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AWAY FROM INNOCENCE: MIGRATION AND CULTURAL TRAUMA IN SABINA KHAN'S YOUNG ADULT NOVEL *ZARA HOSSAIN IS HERE*

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Abstract: Depicting characters in a complex liminal space between childhood and adulthood, often lost in the midst of identity transition, Young Adult literature has traditionally focused on individuality and maturity development to the extent that they have become distinctive features of the genre. However, a number of recent writings belonging to the emergent genre of refugee and migration youth literature have been disrupting the traditional coming-of-age story by envisioning alternative means for the young to face the complexities of identity construction in the new land. By drawing on migration studies as well as decolonial theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy, I will examine Sabina Khan's transcultural novel *Zara Hossain is Here* (2021) which provides an empowering depiction of a queer Pakistani immigrant teen facing cultural trauma through political activism and community building. First, through an intersectional lens, I will show how Khan's text unsettles traditional "moves to innocence" by challenging static representations of gender and cultural norms for immigrant youth of color. Second, I will point out how the protagonist, as a determined and self-aware young woman, with an established sexuality, financial security, and familial support, departs from the typical portrayal of the adolescent struggling for identity formation. Finally, I will demonstrate that social awareness and political consciousness are new effective strategies for the young to overcome systemic oppression linked to social, racial, and gender injustice. In conclusion, Khan's writing unsettles typical categorizations both in terms of genre and content. It reflects the heterogeneity of the youth of color and their varied experiences across cultural and geographic contexts offering an inspiring portrayal of transcultural young generations who develop new forms of recovery from marginalization and envisage subversive kinds of social justice.

Keywords: migration and refugee youth literature; cultural trauma; intersectional diverse literature; transcultural YA novel; Sabina Khan; Zara Hossain is Here.

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1. Introduction

Throughout time, teenage years have been considered a period of identity confusion and emotional turmoil. In 1904, the educator and psychologist Granville Stanley Hall famously defined this stage of life as a "time of storm and stress" characterized by conflicts with parents, mood swings, emotional negativity, and risky behaviors. After Hall, other psychologists including Sigmund Freud (1958) and Erik Erikson (1968) supported the view according to which adolescence is a period of behavioral upheaval due to personal disorientation. These characteristics have contributed to essentialize adolescence as "unfinished and inferior" (Vadeboncoeur and Stevens 2004: 2). However, over time, studies have demonstrated that adolescence cannot be defined according to overarching categories since it is deeply affected by individual, cultural, and experiential differences (Arnett 1999). In this respect, modern psychologists have underlined how adolescence is not only culturally affected, but also culturally constructed (Lesko 2012), thus suggesting that teen identity is less determined by biological and cognitive factors than by experiences, relationships, and opportunities.

In its various literary interpretations, adolescence is embodied by characters in a complex liminal space between childhood and adulthood focused on individuality and maturity development (Hill 2014). Jonathan Stephens, for instance, contends that young adult (YA) literature is "a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice" (2007: 40-41). However, even though the depiction of insecure and troubled teens' journey towards identity formation is a distinct feature of the genre, an emerging facet of contemporary young adult literature, i.e., diasporic YA literature, has been disrupting the coming-of-age pattern by representing empowered and self-aware protagonists. On the one hand, as Patricia Campbell suggests, "the central theme of most YA literature is becoming adult finding the answer to the internal and external question 'Who am I and what am I going to do about it?'" (Campbell 2010: 70). On the other hand, however, it may be argued that contemporary diasporic YA fiction portrays subjects with a certain degree of maturity who do not simply cope with personal issues of identity formation, but also have to come to terms with "their sexuality and coming out, attaining formal education, standing up to violence, or asserting their complexity in an environment that seeks to stereotype them and flatten their identities" (Quintana-Vallejo 2021: 5). As Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo explains, traditional *Bildungsromane* depict middle-class, white, and male protagonists "who [marry] well and [become] respected and productive members of society" (*ibid.*: 3). They usually follow the hero's formation from the beginning up to a determined degree of perfection (Salmerón 2002) and portray the consolidation of the values of a certain society embodied by the main protagonist. Conversely, the culturally-hybrid protagonists of contemporary diasporic YA literature do not offer ideal models of imitation, but empower readers to think of identity as dynamic and complex, thus attuning them to the globalized world. Moreover, diasporic YA fiction protagonists must often assert their right to exist and have rights and struggle with issues of

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belonging and citizenship as they are key factors that delineate the extent to which they can participate in society. As will be discussed later, this is also the case of Zara, the main character of the novel object of this article.

