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MS. MARVEL AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE STRUGGLE FOR AMERICAN IDENTITY

Ashika Prajnya Paramita

ashparamita@gmail.com

Abstract

In early 2014, Marvel Comics released a new series called *Ms. Marvel*. The main character of this series is a Pakistani-American Muslim girl named Kamala Khan. Her story is a breakthrough against the negative representation of Islam in the Western world, especially after 9/11. This research examines five issues taken from the first volume of the *Ms. Marvel* comic book series. The paper discusses the reason why this series is substantial in the struggle of Muslim immigrants to survive as a minority group in the United States. The results show that Ms. Marvel serves as a medium of communication for the under-represented American Muslim community. Furthermore, by accepting the new superhero, the American society itself has also transformed and it is beginning to adapt to the idea that Muslim immigrants are members of their society.

Keywords: Muslim, superhero, comic book, identity, popular culture

Introduction

Muslims have a long history in the United States of America, dating from the transatlantic slave trade long before the country was established. During hundreds of years of interaction, the relationship between the United States and Islam and American Muslim's identity has experienced many transformations. This relationship is mainly influenced by "the impact of slavery, the emergence of unusual forms of Islam in America, the power of traditional Islam, and the ideological pressures created the world events" (Beverley, 2003, p. 40). These factors also help in shaping Western ideas of Muslims. The fact that Islam was practiced on the continent by African slaves long before the country was founded establishes that Islam is, in fact, not a foreign religion for the United States. Still, that Islam was initially practiced by African slaves could be a major contributing factor in assumption that Islam is a backward religion as well as the failure of Islam to establish itself in the United States throughout the many years it has silently existed there.

For modern Muslim Americans, the most significant historical parameter is perhaps the bombing tragedy of the World Trade Center, a symbol of American superiority, on

September 11, 2001 by Islamic extremists. The act of terrorism did not only attack American soil, but also the American Muslim community. Post-9/11, there has been a rising negative sentiment in the United States about Islam in general. The attack "catapulted Muslims into the American spotlight" and as a result, "concerns and fears over their presence and assimilation remain at an all-time high" (Read, 2008, p. 39). After the tragedy Islam was dubbed the fuel of the 'war on terror' and the term 'Islamophobia' was coined. The word 'Muslim' has certain bad reputations and connotations attached to it. The lives of the Muslims inside and outside the United States changed overnight, and the nation established a new stance in its relations with Muslim countries under Bush's administration.

For the unenlightened Americans, Muslims are aliens. These Americans assume that for Muslims, the religion of Islam is the sole doctrine by which they conduct their lives, and that it restricts them from committing to a secular democracy. Regardless of the fact that Muslims in America are ordinary Americans, and Islam is only part of their identity as Americans, the word 'Islam' itself is often associated with the Middle East and terrorism, among others. American Muslims must, nevertheless, endure stereotypes and images rooted in ignorance and prejudice. Since then, Muslim Americans have not only been treated as 'the Other' but also as 'the enemy', and the situation between the non-Muslims and Muslims in American turned into 'us' versus 'them'. Inevitably, products of popular culture became an effective means by which animosity against, and distorted images of Muslims were spread. (Read, 2008, pp. 39-40; Rashid, 2000, pp. 75-77; Sirin & Fine, 2008, pp. 11-12)

As Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause (1992) state in their book *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, the "producers of popular culture will go to great lengths to mold their products to reflect the audience beliefs and values" (p. 3). In other words, popular culture is reflective in nature. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the popular culture of the United States after 9/11 captured the popular public image of Muslims as often accompanied by suspicion, hatred, and marked with "toxic social representations" (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 11). Reflecting these popular beliefs and values, most popular culture products after 9/11 demonize Muslim Americans and construct a false identity of them.

Muslims appear in the products of American popular culture bearing traits that come from stereotypes that picture them as violent, obsolete, backward or as enemies. The movie *Iron Man* (2008), for instance, displays the bigoted stereotype that Muslims are bomb-carrying terrorists who are so violent that they kill each other. The movie even opens with a band of Muslim terrorist killing a group of young American soldiers. Once Muslims were ignored and invisible, now the spotlight is on them, but not from a good angle. Furthermore, globalization, that eliminates the borders between nations to exchange information and commodities, helps spread these images and stereotypes beyond America. Being part of the popular culture in America, the comic book industry and its superheroes were affected by the repercussion of 9/11 on the nation's sentiment about Islam. However, comic book publishers responded to this phenomenon from a completely different angle by tackling issues regarding the chaos in the Islamic world and creating minor Muslim characters and inserting them into their existing series publications.

