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## Longing and Belonging in *If They Come for Us* by Fatimah Asghar and *Home Is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo

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**Abstract:** In this study I shall analyse the sense of belonging in Fatimah Asghar's debut poetry collection *If They Come for Us*, and in Safia Elhillo's novel *Home Is Not a Country*. Both writers describe a specific experience – being Muslim in the US, and also trying to recover places that were once home. Moreover, these books discuss identity from a feminist perspective, especially from an intersectional point of view, taking into account their multiple identities. Moreover, I aim to showcase that not only by using a first-person perspective, but by addressing issues such as identity, selfhood, belonging, family and (dis) placement, being a woman or a non-confirming person with a Muslim cultural background and also living in a westernized culture, Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo give a voice to a marginalized group. Furthermore, by writing from a feminist perspective they are creating an empowered voice, raising awareness on the abovementioned issues.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Identity; Intersectionality; Fatimah Asghar; Safia Elhillo.

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### Introduction

Fatimah Asghar is a South-Asian American poet, fiction writer and screenwriter. *If They Come for Us* (2018) is their debut book of poems, in which they capture the experiences of a young Muslim woman in America. Their book explores the many facets of identity, showcasing topics such as intergenerational trauma, sexuality, racialized violence, Partition, loss, borders and solidarity. What is a very important aspect of Asghar's poetry is that they capture the reality that many Muslims had to face after the 9/11 attacks. Fatimah Asghar also wrote *When We Were Sisters* (2022), a lyrical novel that explores sisterhood, different ways of building a family and orphaning. They also co-edited with Safia Elhillo, *Halal if You Hear Me* (2019), an anthology that brings together Muslim people that are women, gender non-conforming, trans and/or queer, highlighting the different ways of being a Muslim. More than that, they wrote and co-created *Brown Girls*, a web series about two young women of color, who pursue their dreams. Their work puts emphasis on how our identities

are complex constructs, that could not be summed up to a single perspective.

Safia Elhillo is a Sudanese-American poet, author of *The January Children* (2017), *The Life and Times of Susie Knuckles* (2012), and the co-editor of the anthology *Halal If You Hear Me* (2019). Her novel in verse *Home is Not a Country* (2021) explores the relations between identity, family, and finding, as well as defining yourself in a different world. Her work, similar to Fatimah Asghar's, showcases the multiple ways of becoming and understanding one's identity, and the struggles one must face in a world that is not ready to recognize the complexity of identities.

*If They Come for Us* and *Home is Not a Country* explore not only Muslim identity and its intersections with sexuality, gender and other social aspects, but also showcase the process of defining oneself. Both Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo criticize the male gaze, and especially the westernized patriarchal perspective and how it otherizes different identities. As a consequence of the colonial era travelogues, Muslim women "were objects of fascination and desire for Europeans"<sup>1</sup>, as they were portrayed to resonate "in different ways with the masculinist colonial project of imperial conquest and the ambivalent psychological underpinnings of patriarchal desire, sexual curiosity, and disavowal of difference that these encounters evoke"<sup>2</sup>. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks Andrew K. T. Yip facilitated a workshop in Oslo asking the participants to disclose the images that came to their mind when hearing the word Muslim or Islam, and the participants "opened up, collectively identifying two primary images – a gullible bearded young man who was easily radicalized (thus in need of rehabilitation); and an

equally gullible veiled young woman whose freedom and liberty are constrained (thus in need of liberation)"<sup>3</sup>. The Muslim identity could not be limited to a certain way of performing it, neither to what the radicalized Islamist propose, nor to the westernized perception of what being a Muslim means. A brief definition could place the Muslim identity on the verge of embodying multiple forms of marginality, thus it encapsulates multiple identities. It is important to address identity from an intersectional point of view, as it gives a better understanding of this complex process of *becoming*.

Intersectionality has an important role in the process of defining one's identity, as it recognizes the social problems that affect and influence identities, especially marginal identities. Intersectionality is a broad term, that has different meanings, for example, Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality in 1989, suggests that "from its inception, the idea of intersectionality worked in multiple registers of recognizing the significance of social structural arrangements of power, how individual and group experiences reflect those structural intersections, and how political marginality might engender new subjectivities and agency"<sup>4</sup>. Patricia Hill Collins discusses Crenshaw's intersectionality metaphor in comparison with Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland metaphor, which signifies "a geographic, affective, cultural, and political landscape that cannot be explained by binary logic (black/white, gay/straight, Mexican/American, etc.) or even the notion of liminality, that is, *the space between*"<sup>5</sup>. Intersectionality is a form of rethinking social constructs and institutions, by questioning the power dynamics and cultural structures.

Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo use a confessional style of writing, by using the first person perspective and the lyric 'I'. Through this manner of writing they are reclaiming spaces and voices, having a multifaceted perspective, which was not showcased before in literature. From a feminist perspective, confessional writings are "the link between poetic expression and social change"<sup>6</sup>, so not only do those poets represent a very specific type of experience, but by doing so they address the issue of representation, more explicitly the lack thereof. It is well-known that "contemporary images of Muslim women popularized in Western-based media, literature, cinema, television, and popular culture bear the imprint of colonial legacies of representation"<sup>7</sup>, so through *If They Come for Us* and *Home is Not a Country*, the authors dismantle those colonialist representations.

Feminist literature deconstructs patriarchal ideas about women and gender non-confirming persons, by showcasing how patriarchy and heteronormativity limits the ways in which we define our identities<sup>8</sup>. Feminist writers use personal experiences to (re)define and reclaim spaces, different forms of expression and identities. When it comes to feminist literature it is crucial to understand that the political aspects of the text are necessary and urgent, and many texts and authors prefer to use a first-person perspective, that confesses the most intimate and personal experiences. Rita Felski considers that for feminist writers it is important to discuss issues concerning women's and gender non-confirming persons' experiences, because of the lack of representation<sup>9</sup>. In Fatimah Asghar's and Safia Elhillo's books those premises are met, as they not only write

about what being a Muslim means, but they also discuss how gender, race, class, social status, ability, ethnicity, political and religious beliefs, influence the whole concept of identity.

If identity is a social construct, and a process of becoming, rather than being something, how do terms like belonging and kinship influence our perception of identity and how important are those terms in analyzing or reading a literary text? Tyler Bradway argues that often times the reader's relation to the text is thought to be a personal choice, "yet affective relations are foundational to the norms of reading"<sup>10</sup>, but he discusses the term of belonging from the reader's perspective. The feeling of belonging is recurrent in Fatimah Asghar's and Safia Elhillo's works, as they are trying to fit in, to find a sense in the world they are currently living. The act of belonging is defined by belonging to something or someone, for example a person could belong to one or many other cultures. Belonging is also linked to the idea of family, and at the same time to kinship. Kinship could be defined as a connection, or the state of being of kin, of belonging to a family. Queer theory discusses the idea of kinship, questioning how "heterosexual gender norms therefore 'make' kin relations, in that they regulate human behavior toward procreation while appearing to be the result of some primal need to propagate the species"<sup>11</sup>. Elizabeth Freeman considers that "kinship is resolutely corporeal"<sup>12</sup>, marking out "a certain terrain of corporeal dependency: think of the cliché that home is where if you have to go there, they have to take you in"<sup>13</sup>, but she also argues that the culture's official kinship is linked to family values, creating a disproportionate

way of living<sup>14</sup>. Freeman then gives a better perspective of kinship, viewing it “as the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachments are created, transformed and sustained over time”<sup>15</sup>. She also points out that queer belonging “names more than the *longing* to *be*, and *be connected*, as in being “at hand.” It also names the longing to “be *long*,” to endure in corporeal form over time, beyond procreation”<sup>16</sup>. Those ideas of queer belonging and kinship are present in Fatimah Asghar’s and Safia Elhillo’s works.

Even though Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo reconstruct spaces, feelings, memories that they once belonged to, they are also building a safe space, where they can explore their identities and experiences. After all, their work is representative of the Muslim experience in America, an experience that is particular to each writer.

### *If They Come for Us* by Fatimah Asghar

**I**f *They Come for Us* is Fatimah Asghar’s debut volume, in which they explore what it means being an orphan, an immigrant, and a queer Muslim in the post-9/11 United States. The book is drawing inspiration from autobiographical experiences, so the preferred style of writing is confessional. Their poems also discuss the effects of Partition, and how it alters the perception of one’s identity, family and their ideas of the world. *If They Come for Us* draws attention to the complexity of being a human, the complexity of identity and how its definition varies from one living being to another.

After World War II and the decision to end the British rule of India, millions of people migrated between the Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.

But as any country that had been under the rule of imperialism and its forced assimilation, “a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence”<sup>17</sup> began. The violence between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims generated “a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented [...] the carnage was especially intense, with massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence; [s]ome seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered”<sup>18</sup>. The extent of Partition was compared to the Nazi death camps. Even though India was deeply intermixed, after World War II, the polarization of Hindus and Muslims “was so complete that many of both sides believed that it was impossible for adherent of the two religions to live together peacefully”<sup>19</sup>. It is estimated that about 18 million people migrated in that period, many were driven out of their homes by violence, and between half a million to two million died. The history of Partition is still recent and affects future generations, as people still immigrate from these countries.

