

Epilogue: A South Asian Fat Manifesto, Fat-Wisdom from the Brown Fatty to the Reader

As the interviews came to a close, participants were invited to end on a lighter note by answering the following question: What does it mean to “love your body”? If you were to give someone advice on how to love their body, what would it be? These are the responses they shared. Each one calls individuals and communities in, and each one approaches the love-politics feminist-of-colour scholars have been yearning for (Nash, 2019; hooks, 2014). Treat these responses as a placeholder for whenever you find yourself searching for fat-wisdom from the brown fatty.

Ai: I think what it means is being less cruel to myself. Less of the constant criticism I’m used to when I see myself, or catch my reflection in a mirror, or hear those familiar, unkind comments that have followed me all my life. It means not repeating them in my mind, or if they do surface, not holding on to them so tightly. It means being gentle with myself, kinder with myself. Just being kind. Just being gentle. Because this world, and its people, often are not. And I think we need to give ourselves that.

Ajooni: It’s funny, because sometimes I think of my body as being separate from myself. And I feel like what I need to do is accept her, nourish her, take care of her, and stop those judgments, stop those negative thoughts. It’s so easy to slip into, “oh, I’m just a lazy fat slob,” but no, no, no, we’re not doing that. For me, being kind to myself means actually honoring my cravings while also nourishing myself. Intuitive eating has made a huge impact on me. People say, “oh sure, if you eat what you want, you’ll just have sundaes all day,” but believe it or not, when I’m really in tune with my body, I notice when I’m craving more vegetables, or more protein, or more grains, whatever it is. That, to me, is honoring my body.... I guess I’d say: start with acceptance. Don’t try to start with love. Start with acceptance and neutrality, and work up from there.

Ayesha: I mean, I wake up in the mornings and I just thank God, I’m awake, I’m alive. Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror and I just smile. I tell myself, “You look beautiful today. It’s going to be a good day.” Those positive affirmations really matter. That’s what this whole section is about, right? The affirmations. Sometimes I’ll put on some makeup, dress nicely, and take a picture, not even to post it on Instagram. I don’t post that often. But if I feel good, sometimes I’ll share it. Loving myself has become part of that. I’ve really come to love my curves. The journey, like I said, is far from over. This isn’t the end-all. And even if I lose weight, I know I’ll never reach that so-called “ideal” body. My ideal isn’t 100 pounds - that’s too much. My journey will be mine. Nobody else gets to define it. ... What you look like on the outside is nothing compared to who you are on the inside. Your heart is the most important thing — your personality, your heart is what makes you who you are, not what you look like. So don’t listen to the world. Turn a

deaf ear. Thrive. Be happy and proud of your accomplishments, no matter what the world says.

Catharina: It's very broad. It's a continuous journey of coming home. I literally picture myself walking in a desert somewhere, I'm lost, I don't know where I am, and loving my body is realizing that I am always here for myself. I am always the home.

Emerald: I think to love my body is to actually be patient with it, which is something I still don't think I do that well. But I'm trying. And even that framing, saying I don't do it well, is a language of scarcity. It's something I'm still moving toward. When I think about my struggle with fatness and thinness, it has always come down to control, to dominating my body, and in that domination I lost the connection to its sacredness. And I can't just return to that by thinking it back into being. I have to embody it. I have to feel it. And the only way to do that is to be patient. That patience means messing up. It means feeling bad when I gain weight, but not collapsing into shame. It means understanding that I can't just rid myself of all this conditioning, I have to sit with it and ask where it comes from. It means having patience for the younger version of me who stood on a scale with friends who jumped off, and holding space for her. It also means not expecting myself to be morally perfect or physically perfect — but instead being guided by a desire to care for myself and care for others. Because if I can't be patient with my own body, I'm always going to reinforce the idea that the body should be dominated. And at minimum, that hurts other people, and I don't want that. You can't be someone who is kind to others and not kind to yourself. That politic only goes so far.

Eve: I guess, for me, to love my body is just to exist as myself — to let myself be. For so many years, most of my energy went into trying to change my body, trying to work on it, trying not to “let go” of myself. So now, loving my body means letting it be. Letting myself exist.

Fabiha: Be who you are and be comfortable the way you are.

