



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

Reviewed by: Jordan Kozuska, MacEwan University

While a careful reading of Samra Habib's, "We Have Always Been Here" can offer the reader several insights concerning what it means to live a meaningful existence, it can be argued that the most critical of these insights is the power that overtakes when concealing aspects of one's identity and the impact that it can have on a person's existence. The author documents her life struggles and introduces the reader to the negative impact that her lack of authenticity has had on her relationships, including the relationship she has with herself. In addition to discussing the hardships that come with an inauthentic existence, this piece works to push the boundaries on what it means to experience freedom – both internally and in the surrounding sphere of one's reality. Samra has grappled with what kind of freedom could possibly be manifested, considering her conflicting experiences with her religion and relationship with Allah, and her uncertain feelings about her sexuality. In the end, Samra exudes what it means to live life to the fullest and shows the reader what freedom truly looks like no matter what is going on around her. This work uniquely addresses two concepts of hiding parts of a person's identity along with finally finding freedom and expresses how the two are explicable related to one another. This paper will address this relationship and explain how powerfully the author has exhibited these concepts throughout her

lifetime. This piece acts as a roadmap for others who are struggling with originality in their own life and gives a clear depiction of freedom in every sense of the word.

The author takes the reader on a journey along with her, exploring her remarkable life through her own recounting of it. Exploring her individuality began in Pakistan as a young girl, struggling to be anything at all due to the religious climate at the time growing up as a young Ahmadi Muslim. The “Sunni and Shia conflicts has erupted throughout Lahore... for once, the target wasn’t us” (p. 29). Samra describes the religious upheaval that plagued Pakistan and even though the main religious conflicts were not targeted towards Samra’s family, they were not free from difficulty surrounding religious extremism as they frequently provided refuge for those identifying as Shia in their community. Samra’s upbringing forced her to learn how to conceal parts of her identity to help protect her from the surrounding world. In Pakistan, Samra’s early life was centred on hiding her religion as an Ahmadi from the people around her and understanding her place in society as a woman. Since she was a religious and gendered minority, and the Sunni extremists were terrorizing people’s lives who were similar to her, Samra was taught the importance of hiding that part of herself from an early age and this is a trait she took with her far into her adulthood.

Once moving to Canada with her family, this notion of hiding who she was became furthered through her love for literature and concealing the nature of some of the more suggestive books she opted to read, referring to them as her “illicit, hidden contraband” (p. 93). She also displayed this concept of hiding parts of herself when it came to dressing how she wanted and exposing her long curly hair from her hijab, expressing her inner self for the first time on her

exterior while at school, but properly covering back up before returning to the apartment complex where her family lived (p. 78). The reader can catch glimpses of Samra's authentic self in her earlier years, but it wasn't until she began exploring her sexuality and truly accepting herself for being queer that she began to flourish, and subsequently exposed her authenticity. Whether a person is questioning their sexuality or anything else about their fundamental being, this work can help others to digest parts of their true self that they have fought against their entire lives.

This piece specifically holds space in order to discuss sexuality in a wholesome forum. As an outsider looking in, the reader is invited into the vulnerable world of Samra's as she overcomes all of the quirks to becoming her true queer self. Samra explains that it was in the "gendered segregated bubble [in Pakistan] privy to very adult conversations among women [where she] fell in love with the beautiful, complex and resilient beings' women are" (p. 64) and being able to express her ungended love to those closest to her brought her closer to freedom and to her true self, in her own eyes and her closest family members. Samra explained that she "was denying [herself] the freedom to be the person [she] longed to be" (p. 130). Once admitting her sexuality to herself, it was a conversation she felt necessary to face with her family. Due to the highly religious and cultural importance that is placed on Samra's family and upbringing, having the space to explain to her deeply cultured father that her arranged marriage in her teens, and her subsequent marriage in her early twenties didn't work out "because it was preventing [her] from being [her] authentic queer self" (p. 202). Obtaining the acceptance from her father that ensued, allowed her to express her authenticity to the person she hid it from the most. Battling her sexuality and the judgment from others closest to her, hindered her authenticity for so long, that when it was

finally expressed, she was able to start diving back into her relationship with Allah, on a deeper level.

Religion is a topic that some consider taboo as there is much debate around the subject. However, the author of this work introduced religion in the most delicate of ways, not convincing the reader that her Muslim roots are better than any reader's beliefs, or that her commitment to Allah made her any more superior to the next person. Rather, getting to practice her religion in her authentic queer self was her ticket to freedom. This freedom shows itself through a title described as *azaad* in Urdu. The word means freedom in much of its usage, but when using it to "describe a woman, it is meant to imply that she is too wild to be tamed by those who have the right to tame her... [Samra explained that] one day [she] would wear the title of *azaad* like a badge of honour" (pp. 67-68). This is exactly what Samra has done with her life, the badge of honour she wears as *azaad* can be seen through her wild explorations of her inner truth, her quest for religious belonging, and coming to terms with her sexuality reaching larger freedoms than she could have ever imagined as a small girl in Pakistan.

Through her work she immerses herself in as an adult, photographing queer Muslims. She questioned one of her participants asking what kind of advice they would give other young queer Muslims looking for support. The participant stated that:

We have always been here, it's just that the world wasn't ready for us yet... Together, through facing distinct realities, we should be united – united in the desire to be, in the desire to enjoy being free, safe and happy... it is not going to be easy, and one may never reach a reconciliation with oneself (or with religion), but at least we should care for each other. In the face of challenges, our sense of community and our shared aspirations for a better world should make us stronger (pp. 180-181).

It is in this understanding and perspective on the world that the reader can see just how deeply we all crave the same things in this life. We all crave the ability to be our authentic selves, to experience being free and happy – content in our own existence and unified through the relationships we endure. This memoir identifies key themes that any reader would be able to relate to in some sense and allows the reader to feel that they have a friend and supporter in Samra. This memoir would be useful for a sociological academic audience that studies issues surrounding race, gender inequalities, religious ideals and the interrelatedness of these concepts. Overall, the considered readership for this work is anyone with an open mind and empathetic background. This work is one that allows the reader to break down internal walls and relate to someone else that has faced immense hardship. It is in works like this that readers can see that they aren't alone in their battles and where literature can become a comforting phenomenon to help get people through the struggles they face. This work is powerful, eye-opening, and an easy read that is difficult to put down. I would recommend it to anyone who was searching for an informative and deeply thought provoking read.