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SELF CARE AND JUSTICE FOR ALL?



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by Nashwa Khan

Self-care has lined most crevices of young hip social justice spaces, but seldom have

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I seen self-care examined in-depth or troubled. No one wants to fight such a beautiful and needed practice, but in the same instance, a lack of critical engagement with self-care practices can leave it vulnerable to corporate and neoliberal tendencies that progressive circles supposedly challenge and dismantle. When self-care language is used, we rarely examine who can access self-care because we tend to define it in monetary ways that replicate a feel-good capital. Some people offer the suggestion of creating cheap, almost “cost-free” DIY self-care kits as evidence that we can all access self-care. In actuality, though, we forget that a few key components in these fleeting moments of self-care are other expenses like time, individualized space and caregiving. There are generational differences in immigrant understandings of self-care, as well as differences in the accessibility of self-care. I would argue that this is linked to self-care as a Western commodified worldview – one where community needs and power dynamics can be erased in a new wave of self-care capitalism.

Positionality can also impact how we collectively or fragmentally view self-care. How we construct community

health and wellbeing in feminist circles is also built on a popsicle stick foundation of presuming we all enter the conversation from the same seat. In fact, due to social relations, history and positionality, we all sit in different seats and should cautiously speak from that seat only. Speaking for “I,” something vital to moving forward in any space with integrity, is hijacked when we assume we are all able to take a timeout for self-care and do not unpack the thorniness of what self-care has become.

For many of us, the game of life is not one with overtime, a half-time show, or a cool down period. Self-care has been used in very valid ways but also in ways that reinforce the glass ceiling the most marginalized women may have to break through. When a white woman with class privilege uses self-care as a way to destabilize and leave an uncomfortable call-out or conversation, who has self-care really helped? Who has it allowed to disengage and who has it left behind?

These are questions that have remained in the margins of self-care conversations that should begin to become central to

any accountable discussions on what self-care is becoming. I do not have time for self-care because financial survival trumps self-care. My self-care is making a reciprocal effort to give back to my community or making sure everyone is fed in a space. It would feel selfish for me to indulge in a capitalist shopping trip and label it as self-care versus what it actually is, myself as a person in the West buying clothing that is likely unethically made. These fleeting feel-good moments, masked as necessary care reiterate the dominant systems that are already at play. Instead of acknowledging our roles in these oppressive systems, we lie to ourselves by naming practices like shopping for clothes made by exploited people as “self-care.” In this consumerist act we buy into more than capitalism: when we label it self-care we render it ethical, we believe that it is buying into a greater good. Therefore, we buy redemption beyond engaging in capitalism, we buy into the belief that we are healing ourselves and are still engaged in social movements.

We can buy clothes, watch movies that are not necessarily feminist, purchase overly priced lattes for an Instagram aesthetic to caption with “self-care,” but

in that same moment we are oppressing another group to care for ourselves.

Self-care is not something recognized in parts of my family, the language is not there because perhaps the time is not there, nor is the money when one is constantly financially behind. In these moments I see a privilege in people like my peers who are able to say a self-care spa day is a necessity.

In no way is this a call to entirely throw out self-care or taking breaks, but perhaps we need to trouble the corporatization and cultural capitalism of self-care moments. Last fall I went to an “intersectional” feminist conference and saw self-care kits at multiple vendor booths—none were in my price range. I actually wonder which student could afford one of those kits and not consider it a decision between that kit and a textbook. The kits had egregiously price inflated items inside, but here in a kit was a holy grail of self-care staples kit for those who could indulge.

At the same time, what I do have time for and recognize is that women of colour can and should be able to have nice things. I find many (white) anti-capitalist cis men upset with women of colour having nice things, and often white progressive women can follow suit in policing the joy of women of colour. Considering the type of journeys and work we (women of colour) and our families have to do to attain a success we are told we should aspire to during assimilation narratives fed to us—a success we have to arguably work at least four times harder for—I wonder why white men and some white feminist women suddenly think women of colour shouldn't have nice things for the sake of progressive movements when really the scales have barely been tipped over. I find it most amusing when it is people who grew up with a lot of experiences like vacations and other markers of success that now have grown up and want to dictate who cannot have them. Why do they get to dominate the game of life and decide when we get to call a time-out? What does the future of coalition building and progressive movements look like with these rifts? How does this replicate the hegemonic structures such movements aim to counter?

Self-care as a remedy is prolonging the disease of interlocking oppressions amongst the most marginal. When practices of self-care centre on shopping, appropriative practices like yoga (without critical thought), spa days that involve women of colour giving cheap manicures or working around unsafe chemicals, we are active agents in upholding a multitude of oppressions. Self-care has continued to erode into a middle class form of engagement with “progressive” values (read: the fun parts) and is cementing itself in a wave of class-based liberation. Now, a girls’ day out shopping, mani pedis and bougie brunch can be named self-care. People do not have to think about those who service them or the processes that enable some people to sit in a gentrifying cafe, wear clothes made in a sweatshop and dispossess other people in the name of care. People no longer have to ponder the woman they tipped a few bucks. She, like the person who made the clothes or the person who was displaced to make room for the cafe are rendered invisible, while those indulging in self-care are positioned as healing themselves in ways that cannot be critically examined.

Instead of re-imagining what definitions of community collective justice could look like, or reconstructing society to create a balance, we distance ourselves with feel good moments. It dismisses a collective responsibility for what our world should look like and what we should expect and demand from one another. We can self-preserve in valid and authentic ways without resurrecting and re-cementing practices we claim our movements are against. We can position ourselves respectively and use self and community preservation. It is extremely difficult for me to justify my complicity in capitalist systems and exploitative modes of production as “self-care” when I know I am an accomplice in people’s demise everytime I swipe my debit card in a mall.

Much like the self-help industry, self-care has become an industry. The next time you see a manic pixie dream girl self-care kit with moon stones, candles, tarot cards, and khamsa symbols in neon shades, question who is absent from the experience of purchasing the kit and what purchasing such a kit in a fleeting moment tangibly means. For instance, when we buy a stone from a community where resource extraction is an environmental justice issue, which tends

to be a call for action as a result of environmental racism, self-care has masked its own role in resource extraction and environmental racism.

What does self-care mean if you are constantly sick because your land is not well or is occupied? How do we miss these dynamics in social justice spaces if we push self-care as an equally accessible practice? Self-care is arguably the opposite of self-criticism, and can turn into completely abandoning self-reflexivity.

ABOUT

Nashwa Khan is currently living and learning in the Greater Toronto Area. During her undergraduate career at McMaster she served on Hamilton's Status of Women Committee, McMaster's Women and Gender Equity Network, and chaired the City of Hamilton's Youth Advisory Council. Her work has been published in a variety of places including *Vice*, *RH Reality Check*, *This Magazine*, and the *HuffingtonPost*. She is currently enrolled in the Masters of Environmental Studies at York University with a focus on

creating access to safe(r) spaces in healthcare for marginalized populations. She is an avid storyteller, lover of medical humanities, and public health education. Feel free to tweet her @nashwakay.

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