Fatimah Asghar’s family roots are in Pakistan and in the divided Kashmir, so the history of Partition is relevant to their poems, as they explore their multiple belongings. Their poems are about loss, violence, diaspora, identity, religion, generational trauma, healing and love. I would not go so far as to label Fatimah Asghar’s poetry as an example of experimental poetry, even though they blend the free verse with other innovative forms of writing such as mad-lib, crossword puzzle, or different ways of overlaying the text (see *Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan*, p. 59). It is important to note, that even though they are dwelling in different aspects of contemporary poetry,

the confessional aspect of the texts is the one that encapsulates these feelings of longing and belonging, of reconstructing spaces that are fit for their needs.

How can the term homeland be defined, especially when Fatimah Asghar navigates this space by referring also to the consequences of Partition? The history of Partition is imbedded in the cultural memory, so are the effects of division, which are affecting the meanings of home, family and even gender. *If They Come for Us* has an explication of what Partition means, preparatory for the main focus of the book:

At least 14 million people were forced into migration as they fled the ethnic cleansing and retributive genocides that consumed South Asia during the India/Pakistan Partition, which led to India's and East and West Pakistan's independence from colonial Britain. An estimated 1 to 2 million people died during the months encompassing Partition. An estimated 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted and raped. Partition remains one of the largest forced migrations in human history; its effects and divisions echo to this day<sup>20</sup>.

As the poems progress, what stands out is the lasting conflict that affects the lives of many people, which conflicts with their identities and freedom to live their lives according to their own will. The poem *For Peshawar* is dedicated to the victims of the school massacre done by the Taliban in Peshawar, Pakistan, which resulted in the killing of 150 people from which 132 were children ("From the moment our babies are born/ are we meant to lower them in the ground?")<sup>21</sup>. Fatimah Asghar reflects on how the Taliban inflicts

terror on communities, targeting women and children. The poem notes that "*Before attacking schools in Pakistan, the Taliban sends kafian, / a white cloth that marks Muslim burials, as a form of psychological terror*"<sup>22</sup>. Fatimah Asghar questions the meaning of life, mostly the fairness of it, and how these children could have lived a mundane life, if they were part of a different world.

Violence and death are recurrent themes, as many Muslim countries face an unprecedented instability, ruled by laws that inflict violence on women and children, deprived of their freedom and rights. Those rules are masked under different interpretations of the Qur'an and its teachings, and it does not only endanger the lives of women and children, but also men that are not following what the ruling power dictates. Muslim persons are at risk not only in their homelands, but also in other westernized countries, that limit the Muslim experience to Islamic extremism:

In all our family histories, one wrong  
turn & then, death. Violence

not an *over there* but a memory lurking  
in our blood, waiting to rise.

We know this from our nests –  
the bad men wanting to end us.  
Every year

we call them something new:  
*British. Sikhs. Hindus. Indians.*  
*Americans. Terrorists.*

The dirge, our hearts, pounds vicious,  
as we prepare  
the white linen, ready to wrap our  
bodies<sup>23</sup>

The poem *Partition* has an important meaning, as it showcases what belonging to different spaces and cultures means. Fatimah Asghar uses their experiences to highlight body politics, and how different issues affects and otherize different identities:

you're kasmhiri until they burn your home. [...] you're indian until they draw a border through punjab. until the british captains spit *paki* as they sip your chai, add so much foam you can't taste home. [...] you're a daughter until they bury your mother. until you're not invited to your father's funeral<sup>24</sup>.

Fatimah Asghar writes these divisions, the duality of belonging to multiple spaces, and they also point out how often one part of identity *must* erase the other:

you're a virgin until you get too drunk.  
you're muslim until you're not a virgin.  
you're pakistani until they start throwing acid.  
you're muslim until it's too dangerous.  
you're safe until you're alone.  
you're american until the towers fall.  
until there's a border on your back<sup>25</sup>.

This poem rather reflects a feeling of un-belonging, as Fatimah Asghar describes that each part of their identity is questioned by another. It is important to note that from a feminist perspective, identity could not be limited to a one-way form of performing, but as an intersectional practice that brings together every aspect of one's identity, such as ethnicity, race, sexuality, social status, gender and so on. Fatimah Asghar criticizes this one-way perspective, as they embody a multitude

of expressions. Otherized identities, that do not conform to the westernized, white, "male centric" gaze, often face a crisis as they must either conform to what is socially acceptable, or resist and challenge those ideas, by proving that their identities and forms of expression are as valid as the "white centric" one.