By tackling themes of physical and emotional displacement, authors of diasporic YA literature construct literary representations of strong young protagonists who are able to cope with their sense of precarity, alienation, and identity loss with determination and maturity. This is demonstrated, for instance, by recent popular transcultural YA novels such as *American Street* (2017), by the Haitian-American author Ibi Zoboi, *The Poet X* (2018), by the Dominican-American author Elizabeth Acevedo, and *We Are Not From Here* (2020), by the American author – born to a Guatemalan mother and a Salvadoran father – Jenny Torres Sanchez. Their protagonists, involved in different experiences of displacement as first- or second-generation immigrants, face individual and cultural trauma imagining social justice and engaging in political activism, cultural work, and countering stereotypes. Through their books, not only do diverse authors contribute to cultivate an empathetic imagination in readers by providing "windows into the lives of others" (Bishop 1990: 11), but they also promote positive role models for contemporary marginalized teenagers. Living in that which Philip Nel has defined as "the century of the migrant", characterized by "the highest level of global displacement ever recorded in history" (2018: 357), it is fundamental that the debate on migration and its effects on the young generations is not limited to the political and economic level, but also involves the cultural level. In this respect, Sabina Khan's transcultural novel, *Zara Hossain is Here* (2021), is a clear example of the kind of narration that represents the complex and intersecting identity of young people of color, rejecting essentialist discourses and monolithic depictions of diverse teens. Concerning this last point, it is necessary to specify that many authors of color reject the idea of their work being defined as "ethnic" as they do not aim to act as a stand-in of the entire culture or community they are part of. For this reason, recent scholars of young adult literature now use the term "diverse" to resist the notion of homogenous minority experience, thus acknowledging the different experiences lived by people of color that vary depending on gender, class, sexuality, and other identity categories.

South Asian Muslim immigrant, born in Germany, raised in Bangladesh, and now living in Canada, the writer Sabina Khan has tackled issues of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and social discrimination as lived by young adults, mostly female. As she admitted in a recent interview (Khan "Young Adulting" 2021: online), she has drawn inspiration from her own experience as an immigrant who has had to cope with Islamophobia and prejudice all her life, especially in her youth. Talking about her motivation for writing, she says: "I wanted to empower brown teens in a way I never felt because there weren't any characters that looked like me in the books I read growing up" (*ibid.*). Indeed, in her works of fiction, such as the desi novels *The Love and Lies of Rushkana Ali* (2019) and *Meet Me in Mumbai* (2022), she deals with stories that explore the complex ties between identity, culture, and family from a gender perspective. Khan represents Muslim teens who straddle cultures and face social barriers of acceptance, including homophobia and racism, with the purpose of providing

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positive role models that could make the marginalized teen readers feel seen and empowered.

In this article, I will argue that Khan's novel, *Zara Hossain is Here* (2021), by portraying a strong and determined young female protagonist who fights for her rights despite the unwelcoming diasporic space in which she finds herself, unsettles traditional "moves to innocence" (Tuck and Tang 2012) of YA literature by challenging static gender and cultural representations of young people of color. I will also point out the extent to which the girl protagonist, Zara, as a queer Pakistani immigrant teen with an established sexuality, financial security, and familial support, departs from traditional representations of confused teenagers in the midst of an identity crisis. When confronted with prejudices and discrimination related to her South Asian origins, Muslim religion, and open bisexuality, Zara demonstrates personal and cultural integrity by defending her positions and claiming her space within the society. Moreover, demonstrating that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1981: 98), as Audre Lorde famously claimed, Zara never responds to people's acts of hate and discrimination following the same narrow-minded paradigms. On the contrary, she enacts virtuous behaviors that aim at changing the social contexts in which she lives, i.e., her high school, her neighborhood, and more in general her American hometown, with a series of positive and constructive initiatives. By participating in rallies against gender discrimination, joining the social justice club at her school, and advocating for marginalized people in political meetings, she manages to overcome the sense of powerlessness and unease she starts feeling after a series of racial attacks directed at her and her family. As a result, Khan's story demonstrates that it is possible for the marginalized teens to build a safe space in which to express themselves through social awareness and political activism, which are the most effective strategies to overcome systemic oppression linked to social, racial, and institutional injustice.

