

EMC Approaches to Reading

The Roles We Play



Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils

Written and edited by Kate Oliver

English and Media Centre in conjunction with the Reading Teachers Reading Pupils programme, 2024

EMC and Cheltenham Festivals: Reading Teachers=Reading Pupils

These teaching notes have been designed to support schools using *The Roles We Play* as part of the Reading Teachers=Reading Pupils project in 2023-24. The ideas in the sequence of sessions will support teachers in reading aloud and talking about the selected texts with their students, allowing students to respond to and understand the text in greater depth. As this is a graphic novel, the resource includes tips and prompts for reading images.

Notes for Teachers

- Content warning: domestic abuse.
- All page numbers refer to the Myriad Editions paperback edition of the book, first published in the UK in 2021.

Download licence

Permission is granted to reproduce this download publication for personal and educational use within the purchasing institution (including its Virtual Learning Environments and intranet). Redistribution beyond the institution by any means, including electronic, will constitute an infringement of copyright.






Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Tips for Reading | 4 |
| ▶ Reading Books with Words You Don't Know - Useful Tips | 4 |
| ▶ How to Read a Graphic Novel | 4 |
| ▶ Useful Tips for Reading Images | 5 |
| Before Reading | 6 |
| ▶ Chapter Titles | 6 |
| ▶ Looking Inside the Book | 6 |
| During Reading | 7 |
| ▶ During Reading Questions | 7 |
| ▶ The First Few Pages | 7 |
| Part one | 8 |
| ▶ Chapters 1, 2 & 3 | 8 |
| ▶ Chapters 4 & 5 | 8 |
| ▶ Chapter 6 | 9 |
| ▶ Chapters 7, 8, 9 & 10 | 9 |
| Part two | 10 |
| ▶ Chapters 11, 12 & 13 | 10 |
| ▶ Chapter 14 | 10 |
| ▶ Chapters 15, 16, 17 & 18 | 10 |
| ▶ Chapter 19 | 10 |
| ▶ Chapter 20 | 10 |
| Part three | 11 |
| ▶ Chapters 21 & 22 | 11 |
| ▶ Chapters 23 & 24 | 11 |
| ▶ Chapters 25 & 26 | 11 |
| ▶ Chapter 27 | 11 |
| ▶ Chapter 28 | 12 |
| ▶ Chapter 29 & 30 | 12 |
| After Reading | 13 |
| ▶ Discussion Questions | 13 |
| ▶ Exploring the Book Further | 14 |
| ▶ Individualism | 14 |
| ▶ A Favourite Panel | 14 |
| ▶ Visual Themes | 15 |
| ▶ Reading the Reviews | 18 |
| ▶ Creative Activities | 20 |




Tips for Reading

Reading Books with Words You Don't Know - Useful Tips

In writing about her experiences growing up in Britain as a Kashmiri Muslim, Sabba Khan sometimes uses her first language, Pothwari, and may also use other words you don't recognise. Here are some tips for reading a book with words you don't know, whether it's because the language is archaic (like Shakespeare), or because the writer makes use of words from a language you are not familiar with, or because the writer uses specialist or unusual vocabulary.

-  When you come across a word you don't know, first consider whether it is stopping you from understanding something important in the novel.
-  If the word is not affecting your overall understanding we suggest that you keep reading, so that you don't lose track of the story. You could look the word up later if you want to, out of interest.
-  If the word is stopping you from understanding something important you could:
 - ▶ Read back a little and then forwards a bit and see if you can guess from the context (in *The Roles We Play* the images may help as well)
 - ▶ See if someone else in your class can tell you what it means
 - ▶ Look it up online or in a dictionary.

How to Read a Graphic Novel

-  *Slow down.* Reading a graphic novel is not like reading a prose novel, even one with illustrations. Everything on the page contributes to the story: the pictures, the words, the way the words and pictures work together.
-  Look for places where the pictures are telling a part of the story which is not in the words, or, sometimes, even a story that is different from the story told in words
-  Read from left to right, top to bottom, as shown in the image on page 5. (Except manga which is read right to left)

Useful terminology for talking about a graphic novel

- ▶ Panel: frame containing images and text
- ▶ Gutter: the gap or border between panels.
- ▶ Words are contained in
 - » Thought bubbles,
 - » Speech bubbles
 - » Captions.