After 9/11 and the so-called "War on Terror" the trajectory of Muslim representations took a turn for the worse, as the Orientalist and Islamophobic representations were more present in the media, literature and popular culture, disrupting the daily life of many Muslim people<sup>26</sup>. Islamophobic discourses were on the rise, and that contributed to "the securitization and surveillance of particular racialized and religious bodies"<sup>27</sup>. Nonetheless, Muslim bodies are seen as dangerous, they are subjected to violence, therefore threatening to the Westerners. So it is important to note that Muslims still face different forms of harassment and discriminations. There are policies banning the Islamic attire in Europe and Canada, based on negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslim people. This representation of Muslim identity is harmful and detrimental to how Muslim people *must* express or perform their identities. So in the poem *Oil*, Fatimah Asghar notes: "I'm young & no one around/ knows where my parents are from"<sup>28</sup>, underlining the fact that they are orphaned, and also that for the many Westerners all Muslims come from the same place; they then continue writing "My Auntie A says my people might/ be Afghani. I draw a ship on the map/ I write *Afghani* under its hull"<sup>29</sup>. The poem showcases the moment the towers fell, Fatimah Asghar notes "*I think we/ are at war!* I yelled to my sister"<sup>30</sup>, ending the poem with a grim realization:

Two hours after the towers fell I  
crossed the ship  
out of the map. I buried it under a cas-  
ket of scribbles.

All the people I could be are dangerous.  
The blood clotting, oil in my veins.<sup>31</sup>

Suddenly all that they could have embodied became dangerous for the Americans. This poem emphasizes how Muslim people *must* navigate all the social, political and cultural implications that the Western world puts on them („My people/ are on the list. We can't survive without oil"<sup>32</sup>). Fatimah Asghar describes how drastically the perception around Muslim people changed, as they were suddenly seen as the enemy: “The kids at school ask me where I'm from & I have no answer. / I'm a silent girl, a rig ready to blow. The towers fell two weeks/ ago & I can't say blow out loud or everyone will hate me"<sup>33</sup>.

Another important poem that explores how the Muslim body is perceived, is *Other Body*, in which Fatimah Asghar discusses the feelings of inadequacy, of un-belonging in one's gender and sexuality, especially when those terms are discussed in relation to religion. Fatimah Asghar refers to themselves as a “Fully alive, dancing, boy-girl"<sup>34</sup>, embodying both feminine and masculine energy. Also, asking their mother: “Mother, where are you? How would/ you have taught me to be a woman?/ A man? Can you help me?”<sup>35</sup>. Being queer and Muslim is thought by many as being incompatible, because “sexual non-normativity has become for many Muslim countries and communities an issue of political strategy: it helps them situate themselves in complete opposition to the alleged

moral laxity of the aggressively modern but also highly simplified West"<sup>36</sup>. It is important to note that before the twentieth century Muslim communities did not have the same views on homosexuality as they do nowadays, many “Islamicate cultures – that is, cultures whose evolvment have been significantly influenced by their contact with Islam – have a long and complex history of same-sex acts and desire, if not always of *homosexuality* as we have come to understand it in the West since the nineteenth century"<sup>37</sup>. Another aspect that should be reminded is that the terminology that is used in Western countries does not translate to Islamicate cultures, “because the Western exploitation of binaries – i.e., masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual – forecloses behavioral complexities in Islamicate societies"<sup>38</sup>. The homophobia imposed by right-wing Islamists is similar to the one preached by the rhetoric of right-wing Christians<sup>39</sup>, many considering that this homophobia is “symptomatic of colonial mimicry"<sup>40</sup>. Fatimah Asghar questions the role of the body and gender norms, for example a female presenting body in a white-centered society must be hairless, soft and gentle to touch, but for a Muslim woman that means defying the Islamic law. Fatimah Asghar captures this dilemma in the poem *The Last Summer of Innocence*:

The summer my sister shaved her  
armpits  
even though adults said she couldn't.  
She took  
my uncle's dull razor & marveled at  
the smoothness  
left on our Muslim house in a long-  
sleeved shirt

before stripping down to a tube top on the bus.

*Haram* I hissed, but too wanted to be bare  
armed & smooth, skin gentle & worthy  
of touch<sup>41</sup>.

