

# Navigating the Land of Opportunities as Muslim Immigrants: A Geocriticism Perspective to Transnationalism in Multicultural Children's Literature

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This study examines transnationalism in multicultural children's literature with significant Muslim-themed content to investigate whether depictions of Muslim migrant characters in children's narratives reflect contemporary life in the United States.

OVER SEVERAL DECADES, globalization has prompted cross-border and cross-continental movements of people, generally termed as *transnationalism*. Khagram and Levitt (2008) presented transnationalism as an optic or gaze that begins with a world without borders—empirically, the boundaries and borders that emerge at particular historical moments—and explored the relationship to unbounded arenas and processes. It does not take the existence or appropriateness of the spatial unit of analysis for granted. Central to the study of transnationalism is understanding the linkages migrants have between the place where they currently reside and their homelands or other places they have lived (Ong, 1999; Vertovec, 1999). We approached this topic informed by our personal experiences of navigating the United States as Muslim immigrants and having experienced the liminal spaces that require negotiating new identities in a different cultural space. All of this coincided with and was complicated by tectonic events of the past, such as 9/11, the San Bernardino attacks, and former president Donald Trump's travel ban on Muslims.

On September 11, 2001, 19 militants affiliated with Al-Qaeda, the Islamic extremist group, hijacked four airplanes and carried out suicide attacks against targets in the United States, killing almost 3,000 people from 93 nations. The corollaries of “the war on terror,” an international military campaign launched by the U.S. government after the 9/11 attacks, not only conflated immigration and Muslim immigrants with terrorism but also traded the rights and liberties of minorities (e.g., Arab, South Asian, and Muslim communities) for national security (Smith, 2013).

The San Bernardino attack, although minuscule in scale compared to 9/11, was led by ISIS-inspired terrorists. This attack on a Christmas party on December 2, 2015, left 14 people murdered and 22 others wounded. The recurrence of similar audacious attacks by radical Islamic extremists positioned Muslims negatively in the United States and beyond (Dorell, 2015; Tribune Wire Reports, 2015; Wexler, 2015). On January 27, 2017, in the wake of these deadly mass shootings, former president Trump issued an executive order barring immigrants and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. With the

ban, mass movements of people into and out of the country were impeded. However, most strikingly, Trump's travel ban promoted anti-Muslim rhetoric (Khan et al., 2019) and discrimination (Masci, 2019).

The rise in hate crimes toward immigrants across communities (Potok, 2017) has led to a focus on children's literature with immigration themes for opening up conversations in classrooms (Rodriguez & Braden, 2018). Because children's knowledge about people and the communities they live in is informed by the media, portrayals of immigrants' experiences must be accurately represented in their books. In this age of globalization, it is essentially important to expose students to multicultural children's literature. We define multicultural children's literature as books that accurately portray the views and cultures of underrepresented communities, such as Muslims. Through multicultural children's literature, students learn how to interact with others from across different ethnic backgrounds (Steiner et al., 2008) and gain knowledge to enact social change. In light of this, we argue for the importance of going beyond understanding the experiences of underrepresented communities, to recognizing power relations between the dominant and minority groups in society (Hade, 1997), to broaden students' understanding of minoritized Muslims and the world.

### Researchers' Motivation, Positionality, and the Community

Our interest in looking at picturebooks with Muslim immigrant content is motivated by our minoritized identities; we are Muslim immigrants residing in the United States. The first author, Suriati, born and raised in Singapore, has been in the United States for nine years. She has traveled to several Muslim countries, including Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Ebrahim and Amani were born and raised in Yemen and lived in Saudi Arabia before moving to the United States. Both work as Arabic language instructors. Aslihan, born and raised in Turkey, has been in the United States for 15 years. She has worked with children of immigrant families.

As Muslim migrants, we are deeply connected to the harrowing experiences that happened to our community (Sierring, 2017). Recently, we received the shocking news that a friend, the owner of a Turkish café in town, became the victim of a hate crime. On October 15, 2015, Naciye was assaulted by a college student who grabbed her by the back of the neck with one hand, pushing her face down and inducing short-term strangulation, as he attempted to pull off her headscarf (Associated Press, 2015). That traumatizing incident created a powerful impetus for education against xenophobia, specifically Islamophobia.

Although a "scarf-in" event, inviting women of all faiths and backgrounds to wear a headscarf while dining at the café, was held in solidarity with Muslims in the community, we feel the need to respond to the social stigma attached to Muslim immigrants. By examining the complex interactions between fictional and real spaces (Prieto, 2016, p. 20), we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How are Muslim child migrants in the United States represented in multicultural children's books?
2. In what ways are their experiences reflective of the contemporary U.S. context?

To begin, we looked at studies on multicultural children's literature with significant Muslim content or that addressed issues of immigration and transnationalism.