BEFORE READING

These tasks are designed to be completed in small discussion groups. However, they can easily be done on your own too. Instead of talking about the tasks, you can write down and keep a record of your ideas.

Chapter Titles

The chapter titles from the novel are listed in order, below.

- Discuss with a partner or small group:
 - ▶ What do you notice about the titles?
 - ▶ What might this novel be about?
 - ▶ Which title/s make you want to read that chapter?

| | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Together | 2. Opposites | 3. Space |
| 4. Friendship | 5. Nothing | 6. Rocks |
| 7. Opposites | 8. Spare Rib | 9. Monstrous |
| 10. Kismet | 11. Punctured | 12. Questions |
| 13. Pardah | 14. Other | 15. Heritage |
| 16. Layers | 17. Tabula Rasa | 18. Silence |
| 19. Limbs | 20. This City | 21. Warmth |
| 22. Performance | 23. Choice | 24. Illuminations |
| 25. Vessel | 26. Finite | 27. Love |
| 28. Cycle | 29. Future | 30. Water |

Looking Inside the Book

- Working on your own, in a pair, or in a small group, flick through the pages of the book. What do you notice? What different kinds of layout are there?
- Have you read any other graphic novels? If so, what were they and what did you think of them? If not, what are your thoughts about trying one?

DURING READING

During Reading Questions

Warning: to avoid spoilers don't read the questions before reading each section!

- Read the section and answer the questions, either in discussion or make a brief written record of your answers.

The First Few Pages

- Read up to page 15

The panels show Khan looking into a mirror and talking through her dilemmas about how to start. Sometimes what is reflected back is an image of her self, sometimes of her younger self. At other times her father or brother are speaking.

- ▶ What sense do you get of the different ways Khan could go about writing her book? How do other people want her to write it?
- ▶ How does she decide to go about it in the end?



Part One

Chapters 1, 2 & 3

 Read up to page 45.

- ▶ What do you learn about Sabba Khan's family?
- ▶ What is your impression of the family members?

Reading an Image

Remind yourself of the tips for 'How to Read an Image' on page 4.

- Look closely at page 41. Discuss how this panel communicates the child's experience.

Chapters 4 & 5

 Read up to page 59.


- ▶ What are the different ways someone can respond to an insult or slur?
- ▶ Look again at page 55. How does Khan seem to feel about having said 'nothing'? Why do you think she doesn't tell her parents about what happened?
- ▶ What does the young Khan learn in this section about how others see her?

Reading an Image (see page 4)

Remind yourself of the tips for 'How to Read an Image' in the 'Before Reading' section.

- Look closely at pages 47 and 49.
 - ▶ What similarities and differences do you notice? You could think about: the use of colour; how the girls are positioned on the page; how closely 'zoomed in' the image is.
 - ▶ How do the words and images in these panels show the friendship between the two girls?
 - ▶ What does Khan suggest could be different if the friends had been taught more about what they had in common?

Chapter 6


 Read up to page 75.

Reading an Image (see page 4)

Remind yourself of the tips for 'How to Read an Image' in the 'Tips for Reading' section.

- Look closely at pages 72 and 73. Across these two pages, Khan makes the most of the fact that she has both images and words to work with. How does she make the most of this to:
 - ▶ Show how her mother feels about her homeland
 - ▶ Explain definitions of displaced person, diaspora and migrant
 - ▶ Move quickly from the personal (her mother's experience) to the general (definitions).


Chapters 7, 8, 9 & 10

 Read up to page 108.

- What do you learn in this section about the female gender roles Khan is expected to fit into?
 - ▶ How does she respond to some of these expectations?


Part two

Chapters 11, 12 & 13

 Read up to page 134.

- ▶ What issues does Khan explore in this section to do with her race and religion?
- ▶ What does she have to say about how she looks and how others see her?

Chapter 14


 Read up to page 143.

