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A woman's self-care in the diaspora

My initial perception of self-care was defined by its white, largely middle-class interpretation, namely, that self-care, for those who can afford it, entails stepping back from our responsibilities and taking time out to care for ourselves. At some point during my life, I came to an understanding that conceptualisations of self-care are commonly racialized, gendered, and social class-centred. Mum, a first-generation spousal migrant, behaved like a typical working-class woman, working all hours and self-sacrificing. Dad was a healthy eater, but a heavy smoker, which eventually led to a stroke. We originate from Azad Kashmir, a Pakistani administered region of Jammu and Kashmir - a geographical area involved in territorial conflict between India, Pakistan, and China (see map). For my immigrant family, stepping back from responsibilities and taking time out for self-care simply wasn't an option.



Map from *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani families in Britain* (2000) by Alison Shaw

My paternal granddad migrated to the UK in the 1940s, having spent many years as a private in the British army. Granddad fought for Britain in the Second World War; this was during the era of the British Empire. I was too young to really appreciate his stories of the British Raj or his anecdotes of his time in the army. All I remem-

ber is that he fought in the Burma campaign.

Under a 1948 Act, Commonwealth citizens were given entry into the UK as national citizens. After the Second World War, the UK was attempting to rebuild itself after massive destruction and severe labour shortages. Many thousands arrived from the sub-continent and the West Indies during the early 1950s to support rebuilding the UK. Dad joined him in the 1960s, returning in 1970 to marry mum, who accompanied him six years later with 10-month-old me. They lived in a run-down property which my granddad had rented for a few years before their arrival. After a brief spell of living with friends around the UK, they eventually returned to another of granddad's privately rented properties, this one was even worse than the previous. It was here that my siblings were born – two brothers and the youngest, a sister. Eventually, dad registered for public housing.

As the eldest child of working-class immigrant parents, growing up in Britain during the eighties and nineties was challenging to say the least. It was during the Thatcher and Reagan years when the political ideology of neoliberalism was taking hold in the United Kingdom and its overseas special ally, the United States of America. During this time, in some parts of the UK an offshoot of skinhead subculture, aligned with the far right, was growing in significance. Their targets were immigrant groups and the headlines at the time frequently reported racist violence. In 1980, we moved into public housing, in a white working-class area, in an inner-city area of Birmingham – a metropolis some 100 or so miles away from London. In fact, there were no minority ethnic families in the whole neighbourhood. This freaked out mum, who spoke no English and feared being isolated, alienated and physically attacked. On the other hand, my dad was immune to fear, at least to the kind to which mum was susceptible.

Mum's fears were realised when she was intimidated by a local skinhead – a working-class white male youth - on her way to the shops. She came home and told dad. Dad is a short but hot-tempered man. His reaction was to go over to the skinhead's home to 'talk it over'. From that day on the skinhead kept his distance from our family. This was one of the approaches dad used to resist oppression in a society hostile to the likes of him. It was also his version of resistance self-care – a practice in which you face your fears head on. Dad was one my first teachers of self-care in the diaspora. His lesson would be invaluable on my journey through life. For I was the first to attend school, college, university and enter a professional career. While I felt privileged to do so, in a society where I was the 'other', each institution left its mark.

Dad, a working-class immigrant man, tried to guide his children on how to navigate the hostility we found ourselves confronting daily. However, second-generation children of immigrants experience racism and oppression through practices that their parents cannot fathom. I had to find my own way through British society and my own form of self-care.

Self-care and coming of age

During my early years, understandably, I had no real perception of self-care. Immigrant communities were busy working hard to continuously escape poverty. Growing up, we were not allowed sweets, chocolates, and fried food, mainly because we couldn't afford it. Dad had us on a strictly healthy diet. Fish and chips from the local chippy and the odd MacDonald's meal were our treat set aside for special occasions. It was the early eighties and fast food in Britain wasn't cheap. So, when I attended secondary/high school, I was given pocket money, which I first used to buy sweets and chocolates. Having an underdeveloped taste for these in my younger years, I ended up buying few sweets and chocolates and instead saved my pocket money. Mum was also a saver. It was how she managed to make ends meet while always having just enough to cover rainy days. We had many of these, rainy days, I mean.

In my late teens, I came to my first awareness of self-care - a sort of working hard, self-sacrificing, with regular facials and head massage sessions. I learnt the former from my mum and the latter from exposure to middle-class culture now that I was attending an elite university. Head massages were stress-relieving during my undergraduate years. Facials

made me feel good about me. I was also hooked on retail therapy, buying random crap on shopping channels - mostly indulging in high-end cosmetics. The cost of these activities soon added up and eventually consumed much of my student grant – this was the era of public funding to support students from low-income families. Self-care was costly. I came to the point where I was struggling to pay for my bus journey to university. Therefore, I made do with at home facials and hair oiling until I found a graduate job.