Poems like *How we Left: Film Treatment, From, Oil, Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan, Map Home, Partition August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947* or *Microaggression Bingo* are more experimental. Fatimah Asghar merges different styles of writing and shapes, such as crossword puzzle, mad-lib form, standard bingo card or even overlaying a poem as a floorplan for a home. But many of their poems are written in more traditional forms, using the confessional discourse to describe their most intimate experiences.

The image of death is notably present, as Fatimah Asghar writes about their homeland or their family (“Everywhere I look – graves”<sup>42</sup>). In the poem *How’d Your Parents Die Again?*, they describe how intrusive people are on finding out your story, but what is underlined in this poem is the fact that it is not *your* story that matters, rather the story they already made up about you (“Does it matter how?/ There’s no place to see them again. Home is the first grave”<sup>43</sup>). This poem reflects on loss and grief, and how they influence one’s identity and relation with the world around.

The poem that ends the book has the same title, *If They Come for Us*, which showcases the different ways of being a Muslim, regardless of how one practices or does not practice the teachings of Qur’an. Fatimah Asghar claims their kin, “these are my people”<sup>44</sup>, they finally belong to a country that does not need to be put on a map, does not need a border, as they reconstruct their

identity from collective memories and even recreated ones:

Mashallah I claim them all  
my country is made  
in my people’s image  
if they come for you  
they come for me too<sup>45</sup>

Those verses showcase the moment they break free from all the adversities they had to face. Fatimah Asghar’s *If They Come for Us* tells a story of immigration, loss, grief, it redefines the meaning of borders and how they affect people’s lives, and it shows that even though one might never return to their homeland, they can find new ways of belonging to someone or somewhere.

### *Home Is Not a Country* by Safia Elhilo

Safia Elhilo’s *Home Is Not a Country* is a magical realist novel in verse that tells the story of a first-generation immigrant Muslim girl named Nima. The novel has four parts (*Prologue: New Country, Part 1: The Other Side, Part 2: Old Country, Part 3: Home is Not a Country*), that showcase the struggles of the Muslim diaspora in the U.S. after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Written in the first-person, Nima’s voice begins to confess her feelings, as she faces different forms of microaggressions and feelings of inadequacy in the U.S. As she is trying to figure herself out, Nima starts questioning the meaning of life and all the “What ifs?” left unresolved. Even though the poems are not written in a linear timeline, by separating the volume in different parts it gives a sense of continuity to Nima’s story.

Safia Elhillo uses magical realism comparable to Latin American writers, which is “a sophisticated aesthetic expression of primitivism that served the yearning of Latin American writers for identity and cultural emancipation”<sup>46</sup>, developed “from an urge to reclaim a space of otherness by appealing to myths of difference”<sup>47</sup>. A brief definition of magical realism is that it combines and normalizes supernatural elements with aspects of everyday life<sup>48</sup>. But more importantly “[m]agical realism radically modifies and replenishes the dominant mode of realism in the West, challenging its basis of representation from within”<sup>49</sup>. Wendy B. Faris mentions that a magical realist text has five primary characteristics:

First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity<sup>50</sup>.

Those elements are also found in Safia Elhillo’s *Home is Not a Country*, as Nima’s journey pushes the boundaries of real-life.

In the *Prologue* Safia Elhillo describes fragments of Nima’s family memories, reconstructing the images of baba, mama and other characters that are important to her journey, like her friend Haitham, who also is an immigrant child that has to face the Islamophobia of his peers. In the poem *Nostalgia Monster*, it is revealed that

Haitham calls Nima “a *nostalgia monster*”, as she always dreams of the life that they could have had back home, even though they never really knew their homeland. Another important character that is presented in the *Prologue* is Yasmeen, the Nima that she “could have been”, an alter-ego of Nima, which she considers better than her, the child that her parents wanted and could have kept the family safe. In the *Prologue* Safia Elhillo also describes two spaces – the school and America; both showcasing Nima’s feeling of not fitting in, moreover the feeling of un-belonging neither here, nor there: “i’ve never felt like i was good at anything [...] where i sit with/ an assortment of others all citizens of/ the social margins & though assembled/ we do not talk”<sup>51</sup>; “we never ask why our mother had come here [...] we whisper to each other *if it’s so great there/ then why don’t we ever go back*”<sup>52</sup>. Safia Elhillo through Nima gives voice to what many immigrant children and people question about themselves, while trying to figure out whether they are a part of the new country they live in or if they are still a part of the world they left behind. Even if many children are born in the new country their parents immigrated to, they still feel that a big part of their identities is left behind, unknown to them. The difference between first-born and second-born generation and a person that has immigrated to a new country is what Marie C. Hull calls *relative time of arrival*<sup>53</sup>, taking into account the time of arrival in the host country, how early-arriving immigrant children have assimilated some characteristics of the host country, language proficiency, their parents age at arrival and so on<sup>54</sup>. In *Home is not a Country*, through her journey of understanding her identity, Nima creates Yasmeen: “my