2. Intersectional perspectives on diverse young adults' identity formation

In the mostly white world of YA literature (Durand and Jiménez-García 2018; CCBC 2023), diverse literature is essential for providing young people of color understanding of the context in which they live. As the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison has documented (online), the number of books it receives annually that are by and about Black, Indigenous and people of color has been growing over the years, but still represents a small percentage of the overall number of books published for children and teenagers. Hence, there is significant market demand for stories with diverse characters which explore nuanced experiences of marginalized teens. The recent successes of realist YA fiction such as *The Hate U Give* (Thomas 2017), *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (Sánchez 2017), and *The Field Guide to the North American Teenager* (Philippe 2019), which portray teenagers dealing with trauma, racism and cultural hybridity, demonstrate that audiences need to see and read about characters that reflect themselves and real people.

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The growing production of good-quality diverse literature for young adults that involves cross-cultural readers shows that YA fiction is a dynamic genre, open to change, and in line with the historical period in which it is produced. As Michael Cart notes, YA fiction is a genre "creatively risk taking, artistically rich, and intellectually stimulating" (2003: 113). Hill also points out how its audience has expanded in terms of age range – encompassing the 19-35 demographic (2014: 4) – and ethnicity. The increasing forms of narrative experimentation as well as varied groups of readers of the YA literature genre show how Rudine Bishop's call for more narratives that could mirror the real experiences undergone by the young in the specific time and place in which they live (1990) is still imperative. In this respect, contemporary diverse writers, using their own experiences and identities as inspiration, depict nuanced minority narratives that reject the existence of a monolithic experience for marginalized people based on ethnicity, integrating them with further categories such as sexuality, religion, class, and citizenship. In *Zara Hossain is Here* (2021), for instance, Sabina Khan portrays a young woman protagonist whose identity is defined by a number of intersecting elements. Indeed, she is "a Muslim girl from Pakistan" (*ibid.*: 7), whose brown skin "will always [make her] a clear target" (*ibid.*: 122); she is "proud to be queer" (*ibid.*: 183), and belongs to a middle-class family with "educated and skilled" (*ibid.*: 11) parents.

By expanding the concept of identity, diverse authors favor and recover discourses that acknowledge young adults' selves as fluid, overlapping, and intersecting, thus resisting colonial logics that manage difference through generality (Mignolo 2009). From a diasporic point of view, for instance, with every wave of migration or displacement, we should expect interconnected histories and communities. These displacements, whether temporary, permanent, or forced, determine discursive shifts in how identities are understood and constructed, thus also affecting the way they are represented in YA literature. Arjun Appadurai, talking about the heterogeneity of group identities in the modern global context, notes:

> As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality […] The landscapes of group identity – the ethnoscapes – around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous. (1991: 191)

Besides anthropology, educational research has also reflected on the impact of specific environments on identity formation and, as Django Paris (2012) has underlined talking about pedagogy, the intersectional identity of young people of color is shifting both in response to local contexts and across generations, thus requiring different pedagogical approaches. As a consequence, his model of "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy" (CSP), inspired by what it means to make teaching and learning relevant and responsive to the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of students across categories of difference and (in)equality, aims at validating the new community practices that the young develop when they live in multiethnic and multilingual communities. Diverse YA literature also

