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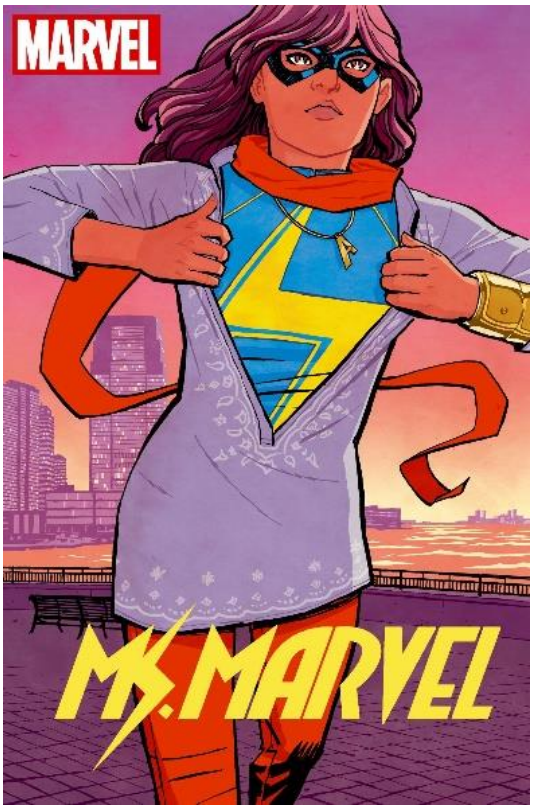
Ms. Marvel, and the Super-Powered Forces of Coloniality:

Addressing and Analysing the Colonial Gaze and Representation of Muslim Characters in Mainstream American Comics.



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Abstract

Using the groundbreaking *Ms. Marvel* (2014-present) comic book series, a collaborative effort from G. Willow Wilson and Sana Amanat as a primary lens, this study provides a thorough examination and critique of the pervasive nature of coloniality within Marvel's superhero comic book narratives. The study offers a systematic and in-depth reading of the comic book from a Global South perspective and through a decolonial lens. It critically evaluated the series' narrative and representation by focusing on the protagonist, Kamala Khan. This thesis draws from Orientalism, critical whiteness studies, Islamic Liberation Theology and the exploration of the "good Muslim" (Mamdani 2002) as an archetype, to argue that *Ms. Marvel* is entrenched in colonial paradigms, preventing Kamala from transcending her tokenised and commodified portrayal. The study investigates how Kamala Khan's identity is important, but ultimately her identity and her sense of justice as a South Asian Muslim woman from a minority immigrant background is constrained by the whiteness, Orientalism and Islamophobia inherent to the white genre of superhero comics. This research is interpretivist by nature and contributes to a growing body of research on *Ms. Marvel* in comic book studies addressing the discourse of Muslim representation within a decolonial framework. This research questions the underlying messages in *Ms. Marvel* and produces a contribution to comic studies that challenge the naturalised Euro-American ideals and values in comic books that often go unchallenged.

Keywords: Ms. Marvel, Representation, Decoloniality, Comic Book Studies, Islamophobia, Orientalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Comic books can function as historical documents capturing the contemporary anxieties, political struggles, social injustices, and ethical dilemmas, while also influencing public perception and discourse (McCloud, 1993). The 2012 Marvel Now! Campaign reflects Marvel's political position and ethical dilemma at the time, diversity. The absence of diversity and inclusion in superhero comics for the sake of "heterocisgender white men, often called 'fanboys'" was a common grievance before the mid-2000s (Pumphrey, 2020, p. 209). Marvel comics have always engaged with intersectional social and political movements, whether through Captain America's role in World War II or the X-Men's allegorical representation of civil rights struggles and racism (Dittmer, 2013). We understand the superhero comic through the emblematic heroes created by DC Comics (1937-) and Marvel Comics (1939-), the American powerhouses that have shaped the superhero genre globally. While rigid archetypes often constrained earlier superhero stories, recent decades have seen the emergence of more inclusive storylines. However, diverse heroes rarely received standalone comics despite comics tackling diverse societal issues. In 2012, Marvel Comics underwent a significant shift when the company announced a change in its roster of protagonists. Marvel Now! was a campaign that launched diverse characters in iconic Marvel titles, most notably *Spiderman*, *Ms. Marvel* and *Thor*. The campaign propelled heroes from underrepresented and marginalised groups into the leading roles of the superhero genre. This change dramatically diverged from the consistent repetition of the same archetypal white heroes.

My sustained interest in the intersection of Marvel discourse and politics, as a South African Indian Muslim woman and comics enthusiast, began with the 2013 introduction of Kamala Khan. Kamala is more than just a quirky superhero; she is a cultural and political symbol of change. As a sixteen-year-old American Muslim protagonist of Pakistani heritage, she occupies a unique space in Marvel's history, marking a significant shift in representation within the superhero genre. Although some critics may argue that a teenage character should not be politicised, the reality is that "all comics are inherently political", as comic writer Alan Moore famously stated (in Sabin, 1993, p. 89). Superhero narratives have long reflected social, cultural, and ideological issues, and Kamala Khan is no exception. Her existence challenges the traditional dominance of whiteness in superhero storytelling and offers an alternative to the Euro-American centric, often militarised hero archetype.



Fig. 1: Kamala Khan in her Ms. Marvel costume from Ms. Marvel Infinite Comic, Vol. 11 (Wilson & Alphona, 2014)

Ms. Marvel (2014-) is Marvel's first long-running comic series to feature a Muslim protagonist with her own standalone title. The character was created by editor Sana Amanat and writer G. Willow Wilson, with art by Adrian Alphona. Several volumes and multiple standalone issues comprise the ongoing comic series. The story follows first

generation American, Kamala Khan, as she navigates the different avenues of adolescence and high school in New Jersey. In keeping with the typical teenage superhero story, she frequently feels marginalised within her school's social circles. Unlike the prototypical adolescent hero, her social isolation is attributable not only to her archetypal nerd characteristics but also to her racial and cultural identity.