### Previous Studies on Muslim-Themed Children's Books

In our selection of literature reviews and children's books, we emphasized the distinction between Muslims and Arabs, who often are perceived as parallel in terms of faith and identity. As Al-Hazza and Bucher (2010) affirmed, "not all Muslims are Arabs and not all Arabs are Muslims" (p. 6). On that note, we situated this study among a growing body of literature that examines representations of Muslims in multicultural children's literature. While we found a few studies specific to transnationalism and immigration in children's books (Brochin & Medina, 2017; Mendoza, 2019; Rodriguez & Braden, 2018; Scieurba et al., 2020), none of them focused on Muslim migrants.

Thus far, the scope of research conducted on Muslim-themed books has been limited to depictions of Muslims in young adult and children's literature (Panjwani, 2017; Raina, 2009; Torres, 2016); thematic analyses of Middle Eastern Muslim children's literature (Gultekin & May, 2020); Muslim-themed stories, text set reviews, and picture-book recommendations (Garcha & Russell, 2006; Manglik & Siddique, 2018; Newstreet et al., 2019; Siddiqui, 2016); and using nonfiction children's literature to learn about Islam (Phelps, 2010). The near nonexistence of studies in this area is a major issue, particularly in light of the aforementioned personal and national traumas Muslim immigrants continue to experience (Thrush, 2017). Given existing research, we aim to contribute to the scant studies addressing multicultural children's books on immigration and transnationalism, specifically focusing on Muslim characters.

### Geocriticism and Transnationalism

In this study, we employed geocriticism, a framework that foregrounds spatial representations, to understand how transnationalism is represented in Muslim child migrant characters. Developed based on pioneering works of critical

theorists such as Michel Foucault (1967; archaeologies and heterotologies), Henri Lefebvre (1976; the production of space), Edward Soja (1996; real-and-imagined spaces), and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987; geophilosophy), geocriticism provides a frame for looking at spaces in literature, including “those places that readers and writers experience by means of texts but also the experience of space and place within ourselves” (Tally, 2018, p. 49). This theory helps us to see how epochs of space (Foucault, 1967)—for example, movements of Muslim child migrants from a space or place of the past—are experienced in the present, at another space and place that may be similar yet different in some ways. As such, we are interested in migration to the United States.

A geocentered approach positioning place as core to the analysis is favored in geocriticism (Westphal, 2011). However, instead of examining the setting as a single subject by itself, taking a geocritical stance means going a step further by analyzing the spatial referent (examining how space is represented), what it does to the character, and how it informs readers about the character’s experience as a migrant. In *Saffron Ice Cream* (Kheiriyeh, 2018), for instance, the beach at Coney Island is seen by the protagonist child character, Rashin, as a social space for everyone, unlike the Caspian Sea in Iran, which mandates gender segregation. Initially, Rashin keeps comparing the beach regulations between the two, but after some time she grows accustomed to the new social space (i.e., the beach at Coney Island), which became part of her life. As Itzigsohn and Saucedo (2002) said, integration (in the form of sociocultural transnationalism) into the host country happens by agreeing and accepting the differences. To investigate what transnationalism does to the Muslim child characters in the books that we chose, we adopted a geocritical practice.

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#### GROUNDING OUR STUDY IN GEOCRITICAL PRACTICE

To pursue geocriticism or engage in geocritical practice, Westphal (2011) suggested keeping four elements in mind. First, adhere to the principle of multifocalization by considering different points of view to eliminate biases in interpreting spatial representations. In our study, this was done rigorously at various stages of the coding

processes, drawing from the perspectives each of us brings as Muslims coming from a secular system where religion is separated from state (e.g., Singapore and Turkey) or a nonsecular system (e.g., Yemen). Second, include polysensoriality—interpreting the space through multiple senses: vision, smell, sound, or, as Rodaway (1994) pointed out, “sensuous geographies.” For instance, by seeing the Caspian Sea described as a place that “looked endless, blue, and beautiful” (Kheiriyeh, 2018, p. 11), with “big, long curtains” (p. 13) separating men from women, we gain an understanding of what migration does to a fictional child character (e.g., noticing different lifestyles and cultures) and the impact on transnationalism. Third, maintain a stratigraphic vision where understanding the place means including the diversity that comes with it. We considered visuals in our analysis as they add another layer for understanding the picturebooks. While there is no singular way of analyzing visuals (Abas, 2019), we used Panofsky’s (1955) three strata of meanings, noticings—meanings—implications, where we articulated what we noticed about the visuals, the meanings they might encompass, and their implications in the context of the study, to guide our analysis of visuals.

Finally, in geocriticism it is important to make connections between fictional or real spaces. We approached this aspect by interacting with textual and visual data in the picturebooks using text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections.

