

Finding the self: Review of Sabba Khan's 'The Roles We Play'

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Sabba Khan's graphic memoir raises questions of identity, belonging and home

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Sneha Krishnan

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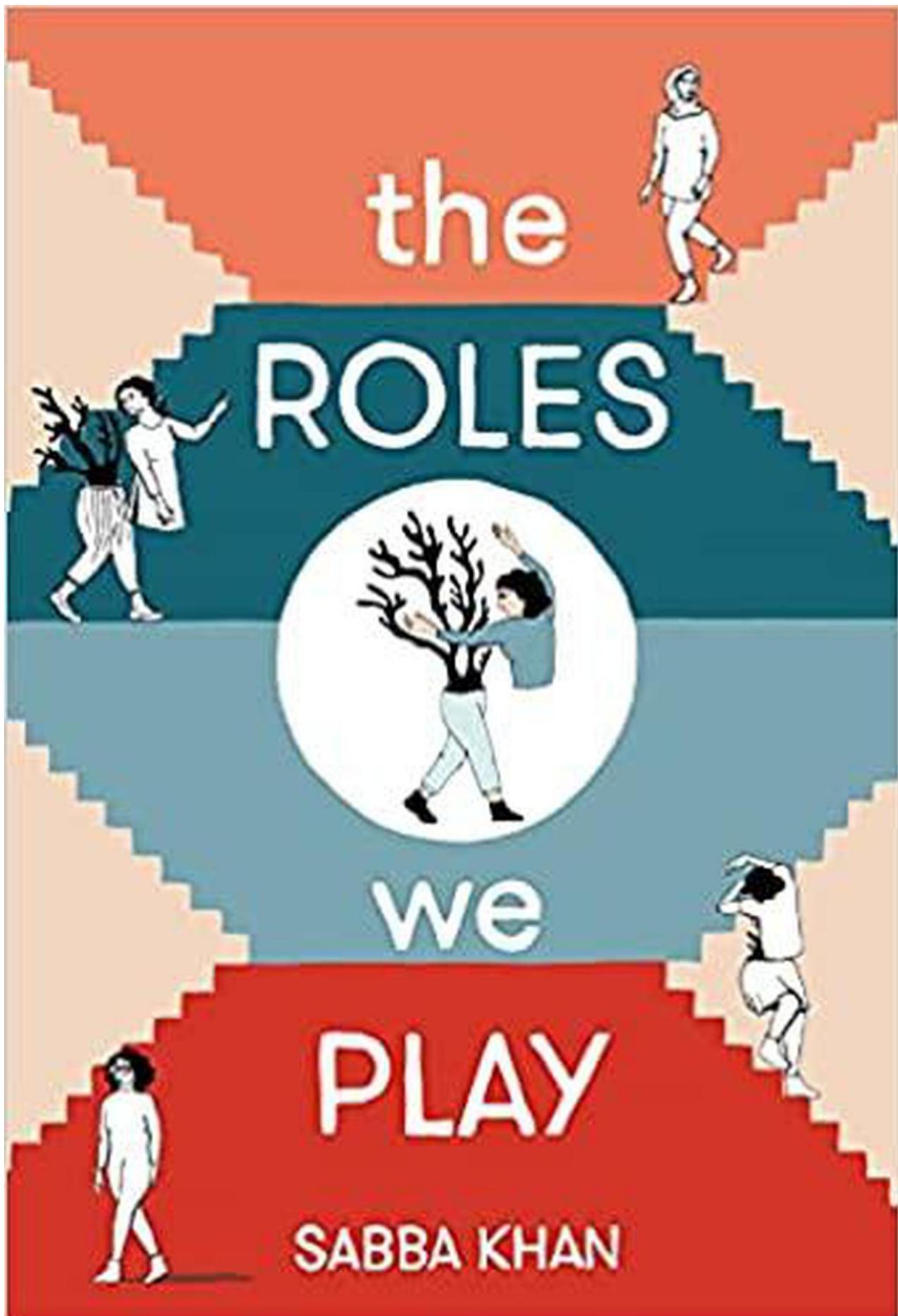
Sabba Khan's graphic memoir bares the truth about growing up as British Muslim in London. Hailing from Mirpur in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, Khan's parents were displaced during the construction of the Mangla dam at a time when the wounds of Partition were still fresh in their minds.

Decades later, Khan searches for identity, belonging and home, while dealing with micro aggressions within her home and professional circles as the rare female architect in hijab. She questions the religious and family values she grew up with, raising larger issues such as the extent to which Muslims can question the fundamental tenets of their faith passed down for generations as word of Allah. These doubts arise because religious laws are often used as a ruse to justify violence, abuse and misogyny, curbing women's right to choose their life. Khan's elder sister is not only married off at a young age against her wish, but also repeatedly asked to stay within the marriage to uphold family traditions and clan honour. Khan wonders if we, our sisters' mothers are trapped in the intergenerational cycles of trauma.

These arguments merge with the wider issues related to immigrant communities and host cultures — problems of segregation, integration, marginalisation and assimilation. How much responsibility do host cultures take in encouraging immigrant families to retain their core cultural characteristics while learning to be a part of the larger national community, she asks.

This book belongs to the tradition of groundbreaking graphic memoirs by female artists as Mira Jacob's *Good Talk* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Khan's questions and crises are centred around a deep understanding of place, home and safety. This comes out in her etchings of their former home in Mirpur: suffused with natural beauty and the memories of her parents and grandmother, it looks achingly real although the real landscape is now lost under water.

In a way, *The Roles We Play* is a way of overcoming personal loss by forging a dialogue between women, men and non-binaries outside the boundaries of the family. Holding important conversations about self, identity and culture becomes a step towards finding



oneself.

The Roles We Play; Sabba Khan, Myriad Editions, ₹1,626

The reviewer is Associate Professor, Jindal Global University, and Director, Environment, Technology and Community Health Consultancy.

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