As an important icon for Muslim women and other marginalised groups, it is imperative to approach Kamala Khan with the same level of criticality that one might apply to a more overtly biased character, such as Captain America (Steve Rogers). The problematic elements of *Ms. Marvel* are often overshadowed by the significance of Kamala's title as the first Muslim main protagonist in Marvel, but these elements should be investigated to highlight the progress that still needs to be made in the representation of Muslim and minority characters. As geopolitical scholar Jason Dittmer (2005, 2013) has argued, superhero comic books, particularly those published by Marvel, are embedded with certain teachings, morals and values. He asserts that these morals and values are important to examine because they have the potential to perpetuate propaganda or harmful messages. The values and messages that can be commonly found in the *Captain America* series echo his role as a symbol of America, akin to the American flag or a bald eagle. He stands for liberty, justice and democracy. In addition, he also serves as an assimilation fantasy[1]. His American identity is so dominant that it completely overshadows his Irish heritage, allowing him to represent American ideals to such an extent that no one recognises him as anything else. However,

[1] Steve Roger's debuted in *Captain America Comics* (1940) #1 by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. He is a first generation American born to two lower middle class Irish immigrants.

the comics featuring Rogers often present a one-sided narrative of America as the greatest country in the world, which perpetuates an imperialist message that fosters the myth of American exceptionalism. The message of American exceptionalism positions the United States of America above all other nations, claiming America is superior, unique, and special (O'Connor, Cox and Cooper, 2022). Its contributions to the world are viewed as unprecedented, and therefore America's efforts towards protecting its nation and its values cannot be considered criminal (McCrisken, 2003). American exceptionalism in Captain America feeds the myth that America is the land of the free and a multicultural nation full of opportunity for anyone, as exhibited through Steve Rogers and his companions. Cultivating feelings of patriotism and nationalism. Similarly, in South Africa during the Apartheid era, a propaganda campaign utilised the American superhero model to create *Mighty Man* (Afri-comics, 1975). He was a black hero who preached messages of civil obedience to combat the Apartheid resistance struggle. Mighty Man was a former police officer turned vigilante whose philosophy focussed on following the law, even if the law was apartheid law. The hero was conceptualised and funded by white Americans for the National Party's government officials. His role was to teach black South Africans that the ultimate good is following the law, normalising Apartheid in the process (Hammett, 2022). These two comics are an example of how comics utilise their didactic qualities to exert influence on society at a governmental level through the superhero model. Unlike Captain America and Mighty Man, Kamala Khan is not a figure of propaganda, and her messages might not be as overtly geared towards Americanness and imperialism. However, she is a product of Marvel, which is part of the Walt Disney Company[2] (1923-). She forms part of an American international

[2] Walt Disney Company bought Marvel in 2009, Mavel forms part of the Disney conglomerate.

media conglomerate as the “new spokesperson for Marvel” (Pumphrey, 2016, p. 794). Therefore, it is important to examine what Marvel stands for and how the brand influences Kamala’s representation, values, and moral messages to uncover her didactic messages.

This study aims to assess whether the representation of morality and values in *Ms. Marvel* are framed within colonial paradigms and points towards whiteness. Specifically, it investigates whether Kamala Khan is constructed within the inherently imperialist notions of the “good Muslim” (Mamdani, 2002), and how her morals, values and practices of justice are influenced by coloniality and its by-products, such as Orientalism, whiteness and Islamophobia. The central research question explores the interplay between Ms. Marvel’s multifaceted identity (as a Muslim, South Asian, first-generation American, and daughter of immigrants) and asks: **How does Ms. Marvel’s (Kamala Khan) brand identity and the influence of colonial paradigms on her portrayal and ideology limit her authentic self-expression and morality?** This research offers a close reading and systematic review of the comic book series *Ms. Marvel*, analysing a sample of the series through a decolonial lens. A significant objective of this study is to analyse the emergent themes of assimilation that influence Kamala Khan’s acceptance into white American society and to examine how the assimilation narratives in the comic prescribe conformity. This analysis argues that the assimilation narratives anchored to the concept of the good Muslim are problematic and harmful to the marginalised and othered audiences that Kamala Khan represents. This study provides a clear analysis of how Kamala Khan sustains or challenges colonial ideologies and praxis in her role as a superhero and protagonist. The study does not argue that Kamala Khan is an inauthentic Muslim character, nor does it challenge her importance and impact

as a pivotal figure in a white male-dominated field (Jackson-Preece & Bhambra, 2021). Rather, it seeks to offer a deeper, more critical reading of *Ms. Marvel* and to highlight the ongoing issues related to Muslim representation in American comic books. This study aims to open conversations that encourage thinking beyond the binary of "othering" and assimilation when representing people of colour, Islam, and Muslim women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis is intersectional, combining comic book studies and decolonial theory. The study employs an interpretive qualitative research methodology to explore the representation of Kamala Khan as a minority Muslim superhero within the superhero comic book genre. The interpretivist paradigm explores the socially constructed nature of reality, knowledge, and modes of being (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). Qualitative research, as a naturalistic paradigm, focuses on interpreting the world that the researcher inhabits. It seeks to create understanding by examining phenomena that constitute human existence (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). This examination is rooted in decolonial studies, which explore coloniality as a default system that pervades human existence and must be actively resisted (Mignolo, 2007). This study explores how Khan serves as a lens to examine the commodification of representation and how justice is sanitised in the superhero genre to uphold the default colonial system. By analysing her character through a focused sample, the research highlights how diverse identities are constructed within the context of a large corporation and how complex social issues are simplified to fit mainstream narratives. This contributes to a deeper understanding of the media landscape that shapes the world, as Marvel plays a significant role in shaping popular culture and producing media products on a global scale.

This study used an in-depth content analysis of the first four volumes of *Ms. Marvel* written by co-creator G. Willow Wilson, specifically focusing on issues #1-#19. The issues analysed include: *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*, *Ms. Marvel Volume 2: Generation Why*, *Ms. Marvel Volume 3: Crushed*, and *Ms. Marvel Volume 4: Last Days*. Through this analysis, I identify, recurring themes, character development, and dialogues that reflect and potentially reinforce colonial ideologies. The character analysis primarily focuses on Kamala Khan, examining her role and brand as an American Muslim teenager of Pakistani origin and a Marvel superhero. This analysis will examine her dialogue, ideologies, external and internal conflicts, and her relationship with religion and racial identity. Although Kamala is the central figure of the analysis, examining her friends and family, her parents, her brother Amir, her mentors, her best friends Bruno and Nakia, her love interest and the villain Kamran are all instrumental figures in the analysis. To ascertain how their relationships with Islam and whiteness situate them within the larger narrative. An analysis of recurring themes in Ms. Marvel is conducted to explore the connections between the comic and colonial ideologies. An examination of the comic book's treatment of patriotism, racism, religion, morality, and justice is undertaken to identify the social messages conveyed and evaluate their origins and alignment with perspectives rooted in whiteness, Orientalism, or Islamophobia.

RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

This study specifically discusses American media but from a South African and Global South perspective. It stems from examining comics as a leading American medium prevalent in

South Africa. South Africa is a prime example of how media ownership remains tied to global capitalism despite formal shifts towards local ownership through implementation of policies like BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) [3]. Despite BEE policies increasing Black ownership in South African media, the dominance of private, internationally linked corporations marginalises public interest journalism and leaves control within the hands of Western corporates (Chiumbu & Radebe, 2020). Therefore, South African media, like most African media, continues to function within a Eurocentric framework, where the private ownership structures privilege corporate interests and limit space for alternative or decolonised media narratives. With the dominance of American media comes Americanisation, sewing Western values across mass media (Maikaiba and Msughter, 2019). While ICT (Information Communication Technology) like the internet, smartphones, and social media have created endless opportunities for connection as tools of globalisation, they have significantly contributed to the Americanisation of local media. Globalisation is a multifaceted and complex world system that, while distinct from Americanisation, significantly contributes to cultural imperialism, particularly through ICT platforms such as social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) and the global dominance of Hollywood cinema (Balogun and Aruoture, 2024). Although globalisation creates interconnectedness and allows individuals to participate in a shared global culture, it simultaneously reinforces patterns of homogenisation, particularly in favour of those who control ICT and multinational corporations with extensive global influence (Makaiba and Msughter, 2019). Dominant nations continue to exert influence over less developed nations by disseminating their cultural products through global media networks, perpetuating the marginalisation of

[3] BEE is an affirmative action government policy designed to increase the economic involvement of Black South Africans, this initiative functions as an attempt to rectify the inequalities caused by apartheid.

local cultures. While a singular, uniform American or European global culture may not exist due to localised adaptations of international trends and increased accessibility to cultural content (Aykaç, 2021). Disparities persist in terms of who creates and disseminates content. The digital divide[4] continues to shape access to cultural production, reinforcing existing power structures. Western cultural hegemony is further solidified by the predominance of the English language across ICT technologies, which subsequently privileges Western content. Globalisation, therefore, cultivates international interconnectedness and facilitates cross-cultural interactions; however, it concurrently diminishes cultural diversity through inherent homogenisation imposed by dominant media entities and powerful corporations.

Corporations including McDonald's, the Walt Disney Company (WDC), parent company of Marvel, and media outlets such as CNN (Cable News Network), have cultivated substantial continental influence via licensing, advertising, outsourcing, and joint ventures throughout African nations (Eko, 2003). Consumption of dominant, often American, media dilutes or eliminates local culture; for example, local vernacular is replaced by the dominant vernacular to adapt to global trends. The same can apply to local fashion and lifestyle habits, and, more importantly, values and traditions (Eko, 2003; Makaiba and Msughter, 2019). For instance, the South African tradition of Ubuntu[5] does not align with the American value of rugged individualism. Ubuntu is a philosophy, or a perspective drawn from Southern African culture which can be translated to "a person is a person through other persons" (Nnodim &

[4] The digital divide is a term used to describe the gap in equal access between groups/individuals who have access to ICTs and those who may not due to infrastructure, socioeconomic factors etc. In the Global South the digital divide is a legacy of structures like colonialism and apartheid.

[5] Ubuntu can be translated to have various meanings; this paper utilises a popular translation. Ubuntu is drawn from and forms part of a Nguni phrase "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu".

Okigbo, 2024, p. 119). There are various meanings that can be derived from the phrase, but the essence of Ubuntu values collectively and an acknowledgement that every person is of value, and that we exist through others (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019). This philosophy is built on the spirit of communal wellbeing, which contrasts the individualist capitalist idea of rugged individualism. Rugged individualism is an American capitalist concept that promotes the idea that economic success or failure is solely the result of individual effort, thus justifying economic inequalities and obscuring power imbalances that shape wealth distribution (Eppard et al., 2020). The more South Africans align with American lifestyles and values like rugged individualism, which emphasises the individual and individual wealth, the value of materialism overtakes the value and tradition of Ubuntu. The American dream thus becomes the aspiration and golden standard in Africa as American media continues to dominate our media streams.

Since the launch of the MCU[6] in 2008, Marvel has evolved to exist in almost every medium and dominate it. The company maintains a significant presence across multiple media platforms, including television series on Disney+, video games, comic books, merchandise and films, demonstrating its extensive influence in the entertainment industry. Since the Marvel NOW! campaign was launched; the Marvel brand has been associated with diversity and progression. The company, however, often undermined this message and contradicted its push for inclusion when key figures, such as a former CEO of Marvel Entertainment, Isaac Perlmutter actively supported and donated to figures like Donald Trump (Curtis, 2020).

[6] The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) adapts Marvel comics book characters into television shows and films which can all be interconnected to each other because they exist in the same universe, the Marvel universe.

Donald Trump is notorious for political stances that work against progress and instead advocates for the preservation of white male supremacy through “fascist” politics (Gökarıksel and Smith, 2016, p. 1). As the spokesperson for Marvel and a minority Muslim American hero, it is important to investigate whether Kamala Khan’s messages and values perpetuate the Euro-American Orientalist biases inherent to Americanness, the comic book genre, and the Marvel brand.

As a South African, Muslim woman of Indian origin, I have grown up consuming American media, including the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon Channel, Marvel comics and DC comics, which have all shaped my perception of myself and my cultural identity. My values and views on traditions predominantly followed American traditions because my identity was not well received, represented, or liked in the predominantly American media I consumed. Depicting women, Islam, Muslim women, and South Asian characters in the media has had a profound effect on me, often leading to feelings of alienation and embarrassment regarding my nationality, religion, and ethnicity. The Western media I consumed from a young age also fostered feelings of inferiority as a South African, as American media often depicted Africa through the same monolithic stereotypes as it did South Asians and Muslims. Therefore, I often found myself disconnected from who I was and attempted to fit into a more Americanised way of being.