#### SPATIOTEMPORALITY, TRANSGRESSIVITY, AND REFERENTIALITY

Although many literary works have employed geocritical practices (e.g., Luo, 2017; Tullós, 2020; Wilkie-Stibbs, 2014), each of them approached the method differently. In our geocritical practice to understand the complexities, challenges, and stereotypical views attached to Muslim migrants who moved to the United States, we followed Westphal’s (2011) approach and focused on three broad categories: spatiotemporality, transgressivity, and referentiality.

Spatiotemporality refers to the relations between space and time (Westphal, 2011). In defining spatiotemporality, Westphal directed his attention to the historical development of the concept of time and how the treatment of space changes with time. Hence, to examine spatiotemporality (or space and time), we traced the characters’ histories in terms of their country of origin, the reasons for migration, and the period in which migration to the United States took place and whether it coincided with contemporary events in the host country.

Since transnationalism is central to this study, the notion of transgression, which Westphal (2011) explained as “a process that accompanies movement and motive” (p. 46), is a significant component for understanding the

experiences of the Muslim migrant characters. Recognizing the works of Michael Foucault (1967), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), Henri Lefebvre (1976), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), among others, we viewed transgressivity based on how the new space is experienced as sites of struggles in relation to the new norms and what the new place has to offer (e.g., relations, food, etc.).

However, it is also through referentiality that we are able to get at the heart of the story. As Westphal (2011) pointed out, “the referentiality of fiction...allows it to point to a recognizable place, real or imaginary or a bit of both at once, while also transforming that place, making it part of a fictional world” (p. x). In this study, we approached the notion of referentiality by examining the identity of the authors, their relationship to the spaces, the reasons for creating the transgressive spaces, and the ways in which they represent Muslim migrants in the United States. This part of our geocritical practice helps us to understand how fictional spaces become part of the real world and vice versa. Rashin Kheiriyeh, for example, illustrated her real-life experiences of moving from Iran to the United States through a child character named after her in *Saffron Ice Cream* (Kheiriyeh, 2018). Table 1 provides a summary of the specific questions that we developed for analyzing the data geocritically.

Within the lens of geocriticism, we incorporated Bishop’s (1990) notion of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. Central to these conceptual metaphors are ideas of representation, cultural awareness, and perspectives about the real world (Möller, 2016). The selected children’s books serve as mirrors that allow Muslim

children to see themselves and their experiences of settling down in the United States through the child characters. These books act as windows to other children as they learn about Muslim cultures and religious practices and compare them with their own. They can be seen as sliding glass doors that enable children of all backgrounds to enter into the world of others. Drawing from our insider stance as Muslims and migrants in the United States, we used Bishop’s concepts to provide additional perspectives on the experiences of Muslim child migrants in Muslim-themed children’s books.

In the following section, we discuss the procedures for this study.

### Methodology

This study was a critical content analysis involving iterative rounds of close reading (Short, 2019) of picture-books with significant content about Muslim migrants to the United States. “What makes a study ‘critical’ is not the methodology, but the framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text” (Beach et al., 2009, p. 130). Our approach to critical content analysis was from the perspective of educators who are working with domestic and international students in the U.S. higher education context. We believe that including multicultural children’s literature in curricula can help students of all grade levels think critically about the world, specifically on the topic of immigration in this country. In many instances, the simplicity of the narratives creates opportunities for conversations centered on multiple areas of interest and issues of concern.

TABLE 1  
Guiding Questions for Analyzing the Texts Using a Geocriticism Lens

Spatiotemporality	Transgressivity	Referentiality
How space changes with time and vice versa for the character	How the new space is experienced by the character	How fictional spaces become part of the real world and vice versa
Where is the character’s country of origin, and when did he or she come to the United States?	What are the norms in the character’s new space, how does he or she feel about it, and how is he or she treated in this space?	Who is the author or illustrator, what is his or her connection to the Muslim community, and when and why did he or she write the text and/or create the illustrations?
Why did the character resettle in the United States?	How did the character integrate into the new space?	What is the author’s relationship to the topic, space, and themes in the book, and specifically, how are Muslim migrants represented?
What historical or contemporary events or situations would have influenced the creation of the book?	How might some readers find the book enriching or problematic?	What specific Muslim cultural or religious markers exist, who uses them, how are they used, and for what purpose?

### DATA SOURCES AND SAMPLING

To begin, we searched widely for picturebooks depicting Muslim immigrants by using the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education Cooperative Children’s Book Center (2021), a database of children’s literature that catalogs and evaluates diverse children’s books. We also referred to lists of books that had received the Middle East Book Award from the Middle East Outreach Council (n.d.), a nonprofit organization that aims to raise public awareness of the Middle East. We looked at Hijabi Librarians (n.d.), a website run by Muslims who review both children’s and adults’ literature. Manglik and Siddique’s (2018) *Muslims in Story* book was also a helpful resource in our search for Muslim children’s books.