mother meant to name me for her favorite flower [...] instead i got this name & i don't even know why"<sup>55</sup>. Nima is haunted by the ghost of Yasmeen, a metaphor for what she thinks she could have been, this other girl that has everything that Nima does not:

i imagine her yasmeen this other girl  
bright & alive  
mouth full & dripping with language  
easy in her charm  
& in essence she looks like me but of  
course  
better [...]

i imagine her back home fathered  
beloved  
knowing all the songs & all the corre-  
sponding dances  
[...]  
jewel of the neighborhood & somehow  
a little taller than me  
like there are extra bones in her spine.  
like everyone knows her name & i ache  
to have been born her instead <sup>56</sup>

The poem *My Name* describes further how Nima sees herself, highlighting her comparison to Yasmeen: "nima meaning *grace* it would be funny/ if it weren't cruel"<sup>57</sup>. Throughout the novel Nima is struggling to find herself, she almost feels like she took Yasmeen's life, therefore she is undeserving of her mother's love and attention. Safia Elhillo captures these feelings of nostalgia towards the life that could have been. If both parents could have immigrated to the U.S. or remained in their homeland. She also showcases the struggles that Muslim women have to face both in America and in their homelands, as women are discriminated against regardless.

*Part 1: The Other Side* continues the premises of the *Prologue: New Country*. Nima describes her experiences, her relationships with her mom, Haitham, the other children at school and how she suffers because of her identity. Safia Elhillo writes about Nima's duality and her struggles to fit in, to define herself. If the *Prologue* gave a brief description of Nima, in *Part 1*, Elhillo showcases the Islamophobia, racism, classism, sexism and misogyny women of color have to face in America:

& in our slow retreat I heard the last  
snatches  
of that man's joke his colleague's bark-  
ing laugh  
*no way we're letting*  
*mohammed so-and-so near the plane*  
& that's why we don't go anywhere  
anymore<sup>58</sup>

Safia Elhillo outlines the curiosity Nima has for the old country, and how she wishes that she would better understand her roots, but she also describes that Nima's curiosity sometimes could bring back bad memories for her mother: "my mother never talks about it except the one time [...] she will not talk about in hopes of erasing/ that whole country .& starting again here"<sup>59</sup>. The lack of communication between the 14-year-old Nima and her mother makes Nima blame herself for her mother's sadness, loneliness. As a result, she starts imagining that Yasmeen could have been a better daughter to her mother:

*i had a whole other name picked out,*  
  
*did you know? but when your father died*  
*i don't know it felt like that name be-*  
*longed to him*

*& i couldn't bear to keep it without him  
so i picked  
something else & I feel that old pang  
of being*

second-best to that other girl my  
ghost-self

yasmeen<sup>60</sup>

Nima is constantly trying to (re)connect to her roots, going through old photographs, (re)imagining the homeland as an ideal place where she could perfectly fit in: “i miss him too my father though we never met/ I miss the country that i've never seen”<sup>61</sup>. The poem *Another Life* showcases how Nima dreams of this homeland, in which she is beautiful, she found her way back home, her father is alive, her god and language are not hated, and her family is reunited: “in the dream he stays alive stays/ alive alive stays alive to meet me”<sup>62</sup>.

The poem *Halloween* stands as an example of how Islamophobia is practiced in the American schools, describing how the boys bullied Nima for her heritage, also this poem showcases the stereotypical view westerners had about Muslim people after the 9/11 terrorist attacks:

*i'm dressed as your terrorist mom &  
everyone  
howls with laughter another wraps a  
sweater  
around his head like a turban & i'm  
your terrorist dad*<sup>63</sup>

Haitham and her mother are always trying to protect Nima, even though she struggles to find a way to express herself in the U.S. When Nima asks her mother why she did not stop wearing her scarves after

the incident at the airport, in which they could not board their flight, because of her mom wearing a hijab, therefore being racial profiled and considered a dangerous person. To Nima's questions her mother replies that she would never let her be ashamed of who she is, and where she comes from: “*nima, i need you/ to understand that it was those men/ who were wrong not us*”<sup>64</sup>.