Reading an Image (see page 4)

'Haram' is an Arabic word used to describe anything which is against Islamic sharia law. It means 'forbidden'.


- Look closely at page 140. What does this panel tell you about how Khan feels about her first 'life drawing'? Think about things like the size of the drawing in relation to the figure as well as the words.
- Do you think Sabba Khan should have been allowed to skip the 'life drawing' element of her course? What are some of her own, complex feelings about it?

Chapters 15, 16, 17 & 18

 Read up to page 170.


- ▶ What are some of the traditions and values Khan wants to hold onto? Which does she seem to want to let go of? Which does she have conflicting feelings about?
- ▶ What have you understood so far about why so many of England's 'Pakistanis' are in fact Kashmiri's?

Chapter 19

 Read up to page 177.

- ▶ How does this chapter relate to chapter 5, 'Nothing'?

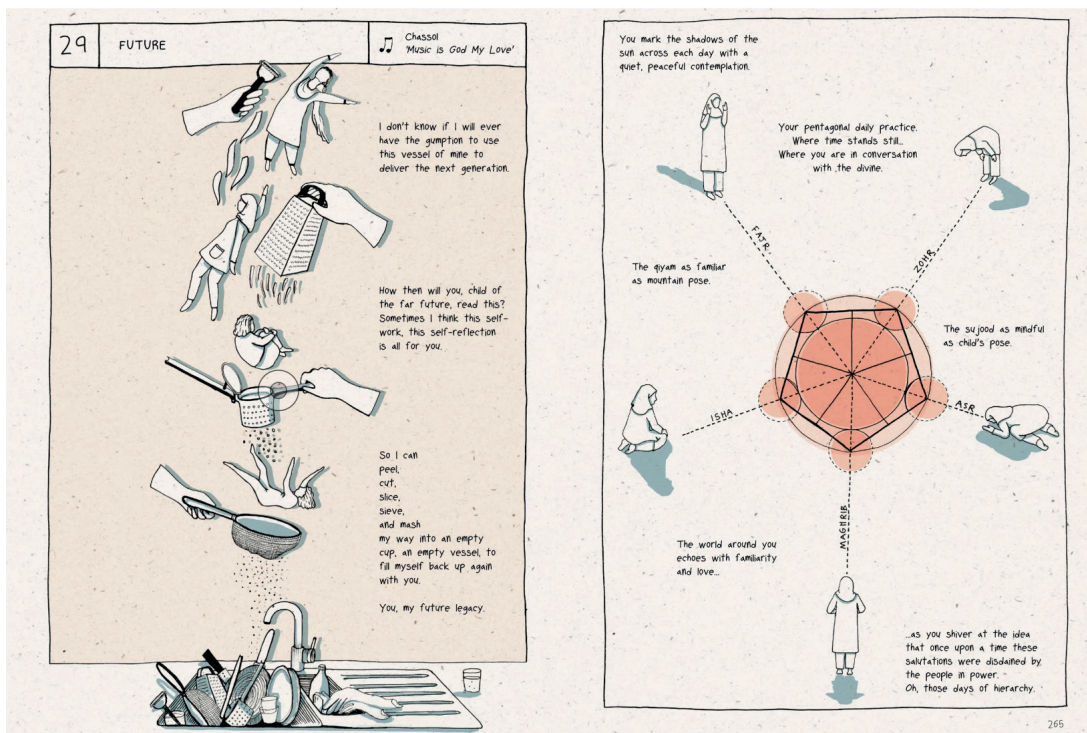
Chapter 20

 Read up to page 192.

Reading an Image (see page 4)

Many of the panels in this section are about 'fitting in' and 'belonging'.


- ▶ Choose one or two of the panels which you find particularly helpful in understanding Khan's complex experiences of and feelings about these issues.



Above Sabba Khan: The Roles We Play (Copyright © Sabba Khan, 2021)


Part three

Chapters 21 & 22

 Read up to page 209.

- ▶ Look again at page 202. What 'boxes' are you in?
- ▶ How do you think it felt for Sabba to be stopped at customs because she is Muslim and then having to prove that she is Muslim in order to go in to the mosque to and pray?
- ▶ Look again at the tweet right at the start of the novel in which 'Bo Rai' says 'My parents were tasked with the job of survival...'. Discuss what you think they mean.
- ▶ How does this tweet help you to understand Chapters 21 and 22?