Hoorr: To not be so self-critical. To be soft. To be generous with myself. And to actually be in my body. For me, that's a big thing, because I've had a tendency to dissociate. I want to be in my body. And yeah — to be soft. I'm really nice to other people, much nicer than I am to myself. I should be nice to me, too. That's important. The love and kindness I give to others, I need to give to myself. ...One step at a time. That's my advice for everything. It's not going to happen overnight. You have to sit with yourself, with your emotions. And also — read. Reading other people's stories helps. It inspires me. It gives me a sense of possibility.

Isha: Honestly, it just means being comfortable in your own skin. Looking not only at the negatives but also at the positives, the things that make you feel good about yourself. Like, I love getting my nails done, so I'll go do that. I'm not going to sit around waiting for someone to say, “oh, they're not dainty enough,” or whatever. Doesn't matter. I'll do what I like. And honestly? I would say: stop giving a fuck. Let people say what they say. Do what you want to do. If you're coming from a place of negativity toward your body,

just acknowledge it, take a step back, and roll with it. I mean, even Buddha was fat, look at where it got him.

Jenny: To me, it means being connected to myself, to my internal self. Being aware of what’s happening, not dismissing my own needs or the sensations in my body, but really being connected to them. Loving my body, internally, is about building that sense of connection and the ability to stay rooted in my truth, in my nervous system, in all of those things. And then loving my physical body, it’s being able to play, to be silly, to be gentle, to check in with myself, and to be whatever I want to be in any moment without that narrative of “I can’t do this because my body is a fat body.” It’s saying: actually, I can feel joy, I can be silly, I can play, I can be sexual if that’s what I feel like that day. I can be whatever it is my body wants to be. And just... embracing all of that.

Khivi: To me, loving my body means constant reframing, mental work. There’s so much messaging out there that makes you feel a certain way. Sometimes you’re watching a video or a movie, or you have an interaction that doesn’t seem fatphobic at first, but you walk away feeling icky. And then you have to come back to yourself and reflect on what made you feel that way. You have to ask: how can I better protect myself from that kind of interaction or that kind of media? Do I need to block certain creators? Are there things I just shouldn’t watch again? That’s what I do. For the longest time, after my body changed from having kids, I didn’t feel like taking care of it. I didn’t think it was worth taking care of. I didn’t feel like dressing up or wearing makeup anymore. But I think loving my body also means making this current body feel beautiful externally. Doing the research on what I want to wear, what brands are inclusive. ... I’m worth doing that. I’m worth doing many things. That’s how I love myself. Another part of it is parenting my girls, showing them that self-love can take many forms, and that it can’t only be about your body. It has to be internal too, about what you’re proud of, about who you are. My advice would be: even though your family, social media, movies, the world might tell you your body isn’t beautiful, it’s not true. There are so many more diverse viewpoints out there. There are people who will love your body for exactly what it is. And if you’re thinking about it in terms of partners, wondering if you’ll ever be loved - yes. People will love you for who you are.

Nila: I think it just feels so profoundly ordinary. Like, we were never supposed to be this aware of our own bodies, we were supposed to see our reflections in lakes, you know? For me, loving my body feels normal in that way. And not to undercut the work it took to get here, but being here doesn’t feel like something I’m constantly thinking about. It’s more like: my body can be neutral, it can be good, and it doesn’t always have to exist in a state of negative self-surveillance.

Natasha: I think it’s a process. It’s kind of like a wave, it’s different every day. For me, some days loving my body means simply not hating it. Other days, it means feeling good in my body, liking the softness of it. It means wearing the things I want to wear, rather than wearing things that hide me or things I think other people want me to wear. It means participating in sports and in spaces even when it’s implicitly or explicitly made clear that you’re not who it’s “for.” And with that, my advice is: there’s no wrong way to do it.

There's no wrong place to start. If you start at neutrality, or if you start at body liberation and then move to neutrality, or the other way around, and eventually get to fat liberation - that's all fair. We have to stop being so hard on ourselves. We've spent twenty-plus years being indoctrinated into these systems, and it's really unfair to expect ourselves to let it all go and love ourselves by tomorrow. It's an evolution. It intersects with all these other aspects of who you are. It requires not just challenging your internalized fatphobia, but also your internalized racism, your internalized ableism. It's a long and arduous process, but if you really want to be free, if you want to feel safe and at home in your body, it's a necessary one.