After the attack on September 11th, 2001, amongst the ensuing hostility against Muslim Americans, Marvel Comics, one of the most prominent comic book publishers in the United States, introduced several Muslim characters, most of which are female. Just one year after 9/11, Marvel introduced Dust, a member of the X-Men, who donned a *niqab* with only her eyes showing. Another Muslim member of the X-Men is Monet Yvette Clarisse Maria Therese St. Croix. Marvel also created the character Faiza Hussain, a British Muslim of Afghanistan descent, who works as a medical doctor and goes by the codename Excalibur. These female Muslim superheroes, however, have never been given major significance like their non-Muslim counterparts. The latest of these Muslim superheroes is Ms. Marvel, whose alter ego is a Muslim Pakistani-American 16-year-old female named Kamala Khan. Emerging as the first solo female Muslim superhero headlining her own series, Ms. Marvel was a breakthrough in her own right, especially when her appearance is seen in the context of the sundry stereotypes about Islam, its association with terrorism, and the assumption that Islam treats women as dainty, weak creatures second to men.

The appearance of Ms. Marvel as a leading character in her own series in the comic book industry has marked a new stage in the history of American superheroes. She emerged and broke the stereotypes that have long been

associated with superheroes and Muslim Americans. A member of the Muslim diaspora in the United States, the character presents a new face of the Muslim Americans that are often seen in negative views overshadowed with misperception, prejudice and ignorance.

This paper seeks to reveal the reason why this series is substantial in the struggle of Muslim immigrants to survive as a minority group in the United States. Exploration and observation will be conducted on the social and cultural backgrounds that compel the emergence of Ms. Marvel as a headline for the latest Marvel Comics' series. The understanding of the American Muslim immigrant identity resulting from this research can be used to understand similar phenomena concerning other minority groups in the United States or in different contexts.

Challenges in Being "American"

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, when Muslim terrorists hijacked and crashed passenger planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Muslims were intensely scrutinized and prejudiced against. From this point on, it had been a popular view that Islam was an evil, dangerous and deadly religion. Some American Christian leaders even took an extreme measure and invited their followers to join their crusade against Islam. Abdo (2006) mentioned two prominent Christian figures, Franklin Graham and Robert A. Morey, who have publicly declared a crusade against Islam (p. 77).

In other words, the 9/11 attacks put American Muslim immigrants on the spotlight as 'the enemy'. As Sunaina Maira (2004) explains in her journal article "Youth Culture, Citizenship and Globalization: South Asian Muslim Youth in the United States after September 11th", after the 9/11 attacks, the prevailing sentiment in American society was that "somebody had to pay" (p. 219). Unfortunately, that "somebody" was Muslims. Moustafa Bayoumi (2011) in his article "Between Acceptance and Rejection: Muslim Americans and the Legacies of September 11" stated that Muslims were "the latest villains in the grand nativist epic about the downfall of the United States" (p. 18). Muslims are, therefore, not only the enemy but also a threat to the United States comparable with Communism during the Cold War.

This popular sentiment was manifested in widespread political

racism and racial and ethnic profiling against Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent, which was intensified by the mass media. Stemmed from the practice of political racism, “a series of legal, cultural, social, and psychological threats challenged Muslim Americans’ status as citizens, their personal security, psychological well-being, social relations, and public life” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 11). Along with the demonization of Arabs and Muslims in general, Islamophobia, “the irrational fear of Muslims” or “a form of prejudice akin to racism and anti-Semitism that should be resisted” (Curtis, 2009, p. xiii), emerged as a popular attitude against Muslims.

The increasingly harmful and prejudicial social representation combined with the tension between Muslim Americans and non-Muslim Americans, topped with the prevailing sentiment that all Muslim immigrants residing in the United States, regardless of their countries of origin, were considered “the enemy”, resulted in a harsh blow for the American Muslim immigrants. In turn, this led to the reinvention, or rather the separation, of two cultural identities as “Muslim” and “American”, which means that Muslim immigrants were no longer identified by their ethnicity or home culture. They are not identified by the American society as the monolithic Muslim community, an enemy and a threat to the United States. Morally and socially excluded despite the fact that they are also citizens of the country, American Muslims “were suddenly perceived as a potential threat to U.S. safety” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 1).