Chapters 23 & 24

 Read up to page 226.

Reading an Image

- What do you understand about the title 'The Roles We Play' now you've read more?
- Do you follow a religion which requires you to fast?
 - ▶ If so, how is your experience similar or different to Khan's?
 - ▶ If not, how well do you think you would cope with fasting and having to get on with your daily life?

Chapters 25 & 26

 Read up to page 238.


- ▶ What do you think Khan means by 'my mother was the first architect I knew'?

Chapter 27

 Read up to page 256.

- ▶ What different kinds of love does Khan experience:
 - » From her mother
 - » From her father
 - » From her uncle
 - » From her boyfriend?

Chapter 28

 Read up to page 263.


- ▶ Why do you think Khan calls this chapter 'Cycle'?

Reading an Image (see page 4)

'Wabi sabi' is a Japanese philosophy which teaches us that all things, including human beings and life itself, are impermanent, incomplete, and imperfect. The Japanese art of 'kintsugi' is related to this philosophy. Kintsugi is the art of repairing broken pottery with a glue mixed with powdered gold, silver or platinum so that, instead of trying to make a pot look unbroken again, the lines of breakage are highlighted and made beautiful.

- Look again at page 262. How does the information about wabi sabi and kintsugi help you to understand this panel?

Chapter 29 & 30

 Read to the end of the novel.

- ▶ What does Khan say about her future?
- ▶ Do you think she and her mother have made peace with each other?

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

- Use the questions, below, as prompts to either discuss the book with others or do a short piece of writing about your response. You could begin by jotting down a few notes in the spaces.

What do you like about this graphic novel?

What do you dislike about this graphic novel?

Which moments stick most in your memory and why?

Which images stick most in your memory and why?

What other stories does it remind you of and why?

Who do you think should read this book? Why?

Exploring the Book Further

Use one or more of these tasks to explore *The Roles We Play* further.

Individualism

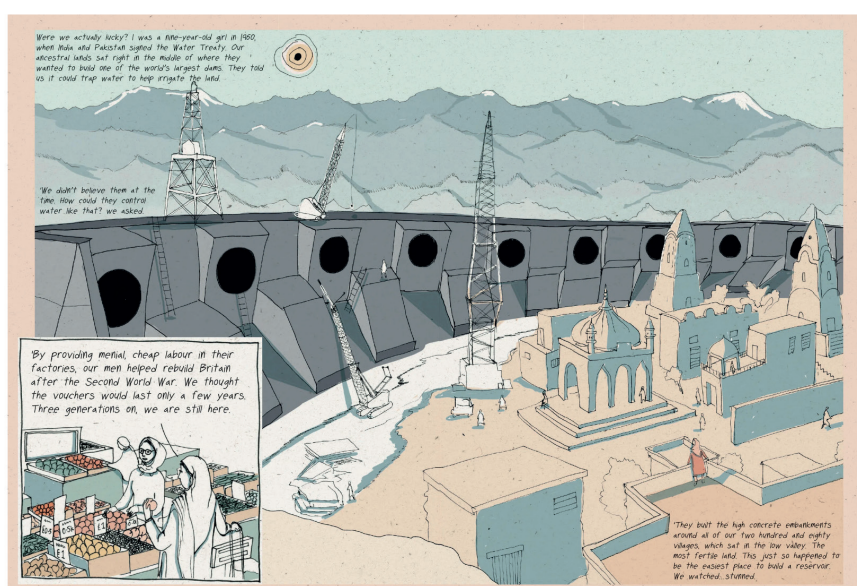
Khan often mentions that she finds British/Western society quite focused on the individual and their immediate family.

- Discuss with a partner:
 - ▶ When you think about your place in the world and who is affected by your actions, do you tend to think more about your personal achievements, your immediate family and close friends, or do you think more about your place in the wider community and your extended family?
 - ▶ What are the pros and cons of each way of thinking?

