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Ms. Marvel: Changing Muslim Representation in the Comic World

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Abstract

Examines the representation of Muslim women in the comic book world, and how Kamala Khan (the titular Ms. Marvel) along with some other characters usher in a new wave of how Muslim women are depicted in comics.

Keywords

Women, Islam, Representation, comics, Marvel

Disciplines

American Popular Culture | American Studies | Anthropology | Gender and Sexuality | Islamic Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Sociology | Sociology of Religion

Comments

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Ms. Marvel: Changing Muslim Representation in the Comic World

by Casey Trattner

Kamala Khan's first appearance was in Captain Marvel issue 14: *The Enemy Within Part Five*. She was portrayed with dark skin and gold earrings, watching Captain Marvel in awe as Captain Marvel ordered her and some others to head for the basement before she headed off to battle a Kree commander with the rest of the Avengers. Readers did not even learn her name - and she was just seen as another unnamed, voiceless one-time person of color placed to represent some diversity in the comic world. But everyone was wrong: just a couple of issues later, in #17, a couple of plans showed that this nameless, brown-skinned girl would become the new Ms. Marvel, a title adopted from Captain Marvel herself.

When this news broke out that a role previously carried out by a blonde "all-American" girl would now be a sixteen-year-old Pakistani-American Muslim girl, the comic book world exploded. (Kent 2015, 4) The announcement followed through with Marvel's recent surge in female-fronted books, such as Thor and She-Hulk. But not only does Kamala Khan indicate the demand, and response, for powerful female representations in mainstream comics; she also implies the demand for accurate and real characteristics of minority groups. Kamala is Muslim, and, although her religion is a huge part of her identity, it is not all that defines her. She is not how most Muslims are seen: one-dimensional terrorist, thief, or villain; nor is she the stereotypical Muslim woman who is beaten by her religion and men. No: Kamala Khan goes to school, hates gym, likes to write fan fiction, and has crushes just like any other sixteen-year-old girl. She is a girl who happens to be Muslim: a multi-dimensional character that has strengths and weaknesses and suddenly gains an ability and chooses to do good. She is a *superhero*, and,

along with the characterization of other Muslim women like her best friend Nakia, a hero who ushers in a new wave of how Muslim women are depicted in the comic world.

To tell Kamala Khan's heroic story, it is best to start at the beginning: before she became Ms. Marvel. Right from the start Kamala references her faith to the readers. She is in a little food mart in her hometown of Jersey City that is run by her friend Bruno, and Kamala smells the BLTs in a display. (Wilson and Wyatt 2013, 1) She mentions that she just wants to smell the BLT, and, when Bruno teases that he is going to start charging her for smells, she replies, "Delicious, Delicious infidel meat..." (Wilson and Wyatt 2013, 1) What Kamala is referring to is the usual Muslim restriction on eating pork, and calling it "infidel" meat. "Infidel" is used instead of the term "forbidden" in this context because, although the pork is forbidden, it is a meat that "unbelievers" eat. Within two sentences of Kamala's story, it is already shown that Kamala routinely struggles to balance Western attitudes and culture against her own Pakistani Muslim culture and ideals. Kamala is torn between her multiple identities of being an American, Pakistani, and Muslim. She wants to eat this meat that looks and smells so good, but she cannot because of her religion, and she tempts herself by getting close enough to smell it. This implication is highly evident in later plotlines, when she struggles with her newly found abilities, her image, and her faith.

Not long after Kamala smells the bacon, she, her friend Nakia, and Bruno are visited by two teens from their school. The girl, Zoe, is rude, walking in like she owns the place and ordering Bruno to get her "usual". The boy seems a bit nicer, and he even invites Kamala and Nakia to a party that night, although he asks if they are "*allowed* to do that kind of stuff." (Wilson and Wyatt 2013, 2) When the girls reply that they are actually not allowed, Zoe uses this moment to ask a pretty personal, rude, and misinformed question towards Nakia. "I'm just

concerned,” Zoe explains herself and her assumption that someone pressured Nakia into wearing the hijab, or headscarf. Her apparent lack of knowledge (and manners) reflects many of Western views on the hijab and on Muslim women today. Zoe’s comments are demonstrated as annoying and stupid, as evidenced by Nakia and Kamala’s facial expressions. This ignorant attitude Zoe displays is specific towards their religion and culture, and the Western belief that Muslim women are forced to wear the hijab, instead of choosing to wear it themselves. Nakia quickly retorts back to Zoe, eliminating her suggestion, and by extension the reader’s (if they had agreed with Zoe), that covering is to mark her openly as the property of a man. (Brown, 2011, 15)

