



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

Reviewed by: Mercedes Bennett, MacEwan University

In her book, “We Have Always Been Here,” Samra Habib uses a culmination of personal experiences ranging from childhood to present life to highlight the many struggles being faced by the Queer Muslim community. Habib uses her personal experiences as a young immigrant, Muslim, and Queer woman to exemplify not only the individual struggles of each group but also the intersectional nature of each. Habib takes the reader through three primary stages in her life that mark these struggles, her life as a young immigrant struggling with fitting in, her life as a young adult working to accept her sexuality, and her present life as an activist for the Queer Muslim community.

Habib starts by detailing her childhood before she and her family were forced to flee Pakistan in order to escape the religious persecution that put their lives at risk. She then moves to describe the pivotal life event of being a young immigrant in Canada. This personal view of having her childhood packed up and moved across the world into a new environment and culture allows her to create an understanding of the hardships many young immigrants would face. Throughout this section, she describes how she had not only tried to adjust to living a new life of poverty but also trying to fit into a completely different culture while at school. Her determination to fit in with

the Canadian born children in order to avoid bullying and racism at a young age came with many hurdles and even influenced her to separate herself from some of the cultural expectations of her family while still trying to avoid angering them. Her intense desire to fit in with those around her at school led her to make many small changes to how she acted. She would lie to her overly protective parents so she could go to a friend's house, she would take off her hijab at school, and even talk to boys outside of required classwork. Each of these actions resulted from not only her need to fit in with those around her but also from her desire to have more independence and autonomy in her life. This want for autonomy and to fit in play an increasingly important role in her life as she grows older, and it is this realization later on in her life that helps her to accept that she is queer.

In her young adult life, Habib had run away and separated herself from her family, married her high school boyfriend, who had offered her a place to stay, and began a job as an editorial assistant for a major car company. At the tender age of sixteen, she had been in an arranged marriage with her first cousin, which left her depressed and suicidal. Eventually, she found the strength to break this Nikah, putting herself in turmoil with the Muslim community around her, as well as her family. This was her first step towards the autonomy she craved when she was younger and eventually led to her completely separating herself from her family. Her act of rebellion against her family and community set her on the path of self-realization and acceptance that would change her life forever. Her marriage to Peter, her high school friend, and her eventual boyfriend was also momentous. Habib describes that she was never really attracted to her husband, at first ascribing it to the trauma of her arranged marriage. But through her new job, she was given her first real

look into the queer community by her lesbian coworkers Abi. She found herself intrigued by Abi and drawn to the queer community, even stating, “Abi was my window into a queer world I hadn’t yet explored, and something told me that was where I needed to be” (p. 124) Habib had found a world where she felt she belonged, and with the help of friends such as Abi, she also found the validation and acceptance she needed to allow herself to experiment. She eventually divorced Peter, whom she had recognized felt more like a roommate and friend than a partner she loved, and began exploring her sexuality further. She started to dress more to her personal style, rather than only with what was popular or expected of her and separated herself from the overwhelming urge to fit in. This pivotal step of moving past the need to fit in with everyone around her opened the world up for her and even helped her relationship with her mother be slowly reintroduced into her life. Habib no longer tried to hide her authentic self, and this helped her grow into the adult she wanted to be while working towards living the future she wanted.

Realizing she was Queer and allowing herself to embrace this side of her allowed much more personal growth for Habib. She traveled, experienced many relationships with different people throughout the Queer community, and eventually found a queer-friendly Mosque. Finding this mosque had a major impact on her life, as she had eventually found herself separated from her religion the day she broke her Nikah. She describes the many dangers that queer Muslims face throughout the world, such as violence and persecution. However, attending the queer Mosque reopened her eyes to her faith. It became a moment when she realized that more often than not, when one is queer, they separate themselves from identifying as Muslim, and vice versa. This pivotal realization is one large influencing factor for her photography campaign. Her campaign

aimed to give Queer Muslims a space to exist and a voice to be heard and supported. Habib worked to create the queer Muslim representation that was so lacking in media because of the fear of retribution that many feel as well as the negative portrayals that many other forms of media had created because of Islamophobia. Habib worked hard to emphasize the need for acceptance and safety for those belonging to these intersectional communities by creating positive portrayals of the community.

Habib's writing creates a detailed look into a marginalized life that many people in not only Canada but also the rest of the world often fails to recognize. By writing this book, she pops the illusion bubble of equality for many of her readers and creates a much-needed voice for Queer Muslims. By detailing her own hardships and trauma, while exploring the stories of others in similar situations, she creates awareness and support for the community. The use of extremely personal experiences creates an intimate setting to the book that makes Habib almost feel like an old friend of the reader. By creating this personal connection to her audience, she leaves a lasting impression and helps to create further understanding and acceptance within the audience. I feel her choice of writing style is tremendously effective for her target audiences of younger allies, the Queer community, and the Muslim community. It also holds strong for the academic audiences such as those interested in Gender studies and Race studies, as it creates an in-depth look at common struggles faced and helps open a dialog that is often not studied. The title of the book itself also creates an important point that I feel would be important for those studying the intersectional nature between sexuality and race in Sociology or Gender Studies. Reminding the audience that "We Have Always Been Here" is extremely impactful. Often, those communities

who remain more private or secretive due to situations such as violence or the fear of being ostracised by those around them are forgotten in research and activism.