Reading the story of *Ms. Marvel* and Kamala Khan’s heroism was one of the few times I felt represented in a comic book. I had become accustomed to the countless portrayals of Muslim and South Asian characters as the Oriental others, but introducing Kamala Khan served as a beacon of hope for the future of Muslim characters in popular media. Her

poignant representation of Muslim people and Islam within a franchise and genre that historically caters to white cisgender men carved another space for marginalised voices (Facciani, Warren and Vendemia, 2015). However, Kamala's lack of engagement with political and social issues related to the American government, especially considering these issues that would likely have impacted her as an ethnically Pakistani American or a brown[7] minority and her family, has reminded me of the patriotism of Captain America. When reading the comic critically and with academic papers on *Ms. Marvel*, concerns about coloniality surfaced, prompting this exploration. This led me to question how morals, values and justice are represented in the comic book and investigate whether Kamala's moral compass consistently points towards Occidental ideals.

AIM

This research aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship focusing on decolonisation in Western comic books, specifically Muslim representation. Since the introduction of *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala Khan has become a focal point in comic book studies centred on discourses of religion, feminism, racism, and gender representation (Modarres, 2021). Although there is a steady flow of research surrounding Kamala Khan, much of it focuses on her as a symbol of subversion against Oriental stereotypes and her role in feminist discourse as an intersectional figure of female heroism (Kent, 2015). However, there is a notable gap in the scholarship in analysing *Ms. Marvel* from a decolonial perspective, particularly from a Global South viewpoint. This research seeks to address this gap by applying a decolonial lens to the analysis of *Ms. Marvel* in comic book studies, specifically focusing on the discourse of Muslim representation. This study adopts an

[7] In the context of this paper the term brown is used to reference and describe people of colour which constitutes any person or people who are not white.

interpretive approach, striving to offer a nuanced perspective through critical engagement with the growing body of research on Ms. Marvel, using decolonial theory. By questioning the underlying messages in *Ms. Marvel* and challenging the naturalised Euro-American ideals and values in comic books, this research aims to contribute significantly to comic studies, one that pushes beyond the surface-level celebration of representation and diversity.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The central question of this research is: **How do colonial paradigms operate within *Ms. Marvel*, particularly within the context of its production by Marvel under the Disney conglomerate, where profit often drives creative decisions?** Therefore, this thesis employs a multidimensional and intersectional approach to analyse the character of Kamala Khan and her family, considering the series portrayal within the frameworks of race, religion, and cultural representation in the early issues of *Ms. Marvel*. It examines how the Marvel brand influences narratives of assimilation, and the didactic philosophical messages the story and characters are imbued with. Furthermore, this study explores Kamala Khan's representation within the "colonial matrix of power" (Quijano, 2000, p. 256), engaging with critical concepts such as Orientalism, whiteness, racial capitalism and assimilation to assess the socio-political implications of her character within media discourse. By examining the narrative and character portrayals within the first few volumes of the comic, I trace the origins of the moral and justice frameworks presented. This is informed by the works of decolonial scholars[8], which provide a critical foundation for analysing how colonial power

[8] Prominent figures in this field include Peruvian scholar Aníbal Quijano, Argentinian scholar Walter D. Mignolo, and Puerto Rican professors Ramón Grosfoguel and Nelson Maldonado-Torres.

dynamics persist in contemporary cultural texts. Orientalism, as conceptualised by Palestinian-American professor Edward Said, will be explored as a key sector of decolonial theory. Orientalism is rarely discussed without mention of Said or his formative work, *Orientalism* (1978). Said's concept of Orientalism refers to a "created" and "practised" system of power and knowledge that constructs and perpetuates the Western view of the East as a fixed, natural, and canonical truth, deeply entrenched in academia, culture and history (Said, 1978). Although Orientalist representations bear no authentic connection to the realities of the East, they frequently serve as the basis for academic discourse, cultural depictions, and political policies related to the Orient. Therefore, Said (1978) affirmed that Orientalism is more than the manifestation of Euro-American designs. It constructs the cultures, histories, languages, literature, religions, politics, economics, ideologies, and philosophies of the Orient (Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and East Asia) as inferior, uncivilised, and dangerous. Said (1978) argued that the Orientalist perspective constructs the East as the antithesis of the West. Where the Occident is viewed as democratic, innovative, and civilised, the East is seen as archaic, uncivilised, and unintelligent, and while Western society progresses and thrives, the Orient remains frozen in its inferiority. Orientalism becomes particularly important in understanding how the East-West dichotomy is perpetuated or challenged in *Ms. Marvel* because she exists within both.

The foundation of this analysis is rooted in decolonial studies, employing decolonial logic and language to investigate the presence and influence of coloniality within *Ms. Marvel*. Decoloniality, a critical school of thought and movement, was primarily developed by Latin American scholars rooted in the Global South. These scholars have been instrumental in

articulating the concept of coloniality. This analysis is informed by various lenses within decolonial frameworks, including Orientalism, critical whiteness studies, racial capitalism, and assimilation theory. These perspectives are crucial for dissecting the complexities of Kamala Khan's character and her narrative, as well as for understanding how *Ms. Marvel* navigates, reinforces, or challenges existing power structures. Additionally, the research explores if she is embracing alternative ways of being by breaking away from imperialist principles? Therefore, it is essential to define coloniality and understand its operation within Kamala's American context for an effective analysis of her portrayal.

Key concepts of Decolonial theory are coloniality and colonialism, which are often used as interchangeable terms and discussed as artefacts of the past. However, decolonial scholars draw a clear distinction between the two terms and argue against the idea of colonialism is not just a violence of the past (Grosfoguel, 2007) [9]. The sentiment that we live in a postcolonial world implies that colonialism no longer persists, but the idea that we live in a post-colonial or decolonised world is an illusion (Grosfoguel, 2007). The illusionary idea of a decolonised world stems from the fact that there are rarely any physical colonial administrations occupying colonies. Grosfoguel (2007) argues that the absence of colonial administrators does not indicate that decolonisation has occurred in its entirety and the world is free of colonialism. Although there might not be European/American flags planted in the soil of any Global South nations instead of their own flags, the usurping, oppressive

[9] Colonialism is the direct control and exploitation of lands and peoples by another state, where power is exerted through political and economic domination. In contrast, coloniality refers to the enduring patterns of power, culture, and knowledge that continue to shape societies long after formal settler colonial rule has ended. Colonialism's historical subjugation has resulted in coloniality, a persistent legacy deeply ingrained in modern life (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

and violent nature of colonialism has evolved to survive without a face that can be directly looked at (Grosfoguel 2007). The evolved and modern “survivor” of colonialism is coloniality. While coloniality may be tied to colonialism, coloniality is a severely more extreme power.

