The Leftovers Dilemma

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Leftovers are like an uninvited guest that does not leave. I never learned how to cook for one. Things do not come in ones back home, there is always plenty of everything for everyone, whether you know them or not. My parents always said, if we live together, we eat together even if we have different schedules, whatever happens we always have dinner together. Sharing food in many cultures such as mine, means sharing love and care and not just the actual meal. In my family, my aunt would cook a nice dinner and call all her nieces and nephews to share this meal with them without any special occasion. We would eat and watch a movie or play board games, nothing too exciting but everything so warm and comfortable. In a place where love is heavily monitored and happiness is hard to attain, food becomes an outlet; something around which we can gather to share one of life's most basic pleasures without facing any horrifying consequences. We learn that to show support to someone going through a rough time, you bring them food and to celebrate any happy news or occasions you cook the appropriate food. But I am not there anymore, I am here in the UK. I am alone and I am not sure if I will ever be able to have a community again, at least not like the one I had. When I get really sick here, I take care of myself all alone. I make myself hot drinks, soups and of course eat tons of leftovers; things that never happened to me back home because I always had the privilege of constant company. That's the thing about where I come from—you barely have any privileges as a woman, a religious minority or a leftist but you only realise how privileged you are to have a community when you are deprived of your support system that has been all that you had for so many years. When people ask me how my extended family is so close as if it is one huge nuclear family, I always say because we are a family of women. My grandmother had three daughters and she cares for each of them even now that she has become a great grandmother. My mom and aunts deal with all of us as if we are their own children. We were brought up to believe that cousins are siblings. When I talk to my grandmother about that, she says that we are all women and we are alone in this world of men and we have to look out for each other because otherwise we would not survive. If a Western person saw my grandmother, they would think she is the biggest supporter of the patriarchy. But isn't what she did and keeps doing, the true meaning of feminism and solidarity? Raising three powerful women with good education and decent jobs who have one another's back is what she did without ever hearing the word feminism in her life. My mother raised me like her mother raised her but adding to that she gave me so much more freedom than she had when she was my age. I grew up to cherish family and freedom more than anything else. And now the political situation back home dictates choosing one of the two. I hate these leftovers but I also hate not being able to be myself, walk in the streets, wear dresses, speak my mind or practice my basic rights—unless I decide that I'm willing to go to prison for it, get sexually assaulted or even worse, both.

There is always a risk. Any tiny decision can turn your life upside down and I mean something as tiny as which picture to post on social media or what dress to wear for an event. I decided to go back home for a bit at least, just to see how much I really am missing out on; thinking maybe my feelings are exaggerated. I told myself that once the plane lands I'll see everything I hate about this country and will immediately appreciate my leftovers. I wanted to prove myself wrong, that my place is not back home where I am cared for and looked after because I've had enough of this country. I like feeling safer, I like being able to wear my dresses and I love the fact that the only thing that controls my clothing choice is the weather, but the cold is another story to tell. Yet, the surprise came only a few hours after landing, an overwhelming feeling that said—this is where I belong. As my Lebanese friend so adequately puts it, we have a toxic relationship with our countries; we cannot be with them but we cannot do without them either. I found my family, my people, my language and most importantly my food. Going home to a hot meal waiting for you and a family to ask about your day and offer a helping hand without you having to ask. I know this world has become all about being independent, but do we have to be? The thing about countries of the South is that all they have is one another. If we do not have this support network, we cannot survive. When you have that, you start questioning all the individualism that capitalism has been promoting for years.

As a woman, I live in perpetual fear. Although I like to remind myself that I am a very privileged woman since I have a car so I am not forced to use public transportation, I live in a relatively safe neighbourhood and am surrounded by a relatively progressive circle, but I never feel safe. The constant feeling is that something bad is about to happen. When I left to live in a first world country, this feeling significantly decreased but I am still scared all the time, and the fear is doubled by loneliness. I still find myself calling someone to stay on the phone with me as I walk back home at night. They live thousands of miles away but I still cannot bring myself to walk home alone without someone on the phone because otherwise if someone attacked me, my people might never know what happened to me. The only difference is that back home, I never even walk home alone. Everything is a struggle for a woman, most of my choices are chiefly based on literal self-preservation. This is not the case for men—neither back home nor anywhere in the world. A man in Egypt only has to fear the regime if he is a political opponent. If he chooses to travel, it would be for personal preferences. For me, it had gotten to a point where it was physically dangerous to stay back there because I am constantly reliving every trauma I have ever encountered.