A Favourite Panel

Sabba Khan says that the panel on page 194 is one of her favourite images in the book. She says this is because she successfully found a way to represent visually the idea of 'who sees who?' and to capture her feelings about the hijab. She still feels a connection with other hijabis and finds comfort in that. But because she has chosen not to wear hers any more, other hijabis no longer see her in that way.

- Choose your own favourite panel and explain what you like about it, either to a partner or in a brief bit of writing.



Above Sabba Khan: *The Roles We Play* (Copyright © Sabba Khan, 2021)

Visual Themes

Throughout the novel, Khan returns to particular images. Some of the main ones are: boxes (sometimes as the outline of a house); buildings; doors; sieves; stairs; maps; mirrors and mirror images; images that overlap; puppets.

- Look back at 'Reading a Graphic Novel' in the 'Reading Tips' section on page 4 to remind yourself what to look for and some of the terminology to use when discussing images.
- Choose one or two of the themes below to explore further, either on your own or with a partner.

A. Boxes (sometimes as an outline of a house)

Some pages to look at again: 84, 132, 197, 211, 214, 222.

People use the phrase 'don't put me in a box' to mean 'don't stereotype me' or 'don't try to limit who I can be'.

- Look first at page 84 to help you to think about why Khan might return to the image of the box.
- Discuss with a partner:
 - ▶ How do you think the images of boxes help Khan to explore and explain the different 'roles' and expectations that are put on her?

B. Overlapping images

Some pages to look at again: 26, 102, 112, 134, 151, 199.

In an interview about the novel, Khan said that she doesn't want her novel to be read as a simple tale of:

Girl from a traditional family, visually Muslim. Goes out into the world, gets liberated and takes off hijab.

- Look first at page 151 which shows some of the different 'layers' Khan explores.
- Discuss with a partner:
 - ▶ How do the overlapping images help Khan give a sense of the complexity of her story?

C. Buildings/houses

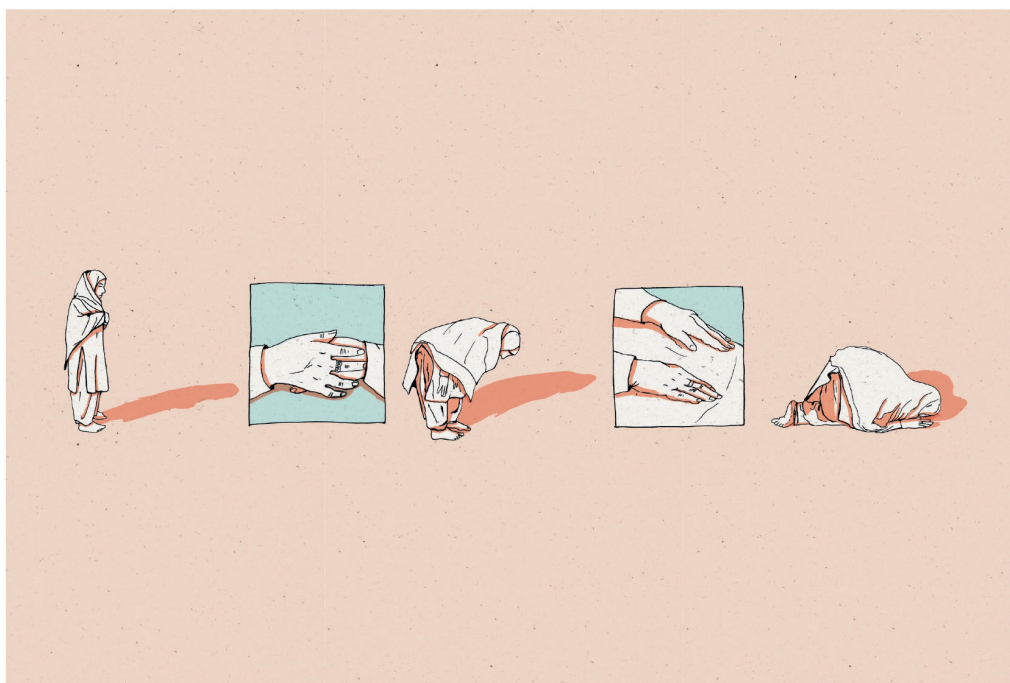
Some pages to look at again: 19, 22, 35, 74, 202-206, 236, 254.