To describe this phenomenon further, Sirin & Fine (2008) pointed out that Muslims “became the designated ‘others who had to be watched, detained, and sometimes deported, in order to save ‘us’” (p. 1). Forgetting that American Muslims were part of the United States, the majority of American society was inclined to allow whatever measure to save themselves from this dangerous ‘other’. They began to construct a formation of identity based on the binary opposition of the progressive, rational, logical, civilized, and peaceful ‘us’ and the backward, irrational, uncivilized, and violent ‘they’, from which most of today’s negative stereotypes against Muslims stemmed.

At the same time, a notion that one cannot be a good Muslim and a good American appeared. The Muslim community, which before the 9/11 attacks was content with living low profile and invisible,

blending into the American society, was suddenly put on the center stage (Abdo, 2006, p. 17). They were increasingly discriminated, against, harassed, and scrutinized. The so-called War on Terrorism fueled vile racist behavior against them. As a result, Muslims were forced to choose either to leave aspects of their native culture and religion and become 'American' or stay 'Muslim' and be considered as one of 'them', the terrorists. They were pressured to give up their identity either as Muslims or as Americans. Sirin & Fine (2008) elaborated on this matter:

> In the fall of 2001, these young people and their families were ejected from the national "we." … 9/11 indeed marked a rupture in their identity negotiation process. They underwent two kinds of cultural disruption. First they were placed under suspicion, socially and psychologically, within the nation they considered "home." … Varied forms of discrimination and surveillance now penetrated their communities, social relationships, and self-consciousness. (p. 7)

Furthermore, Abdo (2006) also discussed this phenomenon, as she explains that:

> Gone was the general sense of benign neglect that had largely shaped the Muslim American experience for decades. Overnight, mainstream America had imposed a stark choice on Muslim believers everywhere: disavow key aspects of your faith and culture, or risk being lumped together with the September 11 the militants. (p. 114)

This phenomenon led to the moral exclusion of American Muslims, as the U.S. Muslim minority was not completely successful in reconciling the differences between the seemingly opposing American and Islamic values.

Assertion of their social and political identity was deemed of utmost importance for these Muslims as they were urged by how they were targeted as supporters of terrorism and were treated accordingly. Abdo (2006) explained that one of "the most important factors in crystallizing the rise in Muslim American pride and collective identity was the passage, and selective enforcement, of the 2001 USA Patriot Act" (p. 83). The struggle for identity is a manifestation of these Muslim immigrants' demand that the United States government and society accept Muslims in the United States as they would Christians, Jews, and other religious groups in the United States.

However, asserting and negotiating identity were (and still are) particularly challenging matters for children of Muslim immigrants who were born and raised in the United States. On the one hand, it is difficult for them to identify themselves with their home culture and home countries, as they have never experienced either one first-hand. On the other hand, it is also problematic for them to identify themselves as 'Americans', because white Americans distinguish them as the 'Other' based on their color, race, and faith. Nevertheless, they think of themselves as

Americans. They were born in the United States, and they are raised in the United States. The United States of America is their home. However, as Sirin & Fine (2008) pointed out, "Muslim youth coming of age in the United States found themselves to be cast simultaneously as citizen and alien, terrorized and terrorist" (p. 12). This so-called home alienates and antagonizes them. The people sharing this home refuse to be likened to them.

Ms. Marvel as an Icon of Integration

Superhero comic books are cultural artifacts that are created and consumed "within the web of their culture" (Kukkonen & Haberkorn, 2010, p. 244). In order to understand them and what they stand for, it is important to examine the cultural context from which they emerge. Superheroes have continuously demonstrated their relevance to the society. Their stories have reflected the history of American culture and society. As Mercier (2008) pointed out, superheroes "have battled real-world figures including Adolf Hitler, tackled controversial topics such as racism, and provoked discussions of cultural shifts within America" (p. 22). Through superheroes, comic books become "a unique medium through which social and political issues have been addressed" (Khan M. , 2013). Sean Carney (2005), in his journal article "The Function of the Superhero at the Present Time", explained that the transformation of the function of the superhero "from its origins as ideological myth, as popular symptom of closed, ideological consciousness, the superhero has been reinscribed with a hopeful ambivalence which transforms it into a symptom of history" (p. 101).