To ensure that we considered all books that were relevant to the study, we did several Google searches using permutations of the following keywords: “Middle Eastern children’s books,” “immigration,” “migration,” and “Muslim immigrants/migrants.” The search yielded 38 titles that included refugees as immigrants. We chose to differentiate the two by referring to immigrants/migrants as people who come to live permanently in a foreign land and refugees as people who have been forced to leave their country to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster. Since we are interested in understanding the local context, we narrowed down the list to include four picturebooks that made explicit mention of Muslim immigrant/migrant characters moving to the United States. Overall, data for the study were drawn from picturebooks written and published in English-speaking countries, based on the following criteria:

- publication period between 2001 and 2020,
- identified as a picturebook for elementary-aged children,
- has a Muslim protagonist and/or significant Muslim-related content, and
- explicit mention of Muslim character(s) moving from their homeland to the United States.

In the following section, we provide synopses of the four books depicting significant Muslim content and immigration to the United States.

### SYNOPSIS OF PICTUREBOOKS DEPICTING SIGNIFICANT MUSLIM CONTENT AND IMMIGRATION

*Saffron Ice Cream* (2018), written and illustrated by Rashin Kheiriyeh, is about a young Iranian girl named Rashin living in Brooklyn, heading for the Coney Island beach with her family. On their way, she reminisces about similar outings in Iran. At the heart of the story is a juxtaposition of Rashin’s two beach experiences, one in Iran and one in the United States.

In *The Arabic Quilt* (2020), written by Aya Khalil and illustrated by Anait Semirdzhyan, an Egyptian girl named Kanzi tries to fit in to the dominant culture in the United States. With some help from her teacher, she realizes that the quilt given to her by her grandmother provides a pathway for acceptance into her new home.

*Lailah’s Lunchbox* (2015), written by Reem Faruqi and illustrated by Lea Lyon, centers on a young Muslim girl, Lailah, who is excited to fast for the first time during the month of Ramadan, but nervous about telling her classmates. After speaking to a librarian, she learns how to explain it to them.

Unlike these three books, *One Green Apple* (2006) is written by Eve Bunting, an Irish American author, and illustrated by Ted Lewin. In this story, a young Muslim immigrant girl struggles to adapt to her new life in the United States. We included this book as it articulates the character’s experiences of moving from one country to another. With these four books, we coded both the visuals and text on each of their pages. Below, we detail the processes involved in data coding and offer an analysis of one of the books, *Saffron Ice Cream* (Kheiriyeh, 2018), as an example.

### DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

We adopted an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1981) during our first reading of these books. As Short (2019) suggested, we “immerse[d] ourselves in the experience of the story” (p. 12) to understand the texts before analyzing them. While reading, we reflected on our personal experiences as immigrants trying to adjust to the geographies of space, place, and everyday life and posted them onto our story map page on Padlet. This process is key to geocritical practice and, as aforementioned, involves multifocalization, where we bring in different points of view on spatial representations. Although all of us are Muslims, each was exposed to different forms of socialization prior to being in the United States.

We did the second reading independently but together developed a set of guiding questions following the categories outlined by Westphal (2011): spatiotemporality, transgressivity, and referentiality. These questions provided us with a common language for examining the texts closely (see Table 1).

During the third reading, we responded to the questions in Table 1 and did open coding, allowing the data to emerge by themselves (Saldaña, 2016). We then utilized a constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to refine the codes that each of us had generated. This three-step process of open coding, axial coding, and selected coding was used to construct assertions and understand the relationships among the codes. We negotiated our codes and drew connections between the open codes, narrowing

the focus to a series of axial codes that related to the experiences of migrant child characters.

In reviewing our axial codes, we developed three categories: personal adjustment, social adjustment, and self-determination. Personal adjustment referred to the character's attempts at adapting herself to satisfy her own needs in the new space (e.g., new flavors in food). Social adjustment, however, addressed the character's attempts at adapting to other character(s) and the new space. Finally, we referred to self-determination as the actions that the character took to change the current situation or to solve existing problems. Table 2 provides a sample of the data coding for *Saffron Ice Cream* (Kheiriyeh, 2018) using the framework of geocriticism.

As mentioned, to maintain a stratigraphic vision in our geocritical practice, we examined the visuals on every page of the picturebooks. Using Panofsky's (1955) three strata of meanings, noticings—meanings—implications, we articulated what we noticed about the visuals, the meanings they might convey, and the implications in the context of the study.

## Findings

In this section, we present our findings, addressing the main themes that emerged. Generally, the books portrayed Muslim child immigrant characters as having to make adjustments in the new spaces. Through close analysis, we found that while the experiences are reflective of contemporary situations, not much of the current lived realities of minoritized Muslims is communicated. In the next section, we delve into the details of our findings, drawing from the three main themes: personal adjustments, social adjustments, and self-determination.