The exclusive control over knowledge production and representation is a key mechanism through which coloniality upholds the colonial matrix of power (Vázquez, 2012). This control allows coloniality to impose Eurocentric ideologies, which prioritises Western ways of knowing and understanding the world. Eurocentrism, in this context, refers to the belief that European and Western perspectives are superior, universal, and the only legitimate ways of interpreting reality (Amin, 1989). By enforcing this worldview, coloniality positions Western perspectives as the default truth, marginalising other ways of knowing and ensuring that Eurocentric ideas dominate global thought and representation.

Power and knowledge are always intertwined, with power producing knowledge and knowledge reinforcing power (Foucault, 1980). This relationship enables dominant groups to define what is considered valid or true, maintaining their authority. In the context of coloniality, Eurocentric knowledge is produced and promoted as the normative standard, legitimising and sustaining the dominance of Western powers (Said, 1978). By controlling discourse dictating what can be said, thought, or known, coloniality profoundly shapes global understandings of reality (Foucault, 1972). This dominance marginalises non-Western perspectives, ensuring they remain peripheral or invisible within the global knowledge

system. Kamala Khan, as an American hero embedded within the framework of Western modernity, is inevitably entangled in this colonial matrix of power.

Decolonial scholars discuss the invisible power of the modern world-system as the colonial matrix of power, a concept coined by Aníbal Quijano in 1992 (Mignolo, 2007) and further developed by Walter D. Mignolo, which explains power and its untethered attachment to coloniality. The colonial matrix of power (CMP) according to Quijano is

> an organizing principle involving exploitation and domination exercised in multiple dimensions of social life, from economic, sexual, or gender relations, to political organizations, structures of knowledge, state institutions and households (Quijano in Grosfoguel, 2006, p.1).

Building on Quijano's work, Mignolo conceptualised the colonial matrix of power (CMP) as a global system that controls and exploits every sphere of life, knowledge/production of knowledge, politics, economy, subjectivity, race, gender/sexuality (Mignolo, 2007), all elements of "being" are influenced by coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Modern society, therefore, exists and operates on a global system of coloniality.

Grosfoguel (2006) expands on the concept of coloniality by engaging with world-systems theory (WST), originally developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) a renowned American sociologist and historian, which examines the global economic and political hierarchies that have shaped the development of the world. World-systems theory categorises nations into three hierarchical levels: core countries (primarily Western nations and Japan), semi-peripheral countries (which exhibit characteristics of both core and peripheral nations), and

peripheral countries (which are exploited for their resources and labour). Core countries exploit peripheral nations to sustain their wealth and economic dominance, while peripheral nations remain dependent on this exploitation to maintain their economies. However, Grosfoguel (2006, 2007) argues that traditional interpretations of world-systems theory, which focus primarily on economic factors, fail to capture the full scope of the world-system. He contends that economic systems such as capitalism are deeply intertwined with racism and oppression, suggesting that the modern world-system exerts influence far beyond economics. It is a system that perpetuates racialised and colonial power structures, reinforcing global inequalities that are as much about cultural and political domination as they are about economic exploitation. Thus, understanding modernity requires recognising its colonial foundations and the pervasive influence of coloniality in sustaining global hierarchies.

Mignolo (2011, p.43) argues that 'modernity', which is often celebrated as a European narrative of progression and advancement, cannot be understood without acknowledging 'coloniality' as its counterpart. This illustrates a concept about modernity argued by Mignolo (2011), coloniality is not a side effect of modernity but is instead fundamentally intertwined with it; modernity and coloniality are inseparable. Decolonial theory redefines the idea of modernity by explaining that it is not just a period of historical advancement, but it is a European construct that masks the exploitation, violence and domination inherent in its spread (Mignolo, 2011). Modernity/coloniality, therefore, sustains the colonial matrix of power, a structure that perpetuates global hegemonic control and domination through the intertwining of cultural, political, and economic forces (Grosfoguel, 2006). In this study, the

concept of the coloniality of power, as articulated by Maldonado-Torres, Grosfoguel, Mignolo, and Quijano frames the modern world-system as not merely a capitalist system but as a "Westernised Christian-Centric Capitalist/Patriarchal Modern/Colonial world-system" (Grosfoguel, 2006, p. 173). This system is characterised by a series of global hierarchies, including a racial/ethnic hierarchy (positioning Western above non-Western people), a patriarchal hierarchy (encompassing both a global gender system and a global sexual system), a religious hierarchy (Christianity as the dominant religion), a linguistic hierarchy (English is a civilised language and must be spoken), and an epistemic hierarchy (Western knowledge above other knowledge systems). Each of these hierarchies reinforces the dominance of Western values, norms, and knowledge systems (Grosfoguel, 2006). This research explores how the CMP influences narratives in popular culture, such as those found in *Ms. Marvel*, and examines whether these narratives reinforce or resist the dominance of Western-centric ideologies.

This study focuses on the colonial legacies of whiteness, assimilation, Orientalism, and racial capitalism. The "Ms. Marvel" brand, character, series, and mainstream superhero status are all subject to critical analysis within these frameworks. This thesis examines the challenges faced by Muslims navigating assimilation within media representations, focusing on the problematic "good Muslim" construct (Mamdani, 2002, p. 767). In his paper, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism* (2002), Mahmood Mamdani explores the construct of the "good" Muslim, which is rooted in Islamophobic cultural and epistemic racism (Mamdani, 2002, p. 767). His analysis of how Muslims are categorised into stark binaries of "good" and "bad" by Western discourses offers a critical lens through which

to examine Kamala Khan's character and the side characters in the comic. This study explains how a Muslim superhero's apolitical stance, viewed through the lens of moderate values and moral/justice practices, amounts to sanitisation. This idea is argued using an Islamic framework of morality and justice called Islamic Liberation Theology, or ILT. ILT is a theological movement that uses religious principles as a basis for acting against political, social, and economic injustice, such as coloniality (Duderija, 2018). The comparison of Kamala's Marvel values versus ILT principles works to situate and juxtapose Kamala's position and practice of good and justice as a whitewashed praxis of justice.

The idea of the moderate Muslim feeds into the concept of whiteness within the American superhero genre. The work of Sean Guynes and Martin Lund in *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics* (2020) provides a framework for analysing how whiteness operates within the genre, both in terms of character representation and underlying narratives. Based on their analysis, this thesis reveals the subtle ways in which whiteness shapes Kamala Khan's identity. In addition to analysing whiteness, Islamophobia and Orientalism are significant areas of focus for scholars studying mainstream American superhero comic books. This research is situated within these specific sectors of comic studies and requires a thorough understanding of the concepts.