Historically, superheroes have always been a reflection of the society in which they were created. Examples of superheroes who fulfilled this function include Superman, who was a symbol of justice during the Great Depression. Captain America also fulfilled this function when, during World War I, he became a symbol of patriotism and a hero who was able to literally punch Adolf Hitler in the face. Iron Man, the Hulk and the Silver Surfer reflected the political tension of the United States in the 1960s. Spider-Man represented the revolutionary youth culture in the 1960s. Their strong involvement in American culture and society has substantiated their position in the American national consciousness (Mercier, 2008, p. 38).

Fulfilling her social function as a comic book superhero, Kamala represents a cultural and historical phenomenon in the United States, where signs of awareness and acceptance of

American Muslim immigrants have begun to grow. She is also a medium through which Muslims, immigrants, and people of minority groups can be heard. She represents the change in the way Muslims are represented and understood in the United States.

Ms. Marvel negates the myth that Islam prevents strong identification with American values and beliefs. The series shows that by adopting a pluralistic identity, Kamala, the main character, can balance her identity as Muslim and American. Indeed, she is of Pakistani descent, but she was born and raised in the United States of America. She grew up surrounded by American cultures and values that influence her as she negotiates her identity as an American. Being an American teenager does not prevent Kamala from practicing her religion. Likewise, being a Muslim does not prevent Kamala from participating in the American culture.

Ms. Marvel carries a different image of Islam countering the prevailing image by which Islam is understood in the United States. In the comic book series, Islam is treated as something that should not estrange or alienate Muslims from the larger society. This is shown in the portrayals of Muslims that are equally capable of competing at work or in education. The mosque, one of the most important symbols of Islam, is also shown as a flexible institution that is willing and capable to adapt to the American setting as a process of negotiating Islam's position in America. Being Muslim is not everything for the Muslim immigrants portrayed in the comic book series. Like many other Americans, Muslims also care about the society. Kamala's being a superhero represents her involvement in the American society, as she becomes an agent in protecting the society from villains that seek to destroy or conquer it.

The exercise of Muslim women's pluralistic identity in the American environment appears in other characters throughout the series, as illustrated by Figure 1 (Wilson, Side Entrance, 2014, p. 12):

Figure 1. Appearances of veiled women (Wilson, Side Entrance, 2014, p. 3 & 12)

The first image in Figure 1 shows two women wearing headscarves among the crowd of Jersey City. The second image depicts one girl wearing the headscarf

among the female Lacrosse athletes in Kamala's school. Although these characters are unnamed, their appearances mark Muslim women's integration in the American culture. The figure conveys the message that wearing the headscarf will not be an obstacle. For instance, the Muslim Lacrosse athlete can still participate in this indigenous American sport even though she wears a headscarf. What she does is adjust her values and personal belief into the culture – while all of her teammates wear sleeveless shirts and tight miniskirts, the Muslim athlete wears long sleeves and a maxi skirt. The images in Figure 1 signify the fact that while participating in the American society and culture, Muslims can still exercise their faith. Indeed, Muslims will look different, but it does not mean that they are less capable than their non-Muslim counterparts are.

Ms. Marvel shows that in general, children of Muslim immigrants, who were born and raised in the United States, show a better ability to integrate into the American society. Kamala and children of Muslim immigrants her age serve as a representation of this generation, as indicated by their active participation in the American popular culture. One of the illustrations of the integration is the Muslim member of the Lacrosse team at Kamala's school that can be seen in Figure 1. She is depicted as wearing a headscarf and a uniform adjusted to the Islamic codes. On the one hand, this illustration shows the school's tolerance of its Muslim students, or, in this case, athletes, who want to practice their religion. In addition, it also shows that the American teenagers, especially those on the team, accept this unnamed Muslim athlete and have no problems with having a Muslim among them. On the other hand, it also shows a process of ethnic integration in the school and a process of identity negotiation on the Muslim's part, combining identity as a Muslim and a student of an American public school, and a member of American society participating in American culture.

Another representation of the children of Muslim immigrants in the United States who have integrated themselves in the American culture is shown in Figure 2 (Wilson, Side Entrance, 2014, p. 5).