**RQ1:** How are Muslim child migrants in the United States represented in multicultural children's books?

Our analysis indicated that due to the norms in the new space (e.g., cultural differences, religious practices, language use), Muslim children initially face difficulties adapting to life in the United States but eventually learn to embrace being in the new space. The three themes that came across very clearly in the four books were personal adjustment, social adjustment, and self-determination. While personal adjustment affected the character(s) at the individual level, social adjustment involved adapting to other characters and integrating into the new space. Self-determination entered into the latter part of the narratives as the characters took agency and responsibility to solve a problem or change the current situation. Evidence supporting these conclusions is explained in the following sections.

## PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT: COMPARING LIFE WITH THAT IN THE HOME COUNTRY

The characters analyzed in this study experienced cultural differences as they moved to the United States. In *Saffron Ice Cream* (Kheiriyeh, 2018), the protagonist, Rashin, made vivid comparisons (using the five senses) between her family's trips to the beach in Iran and to an American beach in Brooklyn. The comparison centered on beach regulations and highlighting gender segregation at the Caspian Sea in Iran. Through the bold, slightly enlarged font size placed on the "The Islamic" beach guards (p. 19), it seems clear that the author was trying to distinguish the social norms practiced by Muslims that differ from those of the Western world. In another instance, Rashin grew excited at the sight of an ice-cream seller that was "just like back home" (p. 23). However, feelings of distress set in when she discovered the saffron flavor that she used to eat in Iran was not served at this beach: "I can't help it. I start to cry. I miss the Caspian Sea" (p. 28).

Farah, the Middle Eastern girl in *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006), experienced the difference in the social norms, too. Sitting next to a boy for the field trip made her feel awkward: "It was not like this in my village" (p. 5). In *Lailah's Lunchbox* (Faruqi, 2015), however, Lailah felt displaced after moving to the United States: "Abu Dhabi still felt like her home" (p. 6). While she was aware that her friends and teachers might not know that she was fasting, the character did not make any explicit comparison between life in Abu Dhabi and the United States. Likewise, Kanzi, the protagonist in *The Arabic Quilt* (Khalil, 2020), was aware of the cultural differences but did not make any comparisons, probably because she was raised in America and as such claims, "I am Egyptian-American" (p. 6).

## SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT: TRYING TO FIT IN TO THE DOMINANT CULTURE

As minoritized Muslims, the protagonists' refusals to acknowledge the practices and cultures that they grew up with indicated their attempts to fit into the dominant culture. For example, in *The Arabic Quilt* (Khalil, 2020), Kanzi "wishes her Baba would pack her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich" (p. 2) instead of the typical Egyptian snack, a kofta sandwich. In another instance, when Mama said "Bahebek" ("I love you" in Arabic; p. 3), Kanzi responded in the English language. She even reduced the volume of the radio playing Arabic songs when the car reached school.

These reactions clearly showed that the immigrant character recognized the importance of striking a congruence with mainstream culture. Much like Kanzi, Farah, in *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006), also started using the English language to "blend with the others" (p. 13). In order