Nakia says that, actually, her father wants her to take off her headscarf and that he thinks it is a phase. (Wilson and Wyatt 2013, 2) This shows the reader that, not only does she choose to wear the headscarf, but also she is actually *defying* her father, who wishes her not to wear it. She is not a subservient Muslim woman who will not stand up for herself, as most Western viewers might think. This depiction fights off the stereotypes that usually are depicted in media forms today. (Morey and Yaqin 2016) Zoe is not being rude on purpose, and her response to Nakia’s comment reflects her willingness to learn more about Nakia’s culture: “Wow, cultures are so **interesting**.” However, it can also be seen as degrading because of the choice of bolding the word “interesting.” This gives the sense that Zoe still believes that Nakia and Kamala are separate from her and that she is above them.

The Western assumption that Muslim women are enslaved by their culture and religion does not account for how Muslim women are often enchained by Western ideals and attitudes, too. In the comic *Cinderella: From Fabletown with Love*, secret agent Cinderella trails the flow of dangerous magical things that are being leaked from the Middle Eastern fable world to the mundane Middle Eastern world. (Phillips and Strobl, 2013, 16) Interestingly enough, this comic

uses the role of *women* as a symbol of the differences between the fable world of the Middle East and the real world of the West. Cinderella and Aladdin, her partner, travel in the Middle Eastern fable world and find three harem sisters who are bootlegging weapons in order to gain enough money so they would “never have to be slaves in Sinbad’s court again”. (Phillips and Strobl, 2013, 16) They explain to the partners that the freedom that they obtained in the ‘real’ Western world was a lie, and that, although there are no guards or walls to keep them prisoner, there are still chains to bind them. (Phillips and Strobl, 2013, 16) Pakistan is not a part of the Middle East or the Arab world, but the Middle East has become associated with the Islamic religion, and many assumptions regarding Muslims are that they are of Middle Eastern descent. Even so, the declaration of the three sisters can be seen in *Ms. Marvel* as well. Kamala lives freely in the Western world, but she faces many challenges concerning her Western peers and stereotypes against her culture. The chains that bind Kamala are the many assumptions of who she is because of her religious identity, and she fights to break these chains for a while.

Kamala eventually decides to sneak out of her room and go to the party she was invited to in an attempt to try and fit in with her peers. After a few minutes of feeling different and judged by her peers, Kamala leaves the party and begins to walk home, when a mist begins swirl around her. (Wilson and Wyatt 2013) This is when Kamala gains her superpower. To understand what this mist is, a little background information from the Marvel Universe is required. In the Marvel Universe, there are many alien worlds that exist (Thor being one of them). An important alien race is the Kree, which was briefly mentioned earlier with Captain Marvel and the Avengers. Thousands of years before modern times, the Kree experimented on humans, and created a subspecies of humans who have extraordinary abilities, called Inhumans. DNA passes on the Inhuman gene, and they still exist in the 21st century. However, Inhumans can live their

whole lives without knowing or having their ability; they only are able to obtain extraordinary abilities if they come to contact with the mist of a Terrigen crystal. The mist unlocks their dormant genes and they go through Terrigenesis, emerging with their abilities. Kamala is an Inhuman. The mist is the aforementioned Terrigen mist. During a fight between Marvel characters in another storyline, a Terrigen mist bomb had been unleashed upon Earth's atmosphere. Kamala begins to feel the effects of the mist, and she has a hallucination.