Figure 2. The girls attending weekly youth lecture (Wilson, Side Entrance, 2014, p. 5)

Figure 2 shows the atmosphere behind the partition of the mosque during the weekly youth lecture. Like the Muslim Lacrosse athlete, the girl on Nakia's left represent how Muslim immigrant teenagers are integrated in the American culture. As the Lacrosse athlete follows the Islamic dress code while also playing an indigenous American sport, the girl at the mosque is shown wearing a headscarf, attending an Islamic youth lecture at the mosque while, like many other American teenagers today, playing with her mobile phone. These teenagers fluently switch and combine the discourses of the American culture with those of their religion and home culture.

Kamala herself shows the ability to switch and combine the seemingly opposing discourses of the American culture and her religion and home culture, as she herself is an embodiment of the combination

between Pakistani, Islamic, and American cultural styles. She eats *pakora*, drinks *chai*, wears *shalwar kameez*, and attends the mosque's lecture while being technology-literate, a superhero fan, a student in an American institution, and a fanfic writer. Other than her being a fanfiction writer, Kamala is shown to be a fan of popular movies in the following excerpt:

> Kamala: [caption] Okay, this is where I admit that I've only ever snuck out twice before in my life. Once when I was **ten**, just to see if I could actually get down the tree in **one piece**. And then once freshman year to see the midnight showing of **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows** with Nakia and Bruno. (Wilson, All Mankind, 2014, p. 15)

From the excerpt above, it is obvious that Kamala is a really big fan of the Harry Potter series. Despite the fact that her parents are strict and say they will not allow Kamala to leave the house to watch a movie at such a late hour, she snuck out of her house to see the last installment of the franchise. Kamala also mentions that she was joined by Nakia. Considering that the movie is one of the most popular young adult movies and one of the highest-grossing films of all time[1], Kamala's eagerness to participate in this global popular phenomenon signifies her integration in Western culture.

Kamala's 'Americanness' is further demonstrated by her reference to Taylor Swift, a celebrity popular in today's American popular culture. Furthermore, Kamala often uses American slang terms. When she arrives at the Circle Q just to see a masked man carrying a gun and talking to Bruno, her first thought is, "Oh my God. Somebody's trying to **stick up** the Circle Q" (Wilson, Side Entrance, 2014, p. 16). Instead of using the word "rob", Kamala uses the slang "stick up". Subsequently, the number 911 is the first solution that comes to her mind when witnessing the armed robbery. 911 is the most important emergency service in the United States. This number is well-known, even in countries other than the United States due to the numerous occasions on which the number is mentioned in American popular culture products. The number itself is important in the United States as it provides a sense of security in the case of emergency. However, after remembering that she has super powers, Kamala decides to help Bruno herself as she equals herself with 911, or rather, the concept that 911 offers—security for all Americans.

Kamala's ultimate declaration of her integration in to American society can be seen in the following excerpt:

> Kamala: This guy thinks he can threaten us where we **live**? **Ms. Marvel** has a message for him… This is **Jersey City**. We talk loud, we walk fast, and we don't take any **disrespect**. Don't mess. (Wilson, Urban Legend, 2014, p. 19)

Seeing that Jersey City is under attack by an unknown villain, Kamala as Ms. Marvel appears publicly in the middle of a crowd and declares her allegiance to Jersey City, warning the villain not to "mess" with the

1 http:// www.imdb.com /title/tt1201607/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus

people of Jersey City in their own home. It is important to note that when referring to the Jersey City community, Kamala uses the inclusive pronoun "we" to emphasis her cohesion in the social group that is the people of Jersey City.

Another negation of the notion that Islam is un-American is also apparent in the way the Ms. Marvel series builds a new image of Islam that contests the binary dynamic of 'us' versus 'them' that has long been used by the Western society to understand the religion. While Islam is widely considered the religion of terrorism, *Ms. Marvel* shows that Islam is a religion of peace. While Islam is considered incompatible with core American values, and therefore cannot adapt to the American setting, *Ms. Marvel* shows that in the negotiation of identity, Islam is able to integrate into the American setting.