TABLE 2  
Analyzing *Saffron Ice Cream* Using a Geocriticism Lens

<b>Spatiotemporality</b> How space changes with time and vice versa for the character	<b>Transgressivity</b> How the new space is experienced by the character	<b>Referentiality</b> How fictional spaces become part of the real world and vice versa
<p><b>Where is the character's country of origin, and when did he or she come to the United States?</b></p> <p>— Iran EVIDENCE: "I lived in Iran" (p. 5).</p> <p>— There is no specific mention of when Rashin came to the United States with her family in the book. [unspecified]</p>	<p><b>What are the norms in the character's new space, how does he or she feel about it, and how is he or she treated in this space?</b></p> <p><b>Norms in the new space</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People travel to the beach via subway train. [public transportation] → <b>SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT</b> EVIDENCE: "We used to drive to the Caspian Sea to swim" (p. 5). VISUAL: The family in Dad's old car heading to the beach in Shomal, Iran: "We are getting there by subway train, which is filled with all sorts of people" (p. 9). VISUAL: Coney Island (the place where the beach is located)</li> <li>2. Ice-cream seller does not serve saffron-flavored ice cream. [food—flavor] → <b>PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT</b> EVIDENCE: "No saffron. Would you like something else?" (p. 29). "I can't help it. I started to cry. I miss the Caspian Sea. I miss Azadeh. I miss everything" (p. 29). [missing home] [sad]</li> <li>3. Men and women are allowed to be together at the beach. [cultural differences] → <b>SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT</b> EVIDENCE: "My family spreads out blankets all together— men and women!" (p. 32). [no gender segregation]</li> </ol> <p><b>Feelings about the new space</b></p> <p>Missing home, food, friendship → <b>PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT</b> EVIDENCE: "But no Azadeh" (p. 9). [missing friendship] "An ice cream seller. Just like back home" (p. 24). [missing home]</p> <p><b>How the character was treated in the new space: welcomed</b> EVIDENCE: "But there, not so far, is the girl I met at the ice cream truck, and she waves at me" (p. 32). [welcomed] [friendship]—establishing</p>	<p><b>Who is the author or illustrator, what is his or her connection to the Muslim community, and when and why did he or she write the text and/or create the illustrations?</b></p> <p>—Author: Rashin Kheiriyeh —Illustrator: Rashin Kheiriyeh —Published in 2018 —Author Rashin wanted to tell her immigration story to children. —Iranian Muslim [#ownvoices]</p>
<p><b>Why did the character resettle in the United States?</b></p> <p>— There is no specific mention about the reason for moving to the United States. [unspecified]</p>	<p><b>How did the character integrate into the new space?</b></p> <p>Made adjustments—food, friendship EVIDENCE: "Turns out chocolate crunch is a pretty good flavor too" (p. 31). "My name is Rashin. What is yours?" (p. 34). [friendship]—establishing → <b>SELF-DETERMINATION</b></p>	<p><b>What is the author's relationship to the topic, space, and themes in the book, and specifically, how are Muslim migrants represented?</b></p> <p>— The author is an immigrant herself. She had moved from Khorramshahr, a border city next to the Persian Gulf in the southern part of Iran, to the northern part of Iran by the Caspian Sea, and then to New York to seek refuge from the war in southern Iran. [immigrant]</p>
<p><b>What historical or contemporary events or situations would have influenced the creation of the book?</b></p> <p>— [unspecified]</p> <p>— Through current affairs, we know that the political climate motivated the production of Muslim-themed books.</p>	<p><b>How might some readers find the book enriching or problematic?</b></p> <p><b>PLUS:</b> This book is a lighthearted read that compares a Muslim migrant child's experience of being at a beach in Iran and a beach in America. [comparison—between beach in Iran and America]</p> <p><b>MINUS:</b> Non-Muslim readers may not be able to make connections between the segregated beach and Islam. The episode may require unpacking for children unfamiliar with the practice.</p>	<p><b>What is the author's relationship to the topic, space, and themes in the book, and specifically, how are Muslim migrants represented?</b></p> <p>— Segregated beach [religious] — Islamic beach guards — Hijab [religious] — saffron-flavored ice cream [cultural]</p> <p><b>VISUAL EVIDENCE</b></p> <p>— Women clad in black abayas [religious] [cultural] — Mum and Dad changed their Muslim clothing to fit the new space: Dad wore knee-length pants and Mum wore a green abaya above the ankle.</p>

not to be different, “Lailah followed her classmates to the cafeteria” (Faruqi, 2015, p. 15), despite observing fasting in the month of Ramadan. The character Rashin in *Saffron Ice Cream* naturally embraced the fact that her family, both men and women, sat together at the Brooklyn beach. Her mother even modified how she dressed in this new space by putting on a hat (typical of Americans) instead of a hijab or headscarf (worn by practicing Muslims in Iran). Transnationalism, as evidenced here, caused the immigrant characters to adapt to the dominant culture. In all, a commonly occurring plot among the immigrant characters is that each of them struggled to be accepted but given time, integrated themselves into the new space.

#### SELF-DETERMINATION: TAKING AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Muslim characters in the four books were found to be taking agency and responsibility to overcome the obstacles they encountered in the United States. In *Lailah's Lunchbox* (Faruqi, 2015), Lailah's decision to declare her identity, faith, and religious practice of abstaining from food and drinks during Ramadan were indicative of

self-determination; she is determined to educate the people around her as to why she was not eating at the cafeteria. As such, the note to her teacher, Mrs. Pensworth, that ended with “P.S. I am a Muslim” (p. 22) was meant to highlight her identity and hence, the reason for observing fasting during the month of Ramadan.

The character of Farah in *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006) was determined to be different by picking a green apple instead of a red one chosen by her classmates. The courage to be a part of the class community grew when she stepped forward to assist with making apple cider. As she said, “I am strong. I can help” (p. 10). By pushing the handle of the machine along with the others, she is reducing the load of the arduous task, thus solving the problem.