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contributes to the implementation of CSP by representing a further kind of intersectional view. Indeed, contemporary literature for young adults pays much attention to the intersection of the individual with the community and the institutional contexts, thus revealing the ways in which some identities become marginalized at particular social, political, and historical moments and how teenagers navigate these margins (Collins 1990). In a passage of Khan's book, for instance, the girl protagonist reflects on the difficulties of adapting to a completely new way of life as a migrant coming from a deeply different familial and cultural context: "Imagine leaving behind everything you know, everything that is home, for you to go and start a life somewhere far away. Without your support system or anything familiar. Even if you know you're doing it for a good reason, it's still incredibly difficult." (Khan 2021: 186). Therefore, it is interesting to note how the young protagonists cope with oppression, whether they accept or reject their social identity, and how they reconfigure their social role in the diasporic environment. In this respect, cultural trauma – and the relative means of recovery – is a central theme in many literary productions for YA dealing with refugee and migration experiences.

As Amy Heberle *et al.* define it (2020), cultural trauma is a kind of collective trauma shared by members of the same racial or ethnic identity who have undergone oppression, discrimination, or disenfranchisement due to that identity. Unlike traditional forms of individual trauma, which is directly experienced by individuals and is linked to a specific event or series of events relegated to the past, cultural trauma is based on the ongoing existence of systemic oppression. Given the common criterion that requires trauma to have a tangible source, usually a past event, in order to be diagnosed, cultural trauma often risks being dismissed or trivialized. Therefore, acknowledging the presence of trauma related to cultural or socioeconomic identity is difficult as it cannot be identified as a single, past experience. Instead, cultural trauma is an ongoing daily condition for marginalized groups expressed through racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, as well as through discrimination, stereotypes, and government oppression or neglect. As a consequence, its victims cannot recover simply by separating from the traumatic past and finding shelter in a safe present, in which they can regain a sense of security to heal. The marginalized young people represented in diasporic YA fiction are forced to reimagine recovery through innovative means, based on a strong sense of self and social identity to restore a new form of agency. This empowered portrayal of diverse teen identity is embodied perfectly by Sabina Khan's novel's protagonist, Zara, who through her strength and determination redefines the apparently established concept of innocence as it usually appears in YA literature.

3. Challenging innocence and the politics of respectability

Besides being a successful author of books for young adults, Sabina Khan is also an educational consultant in contact with young people with academic and personal difficulties on a daily basis. As she recently claimed (Khan "Interview" 2021: online), she started writing YA novels after realizing that diverse youth

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"never see themselves reflected in the books they read" (*ibid.*). She wanted to provide them with stories to which they could relate and where "they could see themselves as the heroes and as the ones overcoming obstacles and finding love and happiness" (*ibid.*). Dealing with experiences of immigration, racism, homophobia, and familial crises, Khan includes much of her life in the works she produces. As an immigrant herself, often being "on the receiving end of discrimination and judgement" (Khan "Literary" 2019: online), through her writing she wants "to highlight the many different mindsets within a single community and how there is much work to be done but that there are also many allies" (*ibid.*).

Khan's 2021 transcultural novel, *Zara Hossain is Here*, tells an empowering story portraying both the hardships and the rewards of living a life in-between, coping with a hyphenated identity. The book focuses on a Pakistani immigrant family, composed of Mr. and Mrs. Hossain and their teenage daughter Zara, who have been living in Corpus Christi, Texas, for many years. They emigrated to the U.S. when Zara was a baby and throughout the years, they have perfectly integrated in the hostland, which has now become their home. Thinking about her family history and their happy life in the U.S., Zara tells:

> Sometimes I marvel at the courage it must take to pack up your life and move thousands of miles away from your home, your family, and everything familiar. It couldn't have been easy to start a new life in a strange place with nothing to call your own. But they've built an amazing life here, full of friends who've become family, and I realize that I should never take it for granted. (Khan 2021: 147)