In the previous section of the discussion, it has been revealed that Nakia's decision to wear a headscarf is an exercise of individualism and subjectivity, rebuking the notion that being Muslim can pose major obstacles to integrating into American society. Similarly, Kamala also uses an Islamic teaching in the form of an ayah taken from the Quran to reconstruct the image of Islam as a violent religion and the enemy of the state into a peaceful religion. When seeing Zoe almost drowning, Kamala hesitates about whether or not she should use her newfound powers to save Zoe. However, after remembering an ayah from the Quran, Kamala resolves to save Zoe, and from then on, uses her power to help people. The following excerpt contains Kamala's motivation to help Zoe based on the Quran:

> Kamala: [caption] There's this ayah from the **Quran** that my dad always quotes when he sees something **bad** on TV. A fire od flood or a bombing. "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: Embiggen!
> Kamala: [caption] When I was a little kid, that always made me feel better. Because no matter how bad things get…there are always people who rush in to **help**. And according to my dad…they are **blessed**.
> (Wilson, All Mankind, 2014, pp. 9-10)

Kamala uses an actual, authentic ayah from the Quran as a motivation for her to use her newly gained superpowers to help others. This ayah is used to counter the bad images and stereotypes against Islamic teachings. In addition, by using this ayah as a motivation for Kamala to save one of her white, all-American schoolmate, the scene demonstrate Kamala's loyalty to the American society, and a sign that she is part of America. Kamala's reference to the ayah rebukes the 'us' versus 'them' dynamic and the binary opposition commonly used to define Islam.

Kamala also reveals that Yusuf always quotes this ayah "when he sees something bad on TV", such as "a bombing". This ayah serves as an evidence that Islam is not a religion of violence, as the holy book itself instructs its believers to help others and strongly warns its believers against murder. Yusuf's quoting this ayah hints at his disapproval of violent acts of terrorism

like a bombing. This is also a means used by Yusuf to teach his children the value of peace. Representing American Muslim immigrants who often have to face prejudice in relation with terrorisms, Yusuf affirms that he is on the same page with every American who condemns terrorism, for Islam teaches that killing another person is un-Islamic.

Furthermore, Kamala says that her father used to teach Kamala this ayah while telling her that there will always be someone helping "no matter how bad things get". Seen from her age when this series first came out, Kamala was about 3 years old and Aamir was 8 years old when the 9/11 attacks happened. Therefore, it can be concluded that the height of the prejudice and negative sentiments against Islam resulting from the aftermath of the 9/11 occurred during her childhood. Teaching this value to his children, Yusuf was imparting a sense of security that they were not alone, that people are kind and will readily help each other in times of need, regardless of religion.

The discussions above are essentially a stand on how Kamala represents the struggle of American Muslim immigrants to resist the violent image of Islam resulting from the aftermath of 9/11. Picking an ayah from the Quran as a reason for her to use her powers for good, Kamala is making clear that Islam is, at its core, a peaceful religion. This counteracts the prevailing allegations that Muslim extremists kill in the name of religion. Kamala's rationale also subtly implies that the different interpretations of the Quran influenced by cultural systems and/or personal sentiment is the reason for the distortions in the practice of the religion often apparent in the militant versions of Islam. Thus, as an American, Kamala will inevitably interpret the teachings of Islam in the American context.

The fact her religion is not the sole thing that defines her makes Kamala relatable for her non-Muslim readers. Islam is just a part of her identity as a child of immigrants who is trying to find her place in the United States. The series diffuses this image by portraying clearly Kamala's relationships with her friends and family facing problems that are universally found in the lives of American teenagers, such as curfew, seeing boys, and detention. Children of minority groups can also relate with Kamala in the sense of inferiority that Kamala expresses at the beginning of the series.

It is a common phenomenon in literature that characters who are not white usually feel a strong desire to be white. This phenomenon has become an issue in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The main characters in these novels have experienced a phase in their life where they feel a strong desire to become white. Kamala is no different. Before embracing her identity as Pakistani-American, Kamala always felt inferior to her white classmates. She is willing to take extreme measures in order to feel integrated and be accepted by her peers. She defies her parent's rule, she feels frustrated that her ethnicity prevents her from being "normal", and she turns into Carol Danvers right after she receives her super powers.

However, Kamala's power to transform into anything she wants represents flexibility. As Maryam Jameela (2014)

argues in her essay, “Kamala’s very superpower is a manifestation of racial issues, religious issues and, amongst other things, issues that come with being an immigrant”. Although she can transform into virtually infinite forms, she chooses to use her power to save people and gives up transforming into her idol, the original Ms. Marvel. In the end, Kamala negotiates her place in the United States and embraces her home culture that makes her different without erasing it.