Neena: To love my body means taking good care of it, the way I took care of my babies. Keeping them clean, keeping them warm, feeding them at the right times, giving them the food their growing bodies needed. Whether it was formula or breast milk, those were decisions we made with care. And building room for joy that was part of it too. Once their bum was clean and their tummy was full, what did we do? We played. We roughhoused. We made them laugh. We gave them whatever stimulation they needed at that age. That, to me, is taking care of a body. So now I ask myself: am I clean? Am I fed? Am I getting the kind of food I need in this moment, the food I can actually provide? Because that's something I learned with my kids: fed is best. It's not always going to be okra and spinach and dal and rice. Sometimes it's eggs on toast and a banana. Responding to what my needs are. Getting enough activity. Fresh air. Taking care of me the way I took care of my kids. Take care of me the way I would take care of a baby; but also in ways that will be best for future me. Is it easy? No. It's very difficult. I get mired down in a lot of stuff. But that's my journey. I would say: take care of yourself the way you would take care of a baby. A baby is completely helpless and dependent on you — and you are dependent on you. What are you going to do to give yourself the best you can? If you're cranky, go take a nap. That kind of thing. And I would also say: your body is the least interesting thing about you. You may have a chronic condition, you may have all sorts of things going on, it's not about reaching some peak version of yourself. It's about asking: what do I need, based on what I need? And remembering that your body is the least interesting thing about you. Everything else matters too."

Raj: I think it's just about being comfortable. If you can wake up in the morning, take a shower, change your clothes, and not have to think about the way you look, because you're comfortable with how you feel and how you look in your own skin, you really can't get more than that. Obviously, there are people who love their muscles and their six-packs, but at the base level, for me to love my body, I'd want to reach a point of comfort. I'd want to feel comfortable taking my shirt off at the gym or at the beach. That's how I'd know I love my body that I'm comfortable with the way I look. You can take the steps you need to become comfortable. Because, like I said, loving yourself is about being comfortable in your body. It doesn't mean you need muscles or abs. It's more: I'm okay. I'm happy with who I am.

Saanvi: Telling her she's beautiful, that she's loved, that she's desired. Telling her I will always take care of her. That she's worth every bit of kindness and respect. That she's allowed to be called whatever she wants, and she doesn't have to stand for what she

doesn’t want. And that I’m letting her eat what she wants, goddammit!! Imagine your inner voice saying all of that to this person you love. How would you respond to your inner voice? In a roundabout way, it’s about treating yourself the way you would treat someone you deeply respect. That’s how you learn to build self-respect. That’s how you learn to build self-love.

Vidhi: To my younger self, I would say: being fat is not the same as being unhealthy. That’s something I learned later in life. When I started doing research, and research played a big role in how I became aware and knowledgeable about these things, I learned about Health at Every Size, and I learned that “unhealthy” is not equal to “fat.” That’s something I wish the younger version of me had known.

And finally, a message from the fat, getting fatter, Punjabi femme sociologist:

Raman: We have spent our entire lives moving, thinking, feeling, and sensing our bodies through the gaze of an audience. An audience that never really cared for us, unless it gave them a sense of power. We have spent hours, days, years waiting to be seen, heard, and felt by systems that were never designed to do any of that. We have begged for far too long to be validated for our intersectional, intergenerational woes. Within the stories of these participants, I watched my inner child and teen take flight and step into fat joy, fat love, *fat life*. The sharing that unfolded in each interview left my heart, and more importantly my bodymind, feeling warm and fuzzy, something that was never felt in our modern-day deathworlds. What I can say is this: these fat South Asian refusals to the auntie-uncle gaze and the clinical gaze are profound. I know these stories will open an entry point for others to finally share what they once hid: the brown fatty. In trying to make sense of these social realities, what once felt like an isolating experience and brought me into the world of fat scholarship and liberation as a Master’s student. And now, to be held in community by my desi kin as a doctoral candidate... the collective disobedience and persistence Ahmed (2015) talks about is deeply felt, honoured, and feels revolutionary. So, what does it mean to love your body to me? Well to treat this vessel with care, kindness, divinity. To trust that your em(BODY)ment will lead you to your truth.

Inhale – exhale – inhale - exhale

My fat, brown, femme body is my home, and I treat my wholeness with kindness and compassion

Inhale- exhale – inhale – exhale

You deserve to be treated with respect at any size, weight, or shape.

You are loved. You are safe. You belong. Your body is yours.

References

hooks, b. (2014). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Nash, J. C. (2019). *Black Feminist Reimagined After Intersectionality*. Duke University Press.