Mr. Hossain is an esteemed pediatrician at the city hospital and thanks to his good job position, the whole family are about to be granted their green card after almost ten years of waiting. Zara is a hard-working student with clear objectives in mind for her future, involved in community activism together with her school friends, and free to express her sexuality as a queer. This apparently perfect balance in Zara's life is totally disrupted when she starts being targeted by school bully Tyler, who makes racist remarks and gestures, calling her a terrorist. Tyler's class and white privilege enable him to continue his attacks, even at Zara's home. The climax of his racist targeting is reached the night when he spray paints "GO HOME TERRORISTS" on the garage door of Zara's home, and when Zara's father decides to go to the bully's house to speak with him, he ends up being shot by his father in a racial attack. After he is charged for trespassing, the hospital in which Zara's father works refuses to renew his work visa, which is required to continue his green card application, putting their immigration status at risk. Confronted by these events, which lead to the potential deportation of Zara and her family, Zara's parents decide to go back to Pakistan since they no longer feel safe and welcomed in America. Zara, on the contrary, refuses to give up and keeps on fighting for what she believes to be right, i.e., the possibility of remaining in the U.S. because she and her family did nothing wrong. By reacting with sheer determination in front of difficulties and by pushing her parents to do the same, Zara enacts a new model of innocence, which does not contemplate passivity, resignation, or inaction of the victim.

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As Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang underline in their essay, "Decolonization is not a metaphor" (2012), there has been a dangerous tendency in mainstream educational and social science research to depict Indigenous or marginalized people as "'at risk' people and asterisk people" (*ibid.*: 22). Indeed, the young and their parents are usually described as on the verge of extinction, culturally and economically bereft, engaged in self-destructive behaviors which can interrupt their school careers and smooth absorption into the economy. This depiction corresponds to a "move to innocence" of the "white settlers" (*ibid.*: 3), as Tuck and Yang put it. Indeed, by representing people of color as problematic and unable to blend in with the community in which they live, white people create "diversions, distractions, which relieve [themselves] of feelings of guilt or responsibility" (*ibid.*: 21). In Khan's novel, however, the facts are incontrovertible and no confusion could be made between the actual perpetrators and the victims. Moreover, Zara's reactions to the various events that involve herself and her family clearly depart from the traditional pattern according to which people of color should step back in order to prove their harmlessness.

Historically, theories and literary research on adolescence have centered on whiteness, maleness, and middle-classness based on the view that teens of color are regressive compared with white teens (DeLuzio 2007; Owen 2019). Age is a category that emphasizes innocence in children and adolescents, but the implications of innocence rarely extend to adolescents of color, as Gabrielle Owen underlines (2019). In her essay, she demonstrates how teens of color are often asked to overcompensate for their "lack" in order to comply with narrative standards or else risk being criminalized or dehumanized. In the past, realist narratives of marginalized young people were didactic as they cautioned readers to be extra aware of their actions and oppressors. Clearly, this position placed blame on adolescents rather than on perpetrators of systemic oppression. As a consequence, the young of color had little to no opportunities to make mistakes and grow since they were forced to mature more quickly than their white peers. However, recent authors reject this "politics of respectability" (*ibid.*: 240) as their novels "expose the limits of normativity as a standard for valuing human lives" (*ibid.*). In other words, teenagers of color are worthy of living and making mistakes independently of how much they fit into normative categories and they should be granted the opportunity to make mistakes and grow. In this respect, reflecting on the subtle differences between her own way of seeing reality and her white girlfriend's, Zara thinks: "We don't experience things in the same way, and we never will. […] [I]t's painful to realize that the way people of color react to hurtful things may appear to be an overreaction […]" (Khan 2021: 123). Despite the unfair treatment people of color receive in the society in which she lives, Zara refuses to stay silent and is ready to face the consequences her actions might have. For instance, she does not hesitate to report her bully both to her family and to the school principal and is not afraid of confronting him on several occasions. Her rebellion against an unfair system leads to increased discrimination and racism against her at school, a physical attack against her father, and a tangible risk of deportation for her family. Nevertheless, she faces the outcome of her actions with courage and moral integrity:

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> I regret so many missed opportunities to help [racist people] see that they're being close-minded, but always in the back of my mind there's been a voice telling me to let it go. But […] what Tyler's done to my father […] is deeply personal. I know there's a storm coming, and I don't care. I just hope I can stand strong in the face of it. (*ibid.*: 93)

