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

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Samra Habib's book, "We Have Always Been Here", is a memoir dedicated to self-discovery and aligning both faith and sexuality within an identity. Habib provides audiences with a sort of diary, recording the adversities and triumphs of a queer-Muslim woman in her journey of living with an identity that is rare in the Muslim community. Her story begins in her birthplace of Lahore, Pakistan where her Ahmadi Muslim family is the target of violent hate crimes from Islamic extremists. To escape this violence, the family emigrates to Toronto, Canada where they are met with new troubles. In addition to navigating through adolescence, Habib experiences racism, bullying, and newfound poverty as an immigrant. Her family imposes hindrances of their own on Habib, based on their patriarchal beliefs and cultural expectations. These obstacles ultimately lead to despair and an attempt on her own life. By means of friendship and faith, Habib not only conquers these burdens, but shifts them into a celebratory account.

Habib possesses a unique, introspective ability to understand herself and also use this capacity to sympathize with her parent's behavior. Their family dynamic, a central theme in the book, is saved by her capacity to not blame them for their shortcomings, and instead commend their best efforts. At the age of four, Habib experiences sexual abuse and her mother is devastated

by the incident. Her priority becomes convincing her mother she is not traumatized by the incident, over her own personal anguish. She states, “instead of making her understand that it wasn’t okay for her to leave me alone at that age with a man who was basically a stranger, I tried to make her believe I was okay, that she didn’t have anything to worry about or any reason to blame herself” (p. 16). Distinguishing her mother’s feelings as more important than her own at this young age, demonstrates Habib’s maturity and selflessness. However, this selfless act may be precisely what causes her inner affliction for so many years to come. She continuously protects her family’s feelings, while dwelling in her own suffering as a result.

During her childhood, Habib’s father was tangibly emotionally detached and distant. When discussing her divorce from Peter with her father, she rationalizes, “this failure to parent me was partly what had led to my relationship with Peter in the first place” (p. 12). Habib’s recognition of her father’s faults in parenting do not cause her to villainize him or shift blame on him for her failed relationships. Habib attests to the fact that, like her mother, he parented with the highest personal effort he could provide. He assisted in the divorce by outlining the steps she needed to take to dissolve the marriage. Habib states, “his focus on the logistics was its own kind of support – the only kind he knew how to give” (p. 12). Rather than scolding him for his lack of *emotional* support, her maturity persists by instead praising him for his efforts. She articulates, “he didn’t have the tools to understand the psychological impact his parenting had on my life – I couldn’t expect him to acknowledge his wrongdoings” (p. 13). By letting go of expectations for her parents, Habib puts forth the intrinsic hope that they may return the favor and sympathize with her own lifestyle.

The definition of refuge, as provided by Oxford Languages, is “a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble.” This notion of a refuge is another theme in Habib’s memoir, as she is continuously seeking safety. Notably, her family escapes to Canada in hopes of finding refuge, but it seems as though fonder memories exist for their previous life in Pakistan. Habib recollects her seventh birthday, when there was turmoil in Lahore. She recalls her mother having a party and cake, when the bakeries and shops had been vandalized. She states, “the smell of cardamom temporarily replaced the pungent odour of burning cars” (p. 9). Although her childhood was chaotic, Habib focuses on the beauty in it. Once arriving in Canada, the despair felt by Habib and her family grew exponentially. In search of solace from the alienation and poverty she was experiencing, Habib finds refuge in the park’s rose bushes. To help provide for her family, she gathers roses from her safe place and sells them in secret, only to be scolded by her mother. Habib explains, “it had been a drastic shift – only a few months ago we had a personal cook to prepare my mother’s favorite dishes and I was attending one of the best school’s in Lahore – so I was especially attuned to these new anxieties” (p. 9). Ironically, the place that was meant to be their refuge, met them with alternate hardship.

The racism and bullying experienced by Habib in school, causes her to seek other places of refuge. She finds refuge in swimming, and another escape is her English as a Second Language (ESL) class which she calls her “safe haven” (p. 17). When Habib suddenly runs away from home, she finds shelter in Peter’s basement apartment, where she, “felt like [she] was in hiding” (p. 1). This need to retreat is not overcome for many years, as she finally finds safety in her identity.

A sense of belonging is a theme revisited by Habib throughout the book. As a new immi-

grant, other students bullied her for her accent, food, and body odor. She states, “I would spend years amassing an impressive collection of perfumes and body oils, as if no amount was enough to mask the scent of my shame” (p. 17). This instance of being shamed in her youth, led to years trying to undo this harm and finally foster a sense of belonging. The traditional food prepared by her mother was ridiculed, causing Habib to use what money she had to buy pizza and chocolate milk, in an attempt at belonging.

Habib does not escape this theme of belonging as she gets older. As her and friend Andrew shop in Holt Renfrew, she is fully aware that the clothes are unaffordable. However, she finally feels as though she has as much business being there as anyone else. Habib affirms, “there is power in giving off the aura of belonging” (p. 9). Although she may not truly possess this sense of belonging, pretending as such is nearly just as persuasive.

As Habib travels in the book, her personal development seems to grow in correspondence with her journeys. Her birthplace of Pakistan establishes her childhood roots, traditions, and foundation. The family’s migration to Canada exposes her to struggles as a new immigrant, as well as navigating through adolescence. Habib’s travel to New York introduces her to creative opportunities and experiences with the queer community. The trip to Japan allows her to explore *herself,* finally establishing her identity as a queer-Muslim woman and readying her to find her own allies back home. In Japan she states, “how far I’d travelled to arrive at a simple truth about myself” (p. 15). Her exploration of other worlds ultimately leads to her own self-discovery.

Faith is perhaps most the prevalent theme throughout the book. Habib’s faith in Islam is wavering at times, but in due time she recognizes its value in her life. During her troubles in the

arranged marriage to her first cousin Nasir, she states, “when I felt absolutely hopeless, I would turn to Allah for guidance” (p. 10). This is just one instance of when she relies on Islam when needing help. The extremists who had persecuted the Ahmadi’s, as well as her own parents, caused her to have negative feelings towards Islam for years. However, she says resolutely, “I now saw that I could carve out a place for myself that provided me with the spiritual nourishment I needed to weather life’s hurdles” (p. 9). Finding acceptance in her community, like at the Unity Mosque, allowed her to continue receiving the sustenance from her faith she always needed.

Two goals are accomplished by Habib’s personal account of her tribulations, successes and adventures. First, authentic insight is provided about the lives of young immigrants to Canada, and the untold difficulties they experience. Second, Habib gives audiences “a broader, more multi-layered understanding of Muslims,” and shatters their preconceived notions about the faith (p. 12). She recounts Muslims with tattoos and piercings, as well as those wearing traditional burkas. Habib tells of her friendship with Shireen, who had hot pink or orange hair under their hijab. The idea that, “there [is] no one way to be Muslim,” is learned by Habib in the book and is a crucial teaching for readers (p. 13). Habib states, “it seemed that because we didn’t fit the popular imagination’s perceptions of Muslims, we simply didn’t exist” (p. 11). Habib’s book is a recollection of her journey in discovering unconventional others like her do exist in Islam and making this more widely known to readers. This piece of work could be applied to several academic audiences’ disciplines including women and gender studies, sociology, religion, and theological studies.