As Khan is an architect, it's not surprising that buildings (as well as doors and stairs) are often images that she goes back to. Her images include:

- Real buildings that she visited, worshipped in or lived in. Her homes were often crowded because her family helped so many people. Girls were not allowed in certain spaces at certain times.
- What buildings can represent such as family relationships, religion, home, feeling cozy or trapped.

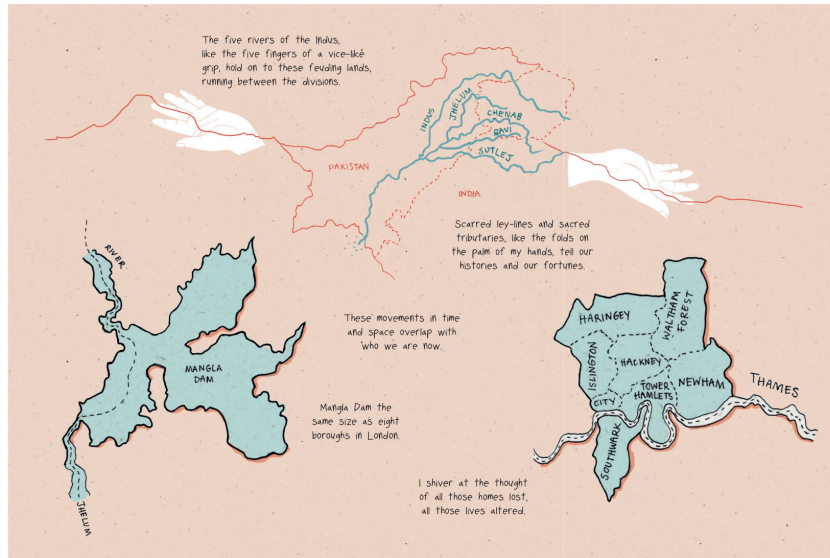
Buildings that are broken or being taken apart.

- Look first at page 35 to help you to think about why Khan might return to images of buildings.
- Discuss with a partner:
 - ▶ How do you think the images of buildings help Khan to explore the fact that her clan had to leave their home because of the dam that was built?
 - ▶ How do you think the images of buildings help Khan to explore her family relationships?



D. Maps

Some pages to look at again: 33, 50-51, 73, 90, 149, 150, 155, 183.



Above Sabba Khan: *The Roles We Play* (Copyright © Sabba Khan, 2021)

In an interview about the novel, Khan talked about:

- » Maps as a way of keeping track of things
- » Comparisons to make sense - London boroughs and size of the dam
- » How she explained her family's experience by showing the way India was divided up ('Partition') and how this left her family's home, Kashmir, divided up between Pakistan, India and China
- » The river shared by all these countries
- » The diaspora. 'Diaspora' comes from an Ancient Greek word meaning 'to scatter'. These days it is used to describe a large group of people who come from the same place and share a culture but are living away from their traditional homeland. Sometimes people scatter out of choice or because of a lack of opportunities in their homeland, sometimes they are forced out by conflict, oppression or war.

■ Look first at page 50-51 to help you to think about why Khan might return to images of maps. Why do you think Khan chose not to put this map right at the start of the book?

■ Discuss with a partner:

- ▶ How do the maps help you to understand some of what Khan is exploring?

Reading the Reviews

The extracts, below, are all from reviews of the book.

- Read all of the reviews and discuss which comes closest to your own view.
- Working individually, write your own paragraph expressing your views about the novel. If possible, share your reviews with a group.

A So this is actually the first graphic novel I've ever read! And honestly... Masha Allah I was so moved. Whatever I imagined graphic novels to be like, I did NOT anticipate this! For example, I never expected to see the building of the Mangla Dam in a graphic novel!? I love how Sabba tells her personal story with such honouring of the colonial and complex histories we have all inherited.