By analysing Kamala Khan as a brown Muslim woman in a white, male-dominated genre, this study seeks to explore the impact of this context on her character's construction. Jason Dittmer (2005, 2013) offers a geopolitical analysis of superheroes, arguing that they do not merely reflect American values but actively mediate the world, shaping the public understanding of reality. Therefore, comic studies often grapple with how different comic

books offer representations of reality to their audiences. Immigrants, minorities, and marginalised groups are often pressured to assimilate into Euro-American societies, conforming to dominant ways of thinking and behaving, usually at the expense of their cultural identities. In the context of comic books, this pressure is compounded by the need for characters to be marketable and profitable. Consequently, characters are often crafted to be palatable to mainstream audiences, embodying Western ideals of justice, morality, politics, and patriotism, conventions that are deeply ingrained in the genre. A major focus of this study is how Kamala Khan embodies or challenges "whiteness" as an American Marvel protagonist, drawing on the definition of whiteness in superhero comics as outlined by Guynes and Lund (2020).

Guynes and Lund (2020) posit that whiteness operates as a form of power and control, validating and reinforcing notions of white superiority. Whiteness is not only tied to skin colour, but intersects with gender, class, and geopolitical positions. It is entrenched in most societies as a default "social norm," perpetuating white privilege (Nayak, 2007, p. 238). The title and premise of their book draws inspiration from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), focusing on the "white mask" that marginalised and "othered" groups must adopt to survive and succeed in the American superhero comic book genre, which is fundamentally built on whiteness.

> Whiteness is a set of malleable historically, culturally, and geographically situated values that join together various meanings of race, class, gender, sexuality and other modes of being and belonging and that establish a master category against which other hierarchies are developed (Guynes & Lund, 2020, p. 2).

This observation by Guynes and Lund (2020) highlights how whiteness is intrinsic to the American superhero genre, with the entire formation and existence of this genre deeply rooted in whiteness. As a result, whiteness becomes the essence of the superhero genre, and the white male American identity is positioned as the only standard for morality and justice, which is the crux of Marvel superheroes and the genre. The authors introduce this concept by referencing literary critic Toni Morrison's (1992, p. 47) assertion that "American means white," this notion is further reinforced by the rise of Donald Trump and his "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) campaign (2016 & 2024). This movement validated and reignited notions of white superiority under the guise of American patriotism and civic duty.

Kamala Khan, as a brown Muslim superhero, faces the challenge of navigating a genre where whiteness dictates the norms and values. Characters like Kamala are often seen as representatives of their entire demographic, and their success or failure is viewed as a reflection of the acceptance of that demographic within the genre. This tokenistic representation often results in "characters of colour being assimilated into the genre through submersion into the superhero 'melting pot'" (Lund and Lewis in Lund and Guynes, 2020, p.7), where their unique identities are diluted to fit the established norms of whiteness. Given this context, investigating Kamala Khan through the lens of whiteness becomes crucial. This study seeks to determine whether Kamala Khan, as a brown Muslim superhero, is successful and accepted in the superhero genre because she adopts the white mask. Does her character conform to the standards and expectations set by the whiteness that dominates the genre? Or does she challenge and subvert these norms, offering a different narrative that resists assimilation into whiteness? This analysis will explore how

Kamala Khan navigates the complexities of identity, race, and power within a genre that has historically been shaped by and for whiteness.

This dynamic is critically examined by postcolonial Islamic discourse scholar Esra Mirze Santesso (2021), who argues that Kamala Khan's acceptance and success as a brown Muslim South- Asian woman in American society is contingent upon her assimilation. She contends that Kamala's relatability is a double-edged sword: while it allows her to resonate with a broad audience, it simultaneously requires her to conform to Western norms, compromising her identity. Her success and acceptance in the American comic book landscape are conditional upon her ability to align with the cultural expectations and values of a predominantly white, Euro-American audience, directly positioning her as the good Muslim. *Ms. Marvel*'s brand is built on Kamala Khan's identity as a brown Muslim and South Asian protagonist. She is celebrated as a hero for minority and marginalised communities in white America. While it is important to acknowledge and celebrate Kamala Khan, it is equally important to critically assess her portrayal as a Muslim minority protagonist, since that is the foundation of her brand. A central critique that informs the foundation of this study is drawn from Santesso (2021), who in her chapter from the book *Muslim American Hyphenations: Cultural Production and Hybridity in the Twenty-first Century*, argues that while Kamala Khan may superficially differentiate from stereotypical representations of Muslim women, she still perpetuates the same "Orientalist biases of the West" (Santesso, 2021, p. 117). Santesso suggests that Kamala's Orientalist qualities can be attributed to the fact that she is a product of Marvel Comics, situated within the American superhero genre, a genre which is inherently steeped in the values and perspectives of whiteness (Guynes and

Lund, 2020, p. 8). Kamala's title as Ms. Marvel positions her as a personification of the Marvel franchise and its values. Marvel Comics, as one of the two major powerhouses of superhero comic books in America, has become a significant cultural force, mediating popular culture through its comics, movies, television shows and various other media publications (Strömberg, 2011). However, as argued by Guynes and Lund (2020), the whiteness embedded in American superhero comics is so deeply ingrained that even heroes like *Ms. Marvel* cannot entirely escape its entrenched representational clutches. Although *Ms. Marvel* is a series that is not necessarily created by or for white cisgender men, the genre, and the publication's history necessitate a critical investigation of how coloniality, including its manifestations in whiteness, Orientalism and Islamophobia, might still be present. These discussions are integral to a wider analysis of *Ms. Marvel* as they highlight the complex intersections of race, religion and power in Kamala Khan's narrative.

Santesso's (2021) critique highlights the concept of moderation in representation through assimilation. This construct often involves a process of racial capitalism, where Kamala's identity is commodified and packaged in a way that makes it more digestible for a Western audience. The theory of assimilation, particularly in racial and cultural minorities, suggests that marginalised groups are often required to adopt the dominant culture's values and behaviours to be accepted. In Kamala Khan's case, this means that her Muslim and South Asian identity is portrayed in a way that minimises its difference from the mainstream, making her more relatable but also less authentic to her cultural roots. Cultural adaptation is only part of assimilation. Assimilation is about erasing or softening the aspects of identity that might challenge the status quo or disrupt the comfort of the majority. Other scholars,

such as Sara Ahmed (2012), have also explored the complexities of representation and assimilation in multicultural societies. She discusses how diversity is often managed in ways that maintain the dominance of the majority culture while superficially celebrating differences. This is clear according to Santesso (2021) in how Kamala Khan is celebrated as a diverse character, yet her representation is carefully curated to align with the dominant cultural norms of the comic book industry. Kamala Khan's presence as a South Asian Muslim superhero is a step forward for representation. However, the process of assimilation, driven by the demands of racial capitalism, often requires such characters to compromise their cultural authenticity, making them more acceptable to a mainstream audience but less reflective of their true identities (Santesso, 2021).