Graduate job and superficial self-care

After leaving university, my first job was with a privatised former public sector utilities provider. I got back into my facials and head massages; I now had the money to pay for these little luxuries. I was happily engaged in aesthetic-enhancing, temporary stress-relieving activities. I was desperately trying to engage in a middle-class version of self-care because it was the only type that I was really familiar with, or at least it felt familiar, momentarily. A self-care that was about taking time out of our busy lives, not taking work home, treating ourselves, and putting our worries and concerns aside. The problem I had was that my working-class second-generation immigrant anxieties were not finding any relief with white middle-class self-care. Narrow practices of self-care, or what I term as superficial self-care, are unhelpful in understanding how self-care can benefit those for whom the 'normalised' model is unfit.

By my late twenties, I was introduced to the self-help movement by a friend. Broadly speaking, self-help is about individuals who share problems or situations coming together to understand and improve their situations. The self-help movement was instrumental in mobilising immigrant communities to fight for their rights in the UK and US. At a local level, self-help was a central tenet of immigrant culture in the early days of migration to Britain. Initially, it was men who migrated to the UK from the sub-continent. They supported each other with experiential knowledge, information, provision of accommodation and finances. When wives and children began to arrive, self-help was still going strong. But by the time the British sub-continent diaspora established roots, during a time underpinned by neoliberalism, self-help was substituted for preserving family respectability and status. The British sub-continent diaspora busied themselves with keeping up with the Jones' and not 'airing their dirty laundry in public' – perhaps strongly influenced by their new home. Seeking help, at least overtly, was antithetical to the new way of being.

Resilience and resistance - self-care in my thirties

When I reached my early thirties, I was bestowed by life another identity – one that women are well-known for encountering. I was now caring for my dad, who had had a stroke and was left with physical and mental disabilities. Some years later, mum developed one of the severest types of rheumatoid arthritis, which continues to deteriorate her quality of life. I was now faced with juggling caring responsibilities with PhD studies and freelance/casual employment. Up until this point, superficial self-care had allowed me to temporarily escape from my life, but this approach was no longer feasible. I had to make difficult life choices and needed a new type of self-care. I wanted to create a life where I could take greater ownership of and responsibility for my life. Self-help took me down the road of what

I term as resilience self-care.

Also, during my thirties I was entangled in trauma experiences from the everyday social injustices that I experienced as the child of immigrant parents. For many years, social injustice and inequalities were a considerable part of my lived experiences. My PhD studies and personal life revolved around issues of oppression, discrimination, racism, social inequality, and misogyny. Both superficial and resilience models of self-care were inadequate. I did try both, but they at best promoted distraction from the unpleasant feelings, and at worse masked the distressing feelings. Neither encouraged me to explore the root causes of my discomfort. I came across the work of Audre Lorde, who states that self-care is a radical political act and writes: "caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare". Like Lorde, caring for myself had become a way of preserving myself in a world that was hostile to my multiple identities and community. This was for me resistance self-care.

Forties and the age of authentic self-care

Now in my forties, I try to adopt what I call 'authentic self-care'. What is that you ask? Well, it's about being connected to everything but attached to nothing. Sounds like New Age mantra, you say. I was exposed to New Age culture, maybe some of it rubbed off. I certainly enjoyed the white middle-class hippy scene - they are one of the few truly inclusive communities that I have had the privilege of meeting. Anyway, I digress. I struggled for years with many unhealthy attachments, bringing me suffering, sorrow, anxiety, and frustration. Our world view is entrenched in attachment, whether that is to material possessions, financial gains, or relationships/associations. In fact, this world view where 'acquisition' is prioritised strongly provokes attachment to practically everything. We are suffering because of this provocation. Centring our lives on attachment and acquisition is making us ill, but we cannot stop - it is bloody addictive.

We are simply not allowed to stop because to live and function in society we have no choice but to acquire and thereby become attached. Therefore, we are attached to everything and connected to nothing. Authentic self-care values calmness, connection, community, cooperation, and conservation, all of which are oppositional to the ideals of neoliberalism i.e., hyper-individualism, individualisation, resilience, self-modification, and the relentless pursuit of success at any cost. We need to feel we can promote and participate in authentic self-care. However, our society presently does not allow us to experience this type of self-care, at least not without being disaffected and disadvantaged. It is therefore conceivably impossible to practice authentic self-care, and yet it is precisely what we need in a world increasingly intolerant of difference. This intolerance has been borne out of a fragmented and disintegrated society, with social, political, economic, and financial systems verging on disarray.

I believe neoliberalism constricts meaningful connection to the point that our relationship with other humans, and the planet, are rooted, primarily, in the extrinsic value that we can extract. Rather, I like many am looking for meaningful connection in a world driven by fierce competition among and between humans, institutions, states, and corporations. Over the past three decades, we have progressively become hostile and

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apathetic towards each other. In fact, we are distracted by social media, materialism, fame, vanity, and aesthetics to name a few. I am guilty of this too. Distractions render us indifferent to and unconcerned about the real issues. On an everyday and mundane level, I am constantly locating my multiple identities as a woman, a second-generation immigrant, a carer, an employee to name a few, in a culturescape that I increasingly barely recognise and certainly do not relate to. Consequently, my practice of authentic self-care has been somewhat thwarted by the constant need to attend to my multiple identities in a society whose expectations I can no longer meet.