The spiritual otherness in *Ms. Marvel*, however, is nothing about danger, as in other comic renditions of Muslim spiritualness, and has everything to do with Kamala's inner thoughts and seeing what she *needs* to see. Kamala receives advice and wisdom from her idols - Captain America, Iron Man, and Captain Marvel - and she even wonders about how they can speak Urdu. Captain Marvel replies that they "are Faith. We speak all languages of beauty and hardship." (Wilson, Wyatt 2013) After Iron Man tells Kamala that she stands at a crossroads, Captain America makes her think about the hard truth. He asks Kamala what happened when she thought if she disobeyed her parents, culture and religion her classmates would accept her. Kamala responds that her classmates then thought it was okay to make fun of her family.

Kamala, like so many other Muslim women, is affected by Western attitudes and beliefs that deem them different and part of a marginalized group. All Kamala wants is to be seen not for the color of her skin or judged for her religion but to be accepted by others. This only makes her more relatable, because who has not wished to fit in, or tried to be someone else? The most authoritative characters (such as Superman or Captain America) in their respective universes must appeal to something beyond the immediate cultural context. (Curtis, 2016, 4) Kamala is Muslim, but that is not the aspect that defines her.

After her hallucination ends, Kamala goes through Terragenesis and emerges with her ability. She is a polymorph, or someone with the power to change her form. Inhumans always have trouble controlling their ability at first, but its no coincidence that Kamala emerges looking like *a blonde woman*. She is blonde and blue-eyed and wearing a skimpy outfit and a sash tied around her waist, looking nothing like herself. (Wilson and Wyatt 2013) She is stumbling and changing from her actual appearance into this “All-American” version when she wonders the following: if she looks strong and confident and beautiful, then why does she not *feel* it? (Wilson and Wyatt 2013) This represents her inner conflict about changing herself to fit in and be happy and possibly having to compromise her identity as a Pakistan-American Muslim in order to do so.

She makes her way back to the party, located on a river dock, when she notices Zoe fall off the dock and into the water. Kamala realizes that not only is Zoe drunk, but her boyfriend is, too, and if he jumps in they will both drown. This is an incredible scene. Not only is this the part of a hero’s journey where she answers the call, but her call to action is *The Quran*. She recalls her father’s quoting of a Quranic text anytime he saw a fire or other terrible tragedy on TV: “Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind, and whoever saves one person, it is as if he has saved all of mankind.” Kamala, who has just been trying to push her religion and identity away, now reflects on a core aspect of her beliefs in order to fling into action. She even continues on after she reveals how it made her feel better as a child, saying that her father believes that the people who rush in to help are blessed. Then she reaches out for Zoe.

In a pre-9/11 analysis of Arabs in comic books, 215 comic books published from 1950 through 1994 were analyzed. It was found that when Muslims, specifically Arabs, were primary characters, they were most often portrayed as villains. (Phillips and Strobl, 2013, 16) Yet in Ms.

Marvel, the titular hero is a young Muslim girl who uses her religious beliefs as a basis of her first heroic deed.

Later on, a villain named the Inventor kidnaps Bruno's brother, and Kamala sets out to rescue him. But first she must make a costume. After a few modifications, including the lighting bolt (a symbol of Captain Marvel), Kamala is ready to save lives. Her costume is a burkini, Muslim approved swimwear for women. Kamala's use of her burkini not only, again, symbolizes her identity as a Muslim woman, but also contrasts with many other female heroes. Think back to what Kamala first morphed into when she emerged from Terragenesis: the slim-fitting outfit, the sash around her waist. Visually, superhero comics are about perfect bodies. The costumes and the action are designed to show off rippling muscles and big breasts. Whereas the male characters are presented as ideals of identification for the mostly male readership, the women are displayed as sex objects, albeit ones that can deflect bullets and throw cars around. (Brown, 2011, 7) The burkini is an example of Kamala not only wearing her religious identity proudly as she goes into battle but also venturing away from the classic way female superheroes, Muslim or not, are portrayed in comics.