Racial capitalism (RC) refers to the process by which racial hierarchies are maintained and exploited within capitalist systems, a concept deeply intertwined with coloniality. The term "racial capitalism" suggests that capitalism is inherently racial (Melamed, 2015). Therefore, the economic system of capitalism, which is the dominant economic system globally, relies on racial exploitation and perpetuates racial inequalities to sustain it. As a Pakistani American Muslim superhero, Khan's identity is constructed within a media culture that commodifies her racial and cultural background. This commodification is influenced by the capitalist system that profits from diversity while simultaneously maintaining racial hierarchies. As a Marvel hero, her identity is a product that can be consumed whether in the form of comic books, television series or merchandise, racial capitalism is at work. This makes her identity part of a capitalist system that profits from it yet also perpetuates racial inequalities. Racial capitalism and the drive for profit yields characters that may be tokenised or sanitised and this exploitation that often involves presenting certain aspects of

a character's identity in ways that are palatable or marketable to mainstream audiences, which may dilute or simplify the complexities of their cultural or racial background.

By linking these perspectives to the earlier discussion on the colonial matrix of power and Orientalism, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how *Ms. Marvel* both reflects and critiques the socio-political realities of its time. Through these critical lenses, this thesis not only examines Kamala Khan's character but also explores the cultural implications of her portrayal within a genre historically dominated by Western, and often white, perspectives. This analysis contributes to the overarching argument of the thesis, which seeks to determine whether *Ms. Marvel* challenges or reinforces the colonial and racial power dynamics embedded in contemporary popular culture. Taking a multi-faceted approach, this study seeks to uncover the intricate ways in which *Ms. Marvel* engages with issues of race, religion, identity and power, offering a nuanced critique of its place within a cultural landscape shaped by colonial legacies.

CHAPTER 1: KAMALA KHAN'S GENESIS: THE FOUNDATIONS OF MS. MARVEL

Kamala Khan represents a unique addition to the Marvel Universe. However, the title of her superhero identity, Ms. Marvel, is not new. Ms. Marvel has been an important figure in Marvel comics, and the title has belonged to several women. A thorough understanding of the history of Ms. Marvel is necessary to appreciate the radical shift in characterisation and the impact of the newest iteration. This chapter asks: **How has Ms. Marvel been historically represented and how did this motivate Kamala Khan's creation?**

The original Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers, made her solo debut in 1977 during the Bronze Age of superhero comics (1970 to 1985). The addition of Ms. Marvel as a female hero made a substantial impact on the genre, fandom, and culture of superhero comics (Cocca, 2016, 2020). Similar to Kamala, she was groundbreaking at the time of her inception. The Bronze Age of comics was a transformative time for the superhero genre in American superhero comic books (Jensen, 2017). It shifted the focus of the genre from stories about great heroes and their superhuman triumphs to stories that humanised great heroes as they faced darker and more nuanced ethical dilemmas and psychological struggles. The Golden and Silver Ages of comics produced by Marvel discussed morals and justice in often rigid binaries of good and bad, while the Bronze Age moved into more grey areas of heroism discourse (Jensen, 2017). Marvel typically feared exposing their hero's humanity by displaying vulnerability and weakness. Heroes never asked questions because they knew what was just, but the Bronze Age saw the company broach subjects of contemporary social injustice that paralleled real American social issues such as racism and prejudice (Darowski, 2014a). Bronze Age comics

were shaped by the socio- political climate of America and mirrored by the Civil Rights movement from 1954 to 1968 and the Second Wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s and the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. Marvel and DC attempted to grapple with these moments in history and the transformation in American culture by introducing more women and people of colour into their stories. The most notable female characters that were introduced and reflect the shift of the Bronze Age is the introduction of Red Sonja in Conan the *Barbarian* #23 (Thomas and Smith, 1973), the relaunch of the X-Men comics in 1975, the introduction of Ororo Munroe known as Storm an African American woman mutant in *Giant-Size X-Men #1* (Wein and Cockrum, 1975), Power Girl now known as Supergirl (Kara Zor-L) in DC's *All Star Comics #58* (Conway and Staton 1976), Spider-Woman also known as Jessica Drew in *Marvel Spotlight #32* (Wolfman and Mooney, 1977) although Carol Danvers had made appearances since her debut in Marvel *Super-Heroes #13* (Lee and Colan, 1968) she had only received her own standalone series in 1977 (Fig2).



Fig. 2: Carol Danver's debut as the main protagonist in 1977 (Conway & Buscema, 1977)

During the Bronze age, Marvel attempted to diversify, but the new additions to Marvel were grounded in stereotypes and sexism and remained ultimately white and cisgender male-

focused and produced (Cocca, 2016). Storm was not a main character and would not receive a solo comic until 1995 while X-Men was viewed as a parallel and social commentary on racism and prejudice in America, the heroes were mainly white while the villains they fought composed of more ethnicities and minorities even in Marvel's attempt to use X-Men as a tool to condemn prejudice. The prejudice of the genre and the target market ultimately dictated heroes as white and villains as the minorities (Darowski, 2014b). Similarly, Carol Danvers' introduction as a protagonist was meant to signify progression, but her characterisation and storylines often operated from deeply rooted misogynistic ideas and representations of women (Cocca, 2016).