The idea that women should not only be seen as caregivers and rather be seen as equals to their male counterparts in all rights and responsibilities is at the core of my beliefs. Yet, the type of care that I speak of here is a different one, care that stems from the fact that we know that we are all in this together. The majority of people in my country do not know theories of feminism or support gender equality, but since childhood I saw how women found comfort and strength in one another. If a woman is subjected to any form of violence, she has an army of women to protect, nurture and defend her. When I started to read on feminism through my Western education, it felt like these women were victims of the patriarchy who did not have any agency and were not capable of standing up for themselves. However, when I started to form my own understanding of feminism, I began to see how, at least in my context, caring for one another in their struggle against male domination is at the core of my feminist values. I come from a traumatised region,

everything is traumatising and everyone is traumatised in one way or another. Every day you come across someone who is suffering and the suffering never ends. I am only here now because I could not stand to see women suffering that much. I felt like I had to do something and I keep telling myself that this is all part of the journey to be someone who has enough knowledge and resources to make this world less of a harsh place. Yet, the amount of people who had the same aspirations and ended up losing themselves or even their lives is horrifying. My career is going according to plan, I am learning to be kind to myself and to make my goal to help one person at a time. But this path is extremely lonely. Sometimes I wish I never knew that the world is messed up to this extent. Sometimes I wish I could just enjoy the warmth of my family and the delicious hot meals. I wonder why I ever chose the leftovers' path. When I was young my brain refused to imagine any scenario where I am not living amongst my family. Little did I know that being in my safe space would traumatise me to the point where I would be eager to leave and never look back. The thing is most people end up looking back and so do I. My mother looks at me with pride for being able to get a scholarship abroad and excel at my career but my feelings of shame and guilt for leaving my people to face the hardships of their daily lives overshadow any joy. The leftovers stare at me everyday as I sit in this big house alone and ask me, 'Which scenario do you choose? Stay here or in a similar place where you'll be your only constant companion or go back to the warmth of your old life and be a prisoner of your fear or an actual prisoner of the state?'

I am sure this might seem like an obvious decision to many, just live with the leftovers. The leftovers may not help but at least they cannot harm. But these leftovers resemble everything I truly hate about this world. They are a spitting image of capitalism, individualism and colonialism that took everything from my country except its warmth. I am here and I am alone because over a hundred years ago, this very country decided to mess my country up to the extent that to this day we cannot fix it and even for a decent education we have to go back to them. I think of all my friends and family members who were forced to make similar decisions when they were my age, the pain they went through and the constant coldness in their hearts. How much they long for home. A home that they do not know anymore. Don't get me wrong, I know how privileged I am to be here and to have those leftovers be my only problem now; I have also been blessed with people full of love and light to soothe me here. Yet, I am still hoping that maybe one day I could live in a world where the norm is for everyone to share their meals, care, love and happiness, without having to sacrifice their freedoms in return.

Critical commentary

When I started to think about Care, all I could think about was the women in my family in Egypt. I was already researching Western feminism and how sometimes various forms of feminisms and gender minority struggles are dismissed or marginalised. Additionally, I had my personal struggle with homesickness and the concept of home that I might be deprived of due to my personal and political choices. I began thinking of my life in England, how care is the only thing that I cannot find and when I took a step back and started

analysing the things that manifest this lack of care, I realised my leftovers dilemma. The presence/absence of care are currently defining my choices, the types of risks I take when accepting jobs and the topics I choose to publicly discuss. I know that if I express all my thoughts, I might be deprived of the care that I have always been used to. Yet, the problem is that I will essentially have to choose whether I want to be a completely free woman or a partially free woman with a huge support system and this is a decision I would hate to make. In writing this, I was trying to get all those ideas out of my head because it is a burden to keep carrying them around. What I now know is that I can denounce patriarchal gender roles while holding on to the care that glues all the women I know to one another.