



The Roles We Play by Sabba Khan [Non-Fiction]



Such generosity! Such appreciation! Such fascination with family, individuality, the tugs between each and the pulls within wider society! And the key is that Sabba Khan's own fascination is infectious, rendering this fulsome meditation on identity a riveting read from cover to cover.

Communicated with astonishing clarity and precision born of a mental acuity which I can barely fathom, *THE ROLES WE PLAY* is the single comic which has most broadened and deepened my understanding on any given subject. I have waited my lifetime for a graphic memoir like this.

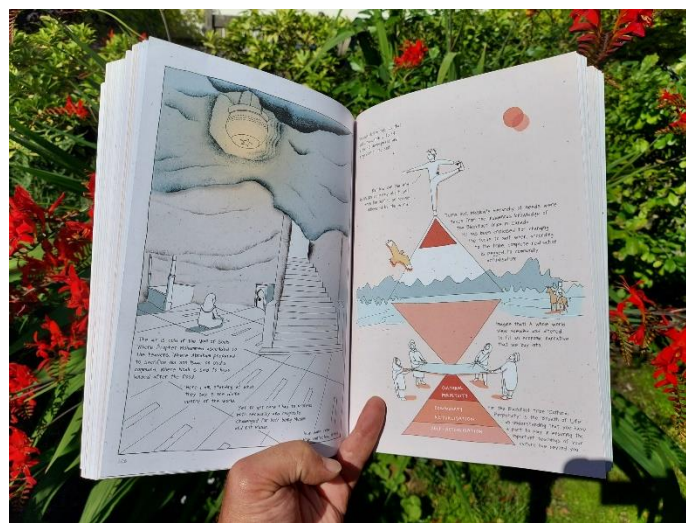
To begin comprehending any individual's journey through life is a joy and a privilege.

But to begin to comprehend the very *different* perspectives of two consecutive generations of Kashmiri Muslim migrants in Britain, the first pushed out of their beloved, flooded villages and country by the British building of a post-Partition dam, and so immediately forced to focus on resettlement, consolidation and the very act of survival in an alien English land whose majority hosts were/are either blithely dominant or predominantly hostile... the second seeking to stretch, to assert their sense of selves without compromising their heritage and seize opportunities which their parents couldn't... and to see all that so skilfully and sympathetically *untangled* along with hard societal truths of repeated resistance by a creator with real love in her heart is a rarity and a treasure. As you'll discover, it took Khan many moons to come close to comprehending herself (and indeed, herself).



Brilliantly – and bravely – Khan also discerned, perhaps intuitively, that her professional passion for architectural design would be the only effective means of not merely illustrating but *illuminating* her questions and reflections. It’s a distinction I’ve only made previously of J.H. Williams III’s contribution to Alan Moore’s PROMETHEA, equally rich in probing and profound philosophy. Such is the diagrammatical wit that I cannot imagine another approach *or* style that would have worked half so well and I tried. A traditional layout with panels and gutters would have set me at as much remove as more embellished forms, and so pushed me away from what is both individualistic and universal: I would have merely *observed* rather than been *immersed* in Khan’s revelations.

The revelations are both personal and societal, the one informing the other. Khan facilitates our understanding of and empathy with these by sharing intimate moments with her mother (who had her own roles to play, which she diligently did) and one particularly cherished memory of rare time spent in her older brother’s loft room crammed full of prime ‘80s and ‘90s sci-fi/horror which is deliciously iconoclastic yet reverent at the same time. “Do Muslims believe in aliens?” she asks him. “Do we believe in time travel?” There follows a consideration of Kismet.



And that’s a perfect example of what you’ll enjoy within: a specific experience giving rise to wider contemplation, both on the page and almost certainly within your own noggin.

THE ROLES WE PLAY is structured with a thematic rather than chronological flow, encounters and reactions suggesting others, and questions begetting questions which her family would rather Sabba stopped asking. But that surely is one of our primary functions in this life if we are to be truly alive.

What I can’t do without reprinting page after page is show how that structure is mirrored visually, with variations on a form replicated in different environments or top tiers on consecutive pages coloured so as to constitute headers. The former suggests myriad extra implications; the latter keeps control of a narrative which in less disciplined hands could careen all over the place.

Obviously there are less cherished encounters: at school, at border control on entering Tel Aviv, being spat on through a car window or banging her head against the wilfully closed doors of prospective employers and wider society whilst wearing a hijab.

Now imagine that I’d typed “headscarf” instead. Yes, exactly. Also: exactly. That miniature mental exercise which you’ve just undertaken (thank you for that) may give you some inkling as to the *multilayered* complexities which Khan has been processing for years involving (amongst many things) superficiality, loaded connotations, nigh-ubiquitous misrepresentation, sheep-mentality/wolf-pack aggression and... Oooh, I haven’t yet mentioned Sabba Khan’s atheist husband.

“Who could have known that a temporal love of this world would bring me closest to the divine?”

I cannot begin to tell you what keen additional reflections that relationship gives rise to.