The poem *Headscarf* is another example of how cruel the American society is to POC (Persons of Color). Nima remembers the moment some boys from her school were closing around her, blaming her for the terrorist attacks. This poem showcases how dangerous Islamophobic narratives could be, because it links acts of terrorism to religion and people, not to a political agenda: “i feel the cold metal of the lockers against my back/ *terrorist bitch* he spits into my hair”<sup>65</sup>. This time Nima responds to her bullies, but when she does so her part of the story is not believed, and she gets suspended from school. In her anger she blames her mother for bringing her in a country that hates them so much. Nima starts regretting her actions and she understands that it is not her mother's fault for how the world views them, she is remorseful. Nima imagines the life Yasmeen could have had, obsessing over how Yasmeen would have been a better daughter, a better friend, a better person: “*i'm sorry you got/ me as a daughter instead of the one you deserve/ i'm sorry i'm me & not yasmeen i'm sorry*”<sup>66</sup>. But the trigger that gives life to Yasmeen is when Nima finds out Haitham is in the hospital.

*Part 2: Old Country* begins with a poem about Haitham's state, when it is revealed that he was a victim of a brutal attack: “a group of fully grown/ men [...]/ *i don't understand between blows they were*

*calling/ him mohammed*<sup>67</sup>. This poem reveals the danger many POC have to face in America, as they are victims of racial profiling. Safia Elhillo describes the pain and grief Haitham's mother feels, and she gives a voice to many mothers who raise their children in America: "*i brought him here/ so we could have a different kind of life & even here i couldn't/ keep him safe*"<sup>68</sup>. For many immigrants America represents a safer place, that promises to fulfill every dream, but then they have to face the reality of the American dream, which is marred by resentment, hate and different forms of oppression and discrimination, for those who do not fit the profile of a white middle-class man.

The novel takes an unexpected turn, when Nima meets Yasmeen and together they begin their journey to their homeland, unravelling the past, and finding the truth about her own family, Haitham's father and everything she imagined about her roots: "yasmeen steps into the frame & she looks fully/ human solid & actually walking instead/ of her supernatural glide"<sup>69</sup>. They enter a photograph, in which their parents were at a party; Nima describes them "so happy so young & full of what is possible/ how could they ever have left why couldn't i/ have been born into this version of us"<sup>70</sup>. In her journey Nima finds out the truth about Haitham's father, Ashraf, and why Khalta Hala never speaks about him, because he had another family:

& his friend cuts in  
*we understand you have mouths  
 to feed how are the kids? your wife?*

& I work to unscramble these facts  
 in my knotted brain kids a wife  
 who it is clear now was not hala

& haitham never mentioned having  
 siblings  
 never mentioned his father at all  
 despite the life he spends wearing that  
 man's  
 exact haunted face<sup>71</sup>

Shocked by what she found out, she wants to go into her mother's arms, but Yasmeen stops her: "*we're only visitors, you understand?*"<sup>72</sup>. Yasmeen reminds Nima that they are here to find out the truth about their roots. Yasmeen and Nima follow their father, Ahmed, and they find out that he was planning to leave Aisha, because she was pregnant and he was not ready to commit. The image Nima envisioned is shattered, and she tries to see her mother as the only person that really fought for their safety, regardless of her father:

in my mind in the photographs & my  
 heart  
 hurts again & again for my mother  
 twirled in the streets

by the coward she loves off imagining  
 names  
 for the daughter she was always going  
 to raise alone

& i feel stupid ashamed of the life i  
 spent pining  
 for this stranger.this man i never knew  
 who never

wanted to know me the ghost i've  
 measured my mother  
 against & no I know him<sup>73</sup>

Then Yasmeen and Nima go back to the house their mother lived, and there

Nima finds out that her mother always wanted to name her Nima, but Yasmeen was Ahmed's choice. Safia Elhillo describes a patriarchal relationship, in which Aisha was taught to respect her husband's wishes. Khaltu Amal, who is not actually Nima's aunt, but a friend of her parents, proposes a game to help Aisha decide on the name she will give the baby, if Amal wins then the baby will be named Yasmeen, if Aisha wins then Nima. When Nima feels that she is losing she hits the table where the women were playing the game, throwing the tea in Amal's lap.