Also, personally, I am so wary of reading people's narratives of complex family relationships as they can so easily fall into the tropes we all know. But I was so so happy and have so much respect for how Sabba both honoured her own truth and pain without ever failing to contextualise the harms and injustices (past, present, epistemic, racial, etc) that her family faced. Can't express how much I appreciated that. Not to mention the beautiful illustrations and representations and honouring of women so much throughout!!

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan @thebrownhijabi on instagram

B Khan starts with the macro: culture, society, race, gender, class division, etc., and breaks it down into the micro, the issues of the heart. She reflects on the changing relationship with her mother, often fraught with difficulty, misunderstanding, and disappointment, and how to find her way back to her 'first home', her mother's heart. It was a beautiful beautiful ending, full of honesty but also hope.

Sabba Khan's debut graphic novel can't help but cause you to reflect on your own complexities and areas of hurt, pain, growth, and what brings you joy. A very emotional read.

Elise on Good Reads

C I enjoyed the parts where she questions the structures of the white man's vision of society that we're forced to participate in, but she often blames her traditional immigrant parents for her traumas instead of the individualistic and controlling systems we lived under for centuries (pretty typical for Asians in the diaspora). It's a bit too whiny for my taste ... Sad stories are not the only thing we can offer to the publishing world. If you are seeking a more humorous story about the Muslim, Pakistani-British working class, I highly recommend the TV series *Man Like Mobeen* starring Guz Khan.

Rehana on Good Reads

D It's difficult for me to attribute any one word to describe Khan's work, which contains multitudes. Nor can I sum it up in the meagre space here. Is it moving? Yes. Is it funny? Yes. Is it thought-provoking? Absolutely. In a way, it mirrors Khan's questions about herself, her community, her identity, her past and her present. They cannot be subsumed or made into a portmanteau. They are all there and each one deserves its unique corner.

Swati on Good Reads

E If I'm honest, I approached this book with some trepidation. A biographical tale about a British Pakistani woman's struggle with identity didn't intrigue me enough for me to dive straight in. For quite a while I put off starting it. Quite frankly, I wasn't even sure what I was expecting, but I suppose I was worried I just wouldn't engage with it. Which just goes to show what an idiot I can be.

It takes a degree of bravery that I certainly don't have to write and illustrate something so personal and forthright. The fact that it also manages to embrace a sense of humour just further shows how remarkable a book this is. I think it helps underscore that no matter what your background, beliefs or gender, ultimately we all share so much in common. It's certainly a book I wish I'd had the courage to pick up sooner, and now I've read it I'm extremely pleased to have done so.

Simon Chadwick, The Cartoonists Club of Great Britain

Creative Activities

On your own, or with a partner, complete one or more of these creative activities to help you develop your thoughts about *The Roles We Play* further.

- Find a map of place that is important to you. Look back at some of the ways Sabba Khan uses maps in her panels, for example on pages 32, 50-51, 149, 155, and 183. Create your own panel using the map. You could print out the map and cut bits out of it, or you could copy parts of it. Add words and other images to create a panel which gives a sense of what this place means to you.

- Write a letter to the author, Sabba Khan, explaining how *The Roles We Play* affected you and why you are glad she wrote it.

On pages 269-270 Sabba Khan quotes a translation of a poem by Alama Iqbal. Read the first lines of the poem, below.

- Continue in any way you choose to create your own poem:

*Search for the path beyond the path
If you find a river search for the ocean*

The Roles We Play is mostly autobiographical. The first ten chapter titles are:

Together, Opposites, Space, Friendship, Nothing, Rocks, Opposites, Spare Rib, Monstrous, Kismat. Each chapter is paired with a song from her playlist.

- Come up with ten chapter titles for your life so far. If you like, you could think of a track to go with each one.
- Look again at page 151 which shows some of the different 'layers' Khan explores. Using drawing, or collaging photographs of yourself, or a mixture of the two, create a panel which shows some of your own 'layers'.

- Write a short speech to give in assembly about something you feel passionately about related to the book. Some ideas to get you started:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| » Discrimination | » Whether we should put more emphasis on community, or more emphasis on the individual. |
| » Pressures on young people | |
| » Family traditions and values | |
| » Faith | |