Meanwhile, as an Iranian Muslim immigrant child who used to be with her best friend, Azadeh, Rashin in *Saffron Ice Cream* (Kheiriyeh, 2018) decided to establish a new friendship. She introduced herself to another little girl she met on the Brooklyn beach, and her proactive behavior made her feel less alienated than before, thus changing how she thought and felt about the new space. Unlike the other books, in *The Arabic Quilt* (Khalil, 2020), both

TABLE 3  
Summary of Findings Across the Four Picturebooks

Themes	<i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> Written by Faruqi Illustrated by Lyon (2015)	<i>Saffron Ice Cream</i> Written and illustrated by Kheiriyeh (2018)	<i>The Arabic Quilt</i> Written by Khalil Illustrated by Semirdzhyan (2020)	<i>One Green Apple</i> Written by Bunting Illustrated by Lewin (2006)
<b>Personal adjustment</b> The character attempts to adapt herself to the new space.	Lailah felt displaced despite having moved to the United States.  “Abu Dhabi still felt like her home” (p. 6).	The ice-cream seller does not serve saffron-flavored ice cream.  “No saffron. Would you like something else?”; “I can't help it. I started to cry” (p. 29).	Kanzi did not explicitly describe adapting to school; she identified herself as Egyptian American.  “I am Egyptian-American” (p. 6).	Farah recognized that she is different.  “I am different too.... [M]y dupatta covers my head and shoulders. I have not seen anyone else wearing a dupatta” (p. 6).
<b>Social adjustment</b> The character attempts to adapt to other characters and the new space.	Lailah felt uncomfortable about telling her friends that she is fasting.  “Lailah followed her classmates to the cafeteria” (p. 15).	Men and women can be together at the Brooklyn beach.  “And my family spreads out blankets together—men and women!” (p. 32).	Kanzi avoided the Egyptian snack as a refusal to acknowledge her own culture. She did not want to be different.  “...wishes her Baba would pack her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich” (p. 2).	Boys and girls may sit next to each other.  “I think it odd to have boys and girls sit together. It was not like this in my village” (p. 2).
<b>Self-determination</b> The character takes actions to change the current situation or to solve existing problems.	Lailah wrote a poem to educate her friends and teacher about Ramadan.  “It's Ramadan.... I won't be eating lunch for a month. P.S. I am a Muslim” (p. 22).	Rashin decided to establish a new friendship. She introduced herself to a friend she met on the Brooklyn beach.  “Then I walk up to the girl and practice what I've learned. ‘Hi’, I say. ‘My name is Rashin. What is yours?’” (p. 35).	Kanzi and her mother introduced the Arabic language and culture to the class.  “Kanzi's mom is here to help us make a quilt of all your names in Arabic” (p. 16).	Farah helps her classmates as they are making apple cider.  “I am strong. I can help. I take a step toward them” (p. 21).  “We push and push. It is hard, but we are working together, and we can do it” (p. 23).

Mama and daughter Kanzi exercised agency in introducing the Arabic language and culture to the class. A significant characteristic portrayed by all of these Muslim migrants was that they developed the strength and courage to change conflicting situations as they grew accustomed to their surroundings and the people around them. Table 3 summarizes these findings.

As explained in the following section, we took a geocritical stance to examine the extent to which transnationalism involving the fictional spaces experienced by Rashin, Lailah, Kanzi, and Farah accurately represented real spaces, based on our own experiences as U.S. immigrants.

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**In the United States, little is known about Muslims and their faith. Even though the U.S. education system embraces diversity in its mission statements and visionary goals, teachers have minimal or zero knowledge about the cultures and religious practices of Muslims. Thus, students feel the need to self-advocate and educate their teachers and friends.**

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**RQ2:** In what ways are their experiences reflective of the contemporary U.S. context?

To respond to the second research question, we drew on Bishop's notion of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. In general, the experiences of the Muslim migrant characters were reflective of current situations in the United States and transnationally in Western countries where white supremacy reigns. The child characters felt displaced because of their Muslim identity and cultural and daily practices that conflicted with the new space.

Very often, Muslim adherents are viewed as monolithic, categorized as "others" (Taras, 2013), and ignored in the mainstream. The voice that Bunting's (2006) *One Green Apple* gave to Farah depicted the social stigma placed on migrants as people who are less versed in the English language: "I understand. It's not that I am stupid" (p. 12). Mirroring the lived realities, racial biases existed among children, too. Farah's experience was not an unusual one: "Some look at me coldly and smile cruel smiles" (p. 6). As Muslims, we had that same experience in which some Americans distanced themselves from us. On a hiking trip, Suriati was praised by an American for "speaking good English," not knowing that

she grew up in an Asian country where English is the first language and the language of commerce.

Children tend to make fun of others who look and sound different, as when Kanzi in *The Arabic Quilt* (Khalil, 2020) was renamed "The Hobbit" by her classmates when they heard Mama calling her "Habibti." While we often perceive children as "racially innocent" and devoid of racist inclinations or behaviors, scholarly investigations have proved otherwise (Escayg, 2019). Gultekin and May (2020) asserted that schools play a role in challenging biases to cultivate safe spaces for Muslims.