The poem *Yesterday & Tomorrow* showcases the fight between Yasmeen and Nima, determining which of them deserves to go back to the real world. Yasmeen holds it against Nima that she does not know the experience of being "*stuck watching between worlds*"<sup>74</sup>, as Nima wastes her life not figuring herself out. In *An Alternate Possibility* Nima confesses to Yasmeen that she did not know why she summoned her, but she wished she was different, a better version of herself, "*which i always imagined as you*"<sup>75</sup>. Yasmeen tells Nima that she is an alternate possibility, but she does not want Nima's life, she tells her that she only wants "*a person to become*"<sup>76</sup>, as she wishes to be real. After telling Nima this, Yasmeen body starts deforming, as she was not supposed to tell her the truth. Mama Fatheya burns some incense and starts reciting a prayer, as the smoke wraps around Yasmeen and she disappears:

i'm haunted by the memory of her  
scream the sound  
of someone in terrible pain a pain she  
didn't deserve  
when all she ever tried to do was live<sup>77</sup>

In the end, Yasmeen helps Nima to get back home, and Nima gives Yasmeen a possibility to become real, by reminding her that their father's friend and his wife wanted a child.

In her journey Nima alters some events in her mother's life, even though the outcome is similar. She saves her father, but her father still leaves her mother, which makes her mother think that she could not raise this child alone, as they will remind her of him and his cowardice. But Nima intervenes and tells her mother that she needs her and that they have a life together, so she should keep the baby: "*i look back at my mother.hurt but surviving/ cradling her belly crooning my name to herself nima*"<sup>78</sup>.

In the last part, *Home is not a Country*, Nima finds her way back home, and on her return she sees herself and her life with different eyes. The most important lesson that Nima learns is that home is not a place, but the people around her like her mother, Haitham, mother Fatheya and Amal. Throughout the novel Nima struggles to understand where her place is, where or to whom she belongs. Safia Elhillo captures in *Home is Not a Country* all the questions that many immigrant people have, also their struggles and experiences in a world that does not reflect their images. The novel discusses themes such as Islamophobia, racism, sexism, belonging and kinship, and also love, grief, loss, healing and finding yourself in the duality of her cultures. Safia Elhillo's use of magical realism does not take away from the impact of the themes that she is exploring, rather she creates a world that exists at the intersection of two possibilities, two identities that exist at the same time. *Home is Not a Country*

showcases “[t]he multivocal nature of the narrative and the cultural hybridity that characterize magical realism”<sup>79</sup>. A crucial take on magical realism is that it “reverses the process of cultural colonization”<sup>80</sup>, showcasing multiple spaces and identities.

### Conclusion

Both Safia Elhillo and Fatimah Asghar discuss similar themes of loss, grief, the struggle of finding oneself, the power of friendship, love and sisterhood and more. They also address what belonging and crossing borders really means, and how family and kinship are intertwined. But those are not the only subjects approached by Safia Elhillo or Fatimah Asghar, as they challenge the rhetoric around what being Muslim means.

Muslims around the world face different types of adversities, many because of the rising waves of Islamophobia. The stories embodied in *If They Come for Us* and *Home is Not a Country* are representative of the complexity of Muslim identity, and in a broad sense those stories are about being human. It is important to note that the identities presented by those two writers, even if they have some similarities, are distinctive. For instance, Fatimah Asghar uses confessional poetry as a political act, denouncing not only the crimes of Partition, but also the involvement of Westerners. Furthermore, Safia Elhillo creates a similar narrative, denouncing through Nima’s character the consequences of Islamophobia and the biased perception that American society has of Muslim people.

The books open the discussion about multiple identities, the intersections, the

borders and the marginality that one could embody. Both Safia Elhillo and Fatimah Asghar are writing from a marginal position, one that could not fit in either in their homelands, or in America. The spaces they cross are not entirely theirs, so another aspect of their identities is being part of the Muslim diaspora, another label that they must (re)define, as they dissolve the meanings of origin, home or migration. Through Nima’s journey, Safia Elhillo implies that home is not a country, as the title of her book states, but rather a feeling of belonging. For Safia Elhillo belonging is closely related to family, chosen or not. This idea is relevant because Fatimah Asghar comes to the same conclusion in *If They Come for Us*, as they realize that belonging is not only related to a space, but to multiple aspects of one’s identity. Even though they use different approaches, as Fatimah Asghar chooses confessional poetry as their main style, and Safia Elhillo a magical realist verse novel, both authors denounce colonialism and its effects on marginalized groups.

*If They Come for Us* and *Home is Not a Country* raise awareness of the problems many Muslim people have to face all over the world. Despite the fact that they showcase the political climate within American society, impacts of Islamophobia are seen all over the world, as the far-right rhetoric rises, questioning and impacting the rights of immigrants and other marginalized groups. Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo write about the experience of many POC. Their stories highlight how important it is to embrace and understand the cultures around us, without harboring any prejudices against them.

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