Zara feels social responsibility towards targeted people like her and is not afraid of taking their side even if this means putting her own security at stake, as it eventually happened: "Even now, with my father laid up in the ICU in critical condition, I can't shake the thought that if I didn't stand up for Maria in the parking lot the other day something bad could have happened to her" (*ibid.*: 97). Zara's clear view of the social dynamics that surround her lead her to reject openly the cultural tendency to criminalize youth of color and make them feel responsible for their actions and oppressors' reactions. Reflecting on what happened to her family for standing up against racist behaviors, she says:

> I go over every interaction with [Tyler] in my mind. Was it something I said or did? Did I somehow make him feel inadequate or cheated? […] But I remember: The problem doesn't lie with me. He's the one with the problem, the one who doesn't want to coexist with people who aren't exactly like him. (*ibid.*: 228)

Obviously, Zara can rely on a very strong network of support that backs her up in the struggle for identity affirmation. This is particularly evident concerning her gender identity, which she is not afraid of manifesting freely. Indeed, despite coming from a deeply traditional culture, like the Pakistani culture, she has the full support of her family when she tells them she is a bisexual. She tells her friend about the day she came out and she describes the exchange she had with her parents as the most natural of conversations:

> "Do you parents know?"
> "That I'm bisexual? Yeah, I told them last year."
> "And they were ok with it?" Chloe is barely able to hide her shock.
> "Well, yeah, they were surprised at first and a little worried, but we talked about it and then they were okay". (*ibid.*: 45)

Thinking about the privilege she has of living in an open-minded family, Zara admits:

> My parents love me unconditionally, even when I put them in difficult situations. They only care about my happiness, not what society tells them they should care about. And I respect them so much for it. I have friends who struggle with who they are because their families don't accept them. I know I am one of the lucky ones. (*ibid.*: 49)

An interesting episode which demonstrates the full familial support Zara can count on occurs when Zareen, one of the Hossains' Pakistani neighbors, visits them in order to tell them about the rumors on Zara's sexuality. When the woman gets confirmation from Zara's mother that she's a bisexual, her reaction is of outrage and shame: "How can you let your daughter do something like that? […]

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What she's doing is against our beliefs, […] [i]t is a sin" (*ibid.*: 143). At that point, Zara's father intervenes, and despite being convalescent and still weak after the shooting, he raises his voice with pride and sense of protection towards his daughter: "Please take your outdated and narrow-minded beliefs and leave. And tell anyone else who has an opinion about my family that if I hear them saying anything about my daughter, they will have to deal with me" (*ibid.*). As is evident, Zara's parents not only leave her free to express herself, but also protect her right to be in the world on her own terms.

This unproblematic representation of a teenager's sex life is a further element that makes *Zara Hossain is Here* (2021) an atypical transcultural YA novel. Indeed, as Mark E. Lewis and Sybil Durand explain in their essay, "Sexuality as Risk and Responsibility in Young Adult Literature" (2014), adults tend to police adolescents' sexuality both in order to maintain their hierarchical status over the lives of youth and to view them as in need of protection from the dangers of sexuality. This is demonstrated by the fact that YA literature often provides didactic portrayals of sexually active adolescent characters, thus continuing to reinforce the idea that "one's sexuality is inherently controversial and conflicted" (Banks 2009: 35). Khan's novel, on the contrary, rejects this view that diminishes adult understanding of the capabilities of the young as well as the structures that hinder their agency.

