

**Habib, Samra. (2019). We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir.
Toronto: Viking Press.**

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Samra Habib's memoir, "We Have Always Been Here", recounts the events of her challenging life, mostly focusing on her adolescent years and early adult life. Habib traces the times she had to navigate harsh environments and explore different identities; from the terrors and delights of growing up in Pakistan as an Ahmadi Muslim to the intricate process of forming her identity in Canada as a Queer Muslim. She tells tales of the wonders of being a child and the brutal treatment of being born a girl, more specifically, a girl in Pakistan. Habib explains how the circumstances of her childhood would lay the groundwork of her future life and how transitioning to such a life is not what she would tolerate. Habib has had to overcome many challenges to get to where she is now and explores how these challenges would give her the strength to endure the difficult nature of society. Through Habib's memoir, audiences are exposed to many different themes, some of which include forming one's identity, feeling invisible, and the comforts of familiarity.

Habib struggles with forming her complex identity. She wants to be known and seen as a good Muslim woman, but at the same time, she doesn't want to follow that traditional role. Instead, Habib feels that she has the right to come into her own person. Her culture wishes to "keep women pious" (p.31) and subservient to the men. However, Habib acts in a rebellious way. She does things

that are considered out of the ordinary for women and sometimes even considered “gunah – [sinful]” (p. 31). Habib wishes for her identity to be more than one thing, a good Muslim woman. Her identity should be many things, and it should be her right to choose what these things are despite her culture and her family’s opinions. There are many moments throughout the memoir where Habib must choose one identity over another. She is forced to sacrifice a part of her identity in order to embrace another. For example, her arranged marriage to her cousin Nasir forces her to give up the opportunity of becoming a writer. If she were to please her parents, Habib would have to “[mute] [her] ambitions and defining traits” (p. 62). She would have to forego what makes Habib herself and embrace the identity of someone else; she would have to deny her own existence. This, of course, is not an appealing lifestyle for Habib. Her mother had believed that what she knew would be best for Habib, however, Habib felt “her [mother’s] best did not look like [Habib’s]; in fact, it looked like danger. It felt like surrender” (p. 71). There are also other instances where she is forced to choose between being her authentic self and her religion, like when she feels she is no longer welcome at a mosque for simply identifying herself as queer.

One might define denying your existence as hiding your authentic self, your identity. In this sense, one might suggest this as being invisible. Throughout Habib’s memoir, she is forced to conceal much of her life. She hides her faith as being Ahmadi for fear of being persecuted for merely being an Ahmadi Muslim. She was forced to hide a part of her being, like it didn’t exist, a part of herself that she was proud of and felt very connected to; this part of her life had to become invisible to almost anyone when she lived in Pakistan. Another example is when she had to hide her books from her family and husband Nasir as they felt that these books were impairing her

ability to be a pious and good Muslim woman.

More examples of being forced to become invisible, in the literal sense, is when she was told to cover up, literally concealing herself and her identity. Habib also alludes to the fact that she was sexually assaulted at a very young age without explicitly saying so. She implies it when she describes the experience as “damage [that] left an invisible scar that will last a lifetime” (p.14). Habib didn’t dare even discuss this horrific event as her parents were fearful of “people speculating whether [she] was still a virgin, the worst possible outcome” (p. 15). In order to be a good Muslim woman, Habib was required to be pure and undefiled, so this too was made invisible. Habib was forced to act as if that horrific part of her life doesn’t exist.

Through these examples, the audience can see why the memoir is called “We Have Always Been Here”. It is because despite being forced to conceal many aspects of her life and identity, Habib is always there. These experiences and profound life events have shaped who she is, and it laid the groundwork for her identity, which have always been there, just below the surface, invisible. Habib doesn’t just refer to queer Muslims or queer individuals. She refers to all other individuals who have gone through the same thing, all the other individuals who can relate to what Habib’s experienced. It is those individuals who have been forced to become invisible by society.

In her memoir, Habib tells her story with an almost Zen-like manner with a very calming, soothing, and familiar tone that evokes feelings of empathy, which allows her audience to relate on a personal level with many of the complicated topics Habib discusses. Throughout, she is reminded of home, or Pakistan in her case. She describes certain smells, like that of her mother or

her mother's cooking; certain spices would remind her of home. Witnessing certain events or seeing certain people would bring her back to the place she had known as home when she was a child. This is significant because despite being surrounded by so much turmoil, this is where she finds her solace. It is a demonstration of the fact that Habib will never forget her roots and reminds her of different facets of who she is, her identity. It serves as a reminder to never forget where an individual has come from and how far they may come since leaving a place they came to know as home. This comfort is reflected in the tone of the memoir previously mentioned. Habib's memoir may serve as a guide or a comfort for those who may have lost their way or seek guidance but are unable to due to their circumstances.

Habib's targeted audience would most certainly be queer Muslims; however, others may find the text as comforting and possibly as a touchstone to navigating the intricate process of developing one's identity. Women from any part of the world would also be a targeted audience and members of the LGBTQ+. Anyone not fortunate enough to be born into a society that provides equality for all and allows all types of people to be their most authentic selves will find this memoir useful. I believe it could also be used in an academic setting as a resource for post-secondary students of any discipline that focuses on, or relates to, gender-studies, feminism and cultural-studies.

In conclusion, Habib shows her audience that it is okay to experience pain and difficult times and sometimes even feel lost as "it's in the getting lost that you find yourself" (p.172). She hopes that this will bring more awareness to individuals and hopes that society will find itself

supporting the youth and that we should leave young people better than when we found them. The only problem I felt with the memoir was when Habib asked many rhetorical questions in sequence. However, I feel that this was her way of showing the audience that she is reflecting on her current situation. I believe that all disciplines of study could learn something from Habib's life and that it is not directed at one single discipline. However, it is directed at some more than others. I loved reading "We Have Always Been Here" as it is straightforward to read and simple to follow, illuminating, and positively engaging. I would recommend this memoir to all women and anyone who is struggling to form their identity.