Kamala is the first Muslim superhero in the Marvel universe to headline her own series, but she is not the first Muslim superhero. In 2002, Marvel created the teen heroine named Sooraya Qadir with the superhero name of Dust. Her name itself reflects the image of usual Western beliefs about the Middle East, with deserts and sand swirling about; and, unsurprisingly, Sooraya's superpower is turning her body into sand, able to fit through small spaces or hurt enemies by the force of a sandstorm. (Brown, 2011, 15) And yet Sooraya is a Sunni Muslim from Afghanistan, once again displaying the usual Western ignorance that all Muslims are linked with the Middle East. It is also worth noting the date of Sooraya's arrival into the comic world,

2002, only a year after the attacks on the Twin Towers. This is when Islamophobia really began to rear its ugly head, and it is clearly evidenced in Sooraya's costume and story, although it is also clear that her creation was well intentioned to represent cultural and religious differences. As Kamala wears her Muslim identity on her sleeve, Sooraya does, too, but she wears a "traditional burqua." (Brown, 2011, 15) The term is in quotes because the comics refer to her costume as a "burqua," but in fact both critics and fans indicate that she really wears a niqab, which again demonstrates the lack of knowledge behind this character. (Brown, 2011, 7)

Although Sooraya's niqab negates the stereotypical dress of female superheroes, she is often drawn with her robe wrapped skintight around her, showing the readers the figure of her body. (Brown, 2011, 15) This is clearly Orientalism, with Sooraya being veiled but also eroticized, and it is noted by many scholars that women in Orientalist films and photographs are often displayed with bare skin as if to show that they still sexy and beautiful underneath their veils. (Brown, 2011, 15) In fact, sometimes Sooraya is portrayed in private moments wearing just her underwear and without her niqab, as if to show the reader that, without her conservatism and religious identity, she is still sexy. (Brown, 2011, 15) Sooraya tells her mother that, although she does not wear her niqab for the Taliban, she wears it because she likes the humility and to protect herself "from the eyes of men." (Brown, 2011, 15)

Sooraya's history is rooted in other Western beliefs about Muslim women. She is an ex-slave, and when traders enslaved her she had to be rescued by Wolverine, a famous X-men superhero. This also refers to the idea of the 'white savior' and that Sooraya was helpless until a strong, white male superhero came to save her from ruthless villains. Kamala also encounters Wolverine later on in her story, and in fact rescues *him* from a giant mutant crocodile. (Wilson and Wyatt 2013) She even carries him on her back when he is injured!

The differences between Kamala and Nakia with Sooraya are vast. Sooraya's and Kamala's costumes are both symbolic of their religious beliefs, but Sooraya's displays the typical Orientalism and sexist fashion of showing her figure and displaying her sexiness underneath her costume, whereas Kamala's does not. Sooraya's superhero name ties back to the association between the Middle East and Islamic religion, and it is really the most defining thing about her. Kamala, however, is Ms. Marvel and takes a name that was not originally hers but in fact a blonde "All-American" woman's and modifies it to fit her identity enough to balance between her American and Pakistani-Muslim characteristics. When asked by her mother why she wears the veil, Sooraya replies with that she likes the modesty it affords and the protection it gives from men. Although they have both decided to wear the veil by their own choice, Sooraya's reasoning is greatly dissimilar to Nakia's cause. Nakia was mentioned earlier when, prompted by Zoe, she replied that it was her own choice to wear the veil. She does not do it for *anyone* but herself, especially not for men or to protect herself from their eyes. In fact, her father wants her to take it off, but Nakia stands strong in her choice of wearing the hijab.

Only eleven years span between Sooraya's debut and Kamala's, but the differences in their portrayal as Muslim women are eons apart. Sooraya, and many other Muslim characters, men and women, were shown in comics with their religion as their main identity - and either as helpless or villains. Kamala Khan, armed with her powers, friends, and family, ignores these stereotypes put upon her by Western attitudes. She has a personality just as you would expect of a superhero and a teen - strong, courageous, smart, and unsure of herself sometimes and the desire to fit in. Yet, with all these characteristics, Kamala also displays her identity as a Pakistani-Muslim proudly, once she realizes that there is nobody she would rather be but herself. *Ms. Marvel* inspires its readers with this superheroine and takes a huge step in the right direction

for better portrayals of women and Muslim characters alike.

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