in agreement, tearing up, and resolving to carry on as they found their lives written on those pages. Her writings on the possibilities of love and its abandonment, on rage and justice, on feminism and healing, struck a chord with us all — women facing patriarchal norms and disciplining, and paralysed by an inability to grasp the world. An inability that emerges from a bewilderment. A bewilderment that cannot comprehend a world that devalues traditional femininity and yet hates the deviant female. A world designed to exploit, extract, and profit from the lives and labour of women.

For many, hooks was not just a powerful feminist writer, but also a sister and ally. In *All About Love*, she cajoled us into trying again, into loving again, urging us not to curl in but to open ourselves up to a world that recognises and respects vulnerabilities and differences. One can imagine the electrifying effect hooks has on young adults, particularly in India, growing up in patriarchal families that normalise

violence and abuse as love and care, when she writes “...the intensity of our woundedness often leads to a closing of the heart, making it impossible for us to give or receive the love that is given to us.” She also teaches us that absence of justice makes love impossible and the absence of love is antithetical to justice. She urges us to forgive, and to love, again. bell’s insistence in sharing her personal experience of love, sexuality and gender broke grounds of what counted as theory— She exploded the false binary between the personal and the academic and in doing so reached countless women who otherwise felt alienated from academic writing: writing she drew from the experience of poor, working-class women’s lives but was not accessible to them.

In the past few decades, neo-liberal feminism has imagined a world strangely at odds with a vision of feminism that envisages a transformation in consciousness. While the former talks of inclusion of certain kinds of women in hegemonic structures, hooks’ brand of feminism calls for an end to caste, race, gender and sexuality-based inequalities that govern the ways we inhabit the world. Her searing critique of reformist feminism foregrounds how

working-class, racialised feminine labour formed the basis on which bourgeois (as well as white/upper-caste) women secured a degree of freedom within the existing system for themselves. The epistemological knowledge developed by hooks insisted that one must go beyond women’s freedom and rights to talk about self-development and self-actualization of those who are at the bottom of the hierarchy. In *Feminist theory: from margin to center*, hooks wrote, “being oppressed means the absence of choices. It is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor.”

For me and many feminist teachers, her book *Teaching to Transgress* left an indelible mark at the core of our beings. She taught us that critical pedagogy meant perceiving students as not receivers of compartmentalised knowledge but as seekers who “want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful.” She urged feminist teachers to make women’s studies classrooms a site of resistance, based on curriculums that do not reflect dominant ideologies but question them. For her, the classroom was a space where marginalised students would

speak of their experience of theory, practice, and politics. And she declared it was these utterances that frightened teachers who continued to perceive students as mere consumers of knowledge. She wrote, "Many professors have conveyed to me their feeling that the classroom should be a "safe" place; that usually translates to mean that the professor lectures to a group of quiet students who respond only when they are called on." In India (as much elsewhere), where academic institutions are central to reproducing inequalities rather than dismantling them, education has always been a pathway to producing good workers and citizens. It ensures that the middle-class and/or upper-caste continue to take advantage of the social and cultural capital granted to them through inter-generational privileges.

Her words never rang truer than today. In Karnataka, the unfolding of a macabre drama where Muslim women and girls are asked to remove their *hijabs* to be able to enter the classroom has predictably brought about a false dichotomy between the right to education and the right to religion. The battle has now become framed as a struggle between two patriarchal right-wing

groups, one more powerful than the other, in taking forward women's oppression. As the political project of the Hindutva regime gains rapid success in exterminating Muslims, it seems that it is young women's bodies that are once again the site of competing interests. Instead of supporting women's right to education, in whatever clothes/markers she prefers, the state and the media in cohort with right wing groups have launched an outright campaign to delegitimize Muslim women as 'brainwashed' who prefer to observe religious precepts than educate themselves, and thus embrace modernity. One forgets, that it is education that liberates women: an education that leads one to question and to transgress, that allows women and members of the minority groups to bring in their experiences to a safe and secure environment, where thoughts and practices can be debated, questioned and challenged. As liberal feminists and progressives join the chorus in debating the meaning of sartorial codes, little realizing that what is at stake is denying women of faith (of a particular community) agency to articulate their thoughts and beliefs. In the current environment where women's and gender studies programmes across

the globe have taken a conservative turn; particularly in the global north, where liberal feminism has allied with militaristic and supremacist ideologies by targeting Asian women, particularly Muslim women, as objects of feminist campaigning, thus strengthening neo-imperialism, hooks' words, "These days, I am compelled to consider what forces keep us from moving forward, from having that revolution of values that would enable us to live differently" strike a chord. It is this 'revolution of values' that we keep striving for, again and again, in face of repeated failures, appropriation, and devaluation.

Her statement that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" has inspired many feminist scholars and teachers (including me) not to quit academics, even when our spirits were broken by the systemic sexism, casteism, and homophobia rampant in our universities. For her, education is a practice of freedom, a practice that taught students to 'transgress'; transgress the racial, sexual, caste and class boundaries that disallowed freedom. As feminist teachers and practitioners, we remain indebted to hooks, for she has taught us that the goal

of transformative pedagogy is to create a democratic classroom where everyone takes ownership of learning, where everyone is an agent. hooks has given us, a whole generation of feminist teachers and educators, a language – to express, to resist, and to transform.