What makes her even more relatable is the way she is portrayed. Unlike strong, female superheroes before her, Kamala’s body and sexuality are not objectified. She is not the image of perfection as many female superheroes before her were. Being brown, she does not meet the Eurocentric standards of beauty. Her physique does not meet the common athletic and busty female superheroes. Unlike Superman or Batman, Kamala is not a larger-than-life superhero. Quite the opposite from that, Kamala, like Spider-Man, is a down-to-earth character and an every-man hero.
Despite the novelty of her characters, Kamala has successfully secured her position among the ranks of Marvel Comics’ major superheroes. Historically, superheroes that cannot reflect the general mood of its society have always failed to be accepted by its readers. DC Comics’ Prez Rickard, for example, is the first teenage President of the United States. His series got cancelled abruptly because, as the readers cannot relate to the character, Prez failed to spur interest. Even Superman, one of the most popular superhero characters of all time, has experienced a similar fate as Prez because it was difficult to fit him in a post-Great Depression period, where his message was no longer relevant to the American society.

However, Kamala represents the voice of today’s youth of America comprised by many minority groups. Following the tradition of Spider-Man, or Peter Parker, Kamala is a social outcast and unpopular. Both heroes initially intend to use their powers to impress people around them, and eventually both realize that having these powers mean that they have responsibilities to do good for other people. This archetype of superhero offers an illusion of empowerment. For children of immigrants, this illusion is influential because they experience a similar sense of not belonging in the society. As a child of immigrants herself, Kamala is using superheroes as a means of assimilation and building a sense of belonging by being a superhero fan and a fan fiction writer. More than anything, she represents the cultural theme of the United States itself—multiculturalism and plurality. This is one of the reasons that children of minority groups feel that the character represents them.

Considering Kamala’s gender, ethnicity, and religion, she is an unusual character and there were always possibilities that the American society could not accept Kamala. In order to ease Kamala’s way into the world of comic book superheroes, her creators put Kamala in the vacant position of Ms. Marvel instead of making a name for herself. Therefore, although at certain points Kamala is different from the majority of American comic book superheroes, she still follows the archetype of American superheroes.

Kamala as a character is comparable to many other mainstream superheroes before her. She is a good girl with strong moral codes. She becomes a superhero with a strong motivation—in Kamala's case, the motivation is represented in an ayah taken from the holy book of Islam. She uses her powers to fight crimes, save people, and protect the society. Most obviously, she wears a costume to hide her identity.

Compared with the costumes of other superheroes, Kamala's costumes are similar in many aspects, as seen in Figure 3 (Wilson, Side Entrance, 2014):

Figure 32. The cover of the third issue of Ms. Marvel (Wilson, Side Entrance, 2014)

Fitting the traditional superhero costume prototype, Kamala does not cover her hair with a headscarf as a Muslim girl, and her costume is rather tight, resembling the Spandex of other superheroes' costumes. Although "flags were raised by some conservative Muslims saying her body was visible" (Dev, 2014), the choice of costume reflects Kamala's identity as a pluralistic American. As discussed in the previous chapter, the bright color scheme is similar with the costumes of A-list superheroes such as Spider-Man, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Superman, Wonder Woman, etc. Incidentally, this color scheme is similar with the color scheme of the flag of the United States. Kamala's symbol as Ms. Marvel, a yellow lightning bolt, is similar with the symbol of Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel. Like many other superheroes, Kamala wears a pair of combat boots and a mask. Her scarf is worn like a cape, and she wears bangles like Wonder Woman does.

Kamala's characteristics are a hybrid resulting from negotiating her identity as a Pakistani woman who is an American superhero. However, her creators keep the mainstream superheroes characteristics in order to make sure that she is not seen as too foreign. In doing so, they are securing a place for Kamala in Marvel Comics' readership. Benita Amalina (2015), in her research entitled *Fighting for Women Existence in Popular Fiction: A Study on American Espionage Movies "Salt" and "Zero Dark Thirty"* finds that a similar strategy is also used in the development of the main characters of the movies she studies. She observes that generally, female characters in spy movies are either sidekicks, victims, sexual objects, or 'damsels in distress' characters. However, in *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, the female characters are the main characters, who are depicted as strong, intelligent, and independent. Nevertheless, there are still remains of the stereotypes of the female characters' role in general, including feminine looks, compassionate nature, and relationship-driven motivation. Amalina (2015) argued that this is a marketing strategy employed by Hollywood production houses in order to gain an audience. Therefore, it can be concluded that this strategy is employed to attract

both the progressive society that supports feminism and opposes women's objectification and the common society that is still influenced by patriarchal values.