The strong support system made of an open-minded family, faithful friends, and illuminated teachers like Ms. Talbot, the Social Justice Club instructor, allow Zara to grow as a determined and self-aware young woman, with an established sexuality, financial security, and ambitious life projects. This portrayal radically departs from the typical representation of adolescents with complex social and familial relationships and struggling for identity formation. However, if on the one hand, she had been naive for a long time, taking her comfortable situation for granted, on the other hand life confronts her with a series of events that make her reflect on her status of immigrant and, consequently, on the controversial meaning of home. After delivering a class presentation on the history of immigration in the U.S., for instance, she remains startled in front of one of her classmates' comments: "I just wanted to say that it's really sad what y'all go through, but I mean, like, why do we have to take care of everyone else in the whole world?" (Khan 2021: 11). The logic of "us versus them" is not familiar to Zara, who has always considered herself as part of the American society, without any distinction compared to her peers. For this reason, she does not know how to respond, but back home, in the safe space of her bedroom, she considers what it means to belong for a hybrid person like her:

> My presentation in class today has reminded me that I exist in a sort of no-man's land. I wasn't born here, but I don't remember much of Pakistan and I can't imagine what my life would be like if I still lived there. But I know how a lot of people here feel about immigrants. So . . . Where do I belong? (*ibid.*: 21)

The cultural trauma she and her family undergo makes this feeling of alienation more acute. Talking about her sense of disorientation in a place that feels no longer welcoming, Zara admits: "It's a sense of encroachment on someone else's

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space, an unbelonging that never goes away, no matter what you do to fit in. And […] it takes just one person like Tyler to make me feel I can never fully belong" (*ibid.*: 56).

However, in spite of these negative feelings of being an outsider within the place she used to consider home, Zara refuses to stop fighting for her own and her family's rights. For instance, when she asks her mother – whom she calls "Ammi" – whether life for them will be back to normal soon, Ammi answers: "We can only hope, hai na, beta?" (*ibid.*: 139). Outraged by her mother's resigned attitude, Zara reacts with indignation:

> So, that's what it all boils down to. Hope. We can do everything the right way, follow all the rules, work hard, but ultimately it all comes down to hoping that things will work out, hoping that the next ignorant racist who comes at us doesn't do even more damage. Somehow, I will not allow myself to accept that things will always be like this. They have to change. I have to make sure of it. (*ibid.*)

Zara's determination is even fiercer when her parents decide to go back to Pakistan because they no longer feel safe in America, which they now perceive as a hostile state. As a teenage girl, Zara has many projects there, including starting a law school for which she had applied, and is not ready to give everything up because of the unjust treatment she and her family have been subjected to as immigrants. In a very empowering reflection, Zara claims:

> I am proud to be a Muslim woman. I am proud of my Pakistani culture. And I'm proud to be queer. I should not have to feel unsafe because of any of those parts of my identity, wherever I live. I have a right, just like anyone else, to live without constantly looking over my shoulder and watching my words or my actions. I deserve the dignity to exist as I am. (*ibid.*: 183)

Besides feeling the victim of a grave injustice, Zara is also worried about what her future would be like in Pakistan, especially concerning her gender identity, which she would no longer be free to express. Hence, in a harsh confrontation with her mother, she tries to explain that in Pakistan her identity would be as threatened as in the U.S., although for different reasons:

> [Zara's mother]: "At least in Pakistan you'll be with family, your own blood. […] You'll be wanted."
> "Until they find out the truth, Ammi. Then what? What will they say when they find out I'm bisexual, that I'm in love with a girl?"
> "Zara, why do they have to know about that? That's your personal life. […]"
> "So, you want me to hide it? Pretend to be someone I'm not just to fit in?"
> "[…] At least in Pakistan you'll blend in." (*ibid.*: 215)

Zara's certainties vacillate when she is confronted with the possibilities that her mother envisaged for her: either stay in America and know that every moment she could be targeted with hate and racism or go to Pakistan and become invisible. A third way, however, materializes thanks to Zara's deep social engagement. She realizes that if she decides to fight, she has to do it not only for her family but for the thousands of people who, like them, see their rights