In the United States, little is known about Muslims and their faith. Even though the U.S. education system embraces diversity in its mission statements and visionary goals (Hossain, 2013), teachers have minimal or zero knowledge about the cultures and religious practices of Muslims. Thus, students feel the need to self-advocate and educate their teachers and friends (Callaway, 2010). As evident in *Lailah's Lunchbox* (Faruqi, 2015), "Laila told Mrs. Carman [the librarian] that Mrs. Pensworth and her classmates didn't know she was fasting" (p. 17). The experience of this child character mirrors all of us during Ramadan. In the spirit of sharing about our faith, we casually tell our colleagues and friends who may not be familiar with the monthlong observance about fasting, nightly Taraweeh prayers, reflections, and community bonding when they offer us food or ask us out for lunch.

In sum, the books described above challenge stereotypical representations of Muslim migrants by giving the character(s) a sense of agency to navigate the complexities in a space with cultural differences and a place where social norms differ from those where they used to live. In the next section, we will discuss the implications.

### Discussions and Implications

As a book written by an outsider author, *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2016) provides us with alternative views on how Muslim immigrant child characters were represented. Unlike in the three books written from the experiences of Muslim immigrant authors, the spatial representation of transnationalism and the protagonist's identity were vaguely described. Using Panofsky's (1955) three strata of meanings as a guide to visual analysis, we recognized Farah as a Muslim because she was adorned with a shawl-like scarf. We gathered that she could be from India or its subcontinents when she said, "But my dupatta covers my head and shoulders" (Bunting, 2016, p. 7) because the word "dupatta" is used for part of the traditional clothing worn across the Indian subcontinent. However, Farah comes from an unknown Middle East country, as the author puts it. In the United States, Muslims refer to their head covering as "hijab," an Arabic

word generically used to name the headscarf worn by Muslim women that conforms to Islamic standards of modesty. Non-Muslim educators may not be able to distinguish these terms and hence, they would use similar words with their students. Although the Irish American author Eve Bunting, who immigrated to the United States as an adult, highlighted the similarities and differences across spaces through the voice of a child, there seemed to be an oversimplification of the process of assimilation into the United States (Motawy, 2011; Muzzilo & Anati, 2008). Bunting placed Farah into a new space where the crunching noise of the dogs eating the fallen apples, the tickle of hay with its smell of dry sunshine, the loud belch, and laughs and sneezes are described as similar to those at home. Literary critics (Motawy, 2011; Muzzilo and Anati, 2008) would have viewed Farah's integration into the U.S. system as unidirectional in that she blended with her friends by adopting their language (i.e., English) and dressed like them in jeans and T-shirt, but not vice versa. During the book-selection phase, we were unaware of the critique around Eve Bunting's *One Green Apple*. As aforementioned, we have limited choices in that we were seeking a book that made explicit the experience of character(s) who had moved from one country to another.

In the books written by Muslim immigrant authors, the plots were well developed and detailed. Through *Saffron Ice Cream*, Iranian-born author and illustrator Rashin Kheiriyeh told her childhood memories of being in Iran and witnessing a different social space in the United States. Egyptian author Aya Khalil, however, shared her memory as a third-grade student trying to fit in to the dominant American culture via the child character Kanzi in *The Arabic Quilt*. Reem Faruqi likewise spoke from her childhood experiences of moving from Abu Dhabi to the United States in *Lailah's Lunchbox*.

### Concluding Thoughts

By adopting a geocritical stance, we learned that in transnationalism, spatiotemporality (or space and time) contributes to personal adjustments, social adjustments, and self-determination. In the four Muslim-themed picture-books, the migrant child characters entered into a new space feeling displaced, often comparing current life with the spaces where they used to be. During the process of integrating into a different space, there is transgressivity or struggles in their attempts to adapt to a new place. However, given time, the new space creates opportunities for friendship, cultural understanding, language learning, and agency. Although the transgressive spaces are fictional,

the stories are told from the real-life experiences of migrant authors. Since Muslim migrants are the fastest-growing immigrant population in the United States (Mohamed, 2018) and U.S. classrooms are becoming racially diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), we recommend reading books written by other Muslim authors who write about their own experiences or from their own perspectives. To introduce children to some of the Muslim observances and practices, educators might want to consider books such as *Under My Hijab* (2019) by Hena Khan, *Mommy's Khimar* (2018) by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, *Amira's Picture Day* (2021) by Reem Faruqi, *Big Red Lollipop* (2010) by Rukhsana Khan, *The Best Eid Ever* (2007) by Asma Mobin-Uddin, and *Hannah and the Ramadan Gift* (2021) by Qasim Rashid. We also suggest evaluating newer books to determine the suitability of the content as some unpolished picturebooks have the potential to promote biases and discrimination through inaccurate representations (Gultekin & May, 2020). In all, multicultural children's literature should be incorporated into literacy curricula to broaden students' understanding of minoritized Muslims and address the injustice of privilege. ■

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