An audience analysis shows that Ms. Marvel has become an icon of inclusivity in the American society. In an interview, Sana Amanat, the editor of the series reveals, "the novel became a matter of pride among the American-Muslim community" (Dev, 2014). Letters from readers have called *Ms. Marvel* a positive advertisement of a Muslim female superhero. She represents the "constant battle between the culture of [children of immigrant's] heritage, and 'western ideals'[2]" (Wilson, All Mankind, 2014, p. 22). Reviews have numerously praised her for bringing the issue of "cultural, religious, and sexual identities expressed together in a classic American comic series,… featured as principal characteristics of an American superhero" (Ahmad, 2013). The A.V. Club acclaimed *Ms. Marvel* as one of the best comics of 2014 (O'Neil & Sava, 2014).

So influential is Kamala Khan as a superhero, she has also become an icon of tolerance and acceptance in reality. In early 2015, blogger Pamela Geller through her organization the American Freedom Defense Initiative, purchased advertisements spaces on the Municipal buses in San Francisco and filled it with anti-Islam messages. The advertisements equates Islam with Nazism and spreads the message that the Quran inherently teaches its believers to hate Jewish beliefs. Then, anonymous street artists overlaid the advertisement with pictures of Kamala Khan in her Ms. Marvel costume, campaigning against racism, bigotry, and Islamophobia with taglines such as "Stamp Out Racism", "Free Speech Isn't a License to Hate", "Calling All Bigotry Busters", and "Islamophobia Hurts Us All". (Adlakha, 2015; Ratcliffe, 2015; Whitbrook, 2015; Farnham, 2015; Letamendi, 2015)

Figure 4 (Adlakha, 2015) shows a picture of the graffiti put over the racist and cruelly offensive advertisements:

Figure 43. Ms. Marvel fighting bigotry in advertisements on San Francisco's buses (Adlhakha, 2015)

The incident serves as an evidence of the significance of Kamala Khan for American Muslims. Evidently, Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel has embodied a notion of racial equality and inclusivity in the American society. It is evident in the fact that the superhero has been used as a weapon to fight bigotry against Islam, which is a value that Ms. Marvel as a superhero is promoting.

2 Excerpt taken from a letter sent to Marvel Comics by a reader named Yamini Marley.

Ms. Marvel's immediate success and popularity is an evidence of the shift of paradigm in the larger American society. The series communicates who American Muslim immigrants are in an American idiom, through an indigenous genre of American popular culture, the superhero comic book. Kamala's popularity reflects the changing image of Muslims in the predominantly Judeo-Christian American society. She reflects the American society's acceptance of Muslims as a part of the United States.

Conclusion

The struggle for identity is triggered by conflicts. Conflicts, on the other hand, are created by the interest or the abuse of authority, which results in the driving force that motivates an asserting of certain identities. Such phenomenon is the essence of the struggle of American Muslim immigrants' in asserting their identity in American society.

Ms. Marvel's significance in the struggle of Muslim immigrants to gain American identity lies in its role as a medium of communication for the under-represented American Muslim community. The superhero Ms. Marvel herself has become so ingrained in the American popular culture that she has become a symbol of integration and an icon of racial equality and inclusivity. She counters the prevailing negative sentiments and stereotypes against Islam, and negates the 'us' versus 'them' dynamic that has become a center in the animosity towards Islam.

Furthermore, this study discovers that Kamala Khan is a widely acclaimed superhero despite her being of Pakistani descent and a Muslim. As a product of popular culture that reflects the values and beliefs of the society, the *Ms. Marvel* series suggests a shift in paradigm in the American society itself. Through its acceptance of the new Ms. Marvel, who defies the traditional standards of superheroes, American society shows that it has started changing the prevailing sentiments against, and it is beginning to adapt to the idea that Muslim immigrants are members of their society.

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