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violated due to systemic oppression. Hence, she concludes that the best responses to cultural trauma are activism and political engagement. As previously noted, Zara was already involved in community activism by participating in discussion groups and rallies in favor of marginalized people, such as LGBTQ people – her mantra being: “We hate the way things are and we want to do something about it” (*ibid.*: 15). Her propensity for action and socially engaged struggles becomes evident in the way she tackles her family issue, too. Indeed, after much research, she manages to reach Senator Susan Delgado, who being daughter of immigrants herself, understands Zara and her family’s difficult situation and does her best to help them out. Besides showing her personal sympathy and trying to prevent the Hossains from being expelled from the country, the senator invites Zara and her parents to share their story to a rally in San Antonio, joining the activist group “Citizens for Immigration Reform”. Despite being angry at a country that offered the promise of a home just to withdraw it unmercifully after many years, Mr. and Mrs. Hossain accept saying: “We should do what we can so that your generation doesn’t have to deal with this” (*ibid.*: 205). The experience at the rally is an epiphanic moment for Zara, who understands the power of ideas and principles as well as the importance of raising one’s voice for that which is right. She describes that moment as follows:

> I’m filled with hope as I look around and see so many young people from all backgrounds gathered here to fight for our rights. […] It’s all very inspiring, and as I look to my parents, I can see they feel the same way” (*ibid.*: 206).

Senator Delgado concludes the speech with an encouragement that makes Zara feel hopeful and heartened facing her own situation: “I believe in all of you, […] and I know that if we work together we can accomplish great things and make this country a safe space for all of us” (*ibid.*). Zara’s engagement with politics and activism eventually secures her an opportunity to stay, provided her father works for the senator, but she ultimately decides on a middle ground with her parents to move to Canada. Canada is not the U.S., where her parents feel unsafe, but it is also not Pakistan, where Zara would feel unsafe being openly bisexual. Hence, Zara finds a new form of recovery from cultural trauma, one that does not rely on the traditional literary approach in which the victim mourns and overcomes the past to regain a sense of agency and safety. Instead, she finds peace as well as self-validation only by envisioning social justice and enacting behaviors that could dismantle systemic oppression. As Traise Yamamoto claims, issues of belonging and safety “extend beyond simple inclusion, representation, or ‘tolerance’” (2009: 123). As Zara’s story also shows, black and brown young people need to feel safe, secure, and free to celebrate their identities and overcome cultural trauma not just at an individual level, but also at a social and institutional level.

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4. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how Khan's writing unsettles typical categorizations both in terms of genre and content. It departs from traditional YA fiction in many ways by tackling cultural and intergenerational trauma through an intersectional lens. Furthermore, it depicts a strong girl protagonist who refuses to play the part of the innocent, passive victim who adopts careful behaviors in order not to be further criminalized due to her weak social position as immigrant. Demonstrating the complexity of what home means to diverse young people in the U.S., Khan brings to the forefront the issues that immigrant teenagers, as opposed to their parents, face in the places they identify as their home. *Zara Hossain is Here* (2021) also reflects the heterogeneity of the young people of color and their varied experiences across cultural and geographic contexts, thus offering an inspiring portrayal of transcultural young generations who develop new forms of recovery from marginalization and envisage subversive kinds of social justice. In particular, Khan's novel confirms Kathryn Bond Stockton's assumption that "there are ways of growing that are not growing up" (2009: 11). By deflating the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up, Stockton envisages a different kind of claim for growth that involves a sideways movement, which is by definition more inclusive and intimately linked with queerness. According to Stockton, "growing sideways" means that the width of a person's ideas or experiences pertain at any age, bringing adults and adolescents into lateral – rather that vertical – contact. By presenting a queer main character engaged in social and political activism in order to process forms of racism, sexism, and social and government oppression, Khan shows that human growth is not completed when individual realization – and reproduction – is achieved. Instead, an active engagement within the community as well as a positioning "to the side of cultural ideals" (*ibid.*: 13) are necessary steps towards personal development. Furthermore, the book questions the common idea of innocence as lack of guilt, knowingness, experience, and action. Rather than focusing on flatness or a "set of *have nots*", as James Kincaid puts it (2004: 10), Khan exposes the dangers of inaction, indifference, and passivity and invites young readers to consider (e)motion as a guiding principle in the back-and-forth of life experiences and connections. In conclusion, the kind of realist diverse YA literature exemplified by *Zara Hossain is Here* (2021) tackles important social issues affecting the young in the Western society and provides strategies for diverse teenagers to feel seen, validated, and empowered.

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