Danver's original debut in 1968 was as a side character and primarily as a love interest for Captain Marvel, and less than a decade later, she would take on the mantle of Ms. Marvel in her own series. At the time, having a female character as a powerful protagonist was extremely rare. Ms. Marvel debuted as a standalone series. Although she is a white, thin and blonde woman, her role as a main character signified a change. Danvers was introduced as a skilled Air Force officer and romantic partner for Captain Marvel (Mar-Vell), and her professional competence was often overlooked by her relational ties to Captain Marvel. However, her transformation into Ms. Marvel, following the accidental merging of her DNA with Mar-Vell's, symbolised a significant shift in her relationship and role in the Marvel universe. As Ms. Marvel, Danvers challenged the prevalent portrayal of female characters as exclusive sidekicks or romantic interests. She signified a change and was a nod to the second wave of feminism and diversification without being guilty of controversy (Cocca, 2016). The fact that she was not controversial indicated a lack of disruption to the status quo, which led to the accusation of her superficiality in comic scholarship. Modern comic scholars and

social studies critics viewed this diversification attempt made by Marvel as a diluted attempt at representation because Marvel's true focus was on creating more copyrighted material under their brand (Madrid in Cocca, 2016). This argument is reinforced by the fact that her design, characterisation, costuming and dialogue were primarily devised by a white male team throughout the Bronze Age. This would result in a female character that in theory is a sign of female empowerment, but it was not until approximately the 2000s that Carol Danvers was not represented through fan service[10] and stereotypes.

The cycle of white men creating, writing, and designing the various iterations of Ms. Marvel persisted as Carol Danvers adopted other aliases in the Marvel Universe. The second Ms. Marvel (1986-1994), Sharon Ventura, was created by Mike Carlin and Ron Wilson, while the third Ms. Marvel (2009-2010), Karla Sofen, was created by Marv Wolfman and Frank Robbins, all white men. These creators adhered to similar designs and beauty standards for their female protagonists, which reflected industry trends and societal norms of their respective times. Although Ventura and Sofen have distinct backgrounds and story arcs, their visual portrayal follows a pattern of objectification commonly seen in female comic book characters. Sharon Ventura, initially a stuntwoman and wrestler, adopted the Ms. Marvel identity with a costume that accentuated her physique, reinforcing traditional beauty standards. Her character, while strong and capable, was often depicted in poses and scenarios that highlighted her physical attributes rather than her heroism. Similarly, Karla Sofen's transformation into Ms. Marvel during the "Dark Reign" (Marvel, 2008-2009) storyline maintained the emphasis on sexualised aesthetics. Sofen, more famously known as

[10] Fan service refers to content created to satisfy the target market. It often involved overly sexualising female characters to appease the male audience members.

Moonstone, is a nuanced character, an incredibly intelligent woman with a dark talent for villainy. Sofen's depiction as Ms. Marvel included tight-fitting costumes and revealing designs, which were made to appeal to a predominantly male audience. This portrayal reduced her character to visual appeal, overshadowing her complex personality and capabilities as a powerful villain.

The common thread of objectification is particularly notable in the costuming of the three Ms. Marvels before Kamala Khan. Each iteration of Ms. Marvel wore costumes that were revealing and impractical for combat, focusing more on their appearance than functionality. Carol Danver's original (1977) costume is meant to be a homage to Captain Marvel's costume but its overt sex appeal diminishes the idea that she was thoughtfully constructed as a sign of female empowerment. This trend highlighted a central issue within the comic book industry, where female characters were often valued more for their looks than their personalities, abilities, heroism, or character development. Furthermore, the creative control throughout the Ms. Marvel cycle being dominated by white male writers and artists often resulted in narratives and designs that lacked genuine representation and understanding of the women they sought to represent with rape romanticisation storylines, damsel in distress ideals and rarely fostering strong connections between female characters. This limited the depth and authenticity of the characters, reducing them to archetypes that fit within narrow definitions of femininity and heroism. In 2012, Carol Danvers assumed the mantle of Captain Marvel, and with this new identity came significant changes to her costuming that aligned with her character's evolution and a moved away from stereotypical portrayals of women. Danvers is now often drawn in a full-body suit reminiscent of the original Mar-Vell's. Her costume emphasises functionality and strength over traditional,

often objectifying, female costumes. As Captain Marvel, her costume evolved to reflect her abilities and leadership roles, highlighting the crucial role of costuming in character representation and reinforcing her image as a powerful, independent hero. However, it was not Danvers who broke the sexy curse that plagued the Ms. Marvel title. It was Kamala Khan who broke the male designed white, thin and almost-naked pattern that Marvel used as a template. Carol Danvers, as Ms. Marvel, had the potential to be a feminist icon, but her portrayal was often shaped by the male gaze, making it difficult to present her as a character truly made for women (Langsdale, 2020). When she took on her transformation and new title, she left a gap in the Marvel universe, and her successor could not inherit the old legacy; instead, she had to embody the ideals of Captain Marvel, a hero created for and representative of women.

THE BIRTH OF KAMALA KHAN

The creation of *Ms. Marvel* (2014) was driven by a desire to tell a story, one that Marvel had never told before in mainstream superhero comics (Wilson in Mir, 2017). The series was co-created by writer G. Willow Wilson, a white American Muslim convert, and Sana Amanat, a Muslim Pakistani American editor at Marvel, both of whom spent nine months crafting Kamala's story, infusing their personal perspectives or experiences with faith, identity and cultural belonging into the character's development (Wilson in Mir, 2017). Kamala is a Jersey City native; her city is in the State of New Jersey, where both the creators originate from as well (Wilson in Marvel, 2022). Being the first of her kind in the Marvel universe made her special, but it also made her susceptible to controversy, as her unique character composition put her under the microscope. "Traditional Muslims might want her to be more

modest, and secular Muslims might want her to be less so. Some would be wary no matter what" (Tolentino, 2017). Tolentino's (2017) article for *The New Yorker* prefaces the enormity of the task behind Kamala, her balance of religion would not appease all audiences, her religion itself would displease a wide audience she could be too traditional or not traditional enough, either way criticism would be made whether it was warranted or not. Despite these concerns, their intentions were never to create controversy but rather to craft a narrative that was both specific and universal in its appeal (Wilson in Mir, 2020).

The impetus for Kamala Khan's creation stemmed from Amanat's own experiences as a Pakistani American growing up in the United States. She frequently shared anecdotes with her then-editor, Stephen Wacker, about navigating her dual cultural identity and how her upbringing differed from traditional Western narratives in comics. Recognising that many young readers might relate to these experiences, Wacker and Amanat developed a character that could embody the complexities of being a Muslim-American teenager (Wilson in Mir, 2017, Amanat in Shah, 2018). This vision materialised in Kamala, whose story not only explores traditional superhero themes of power and responsibility but also delves into issues of identity, faith and representation in ways previously unseen in mainstream comics.

A COVENTIONAL ORIGIN STORY FOR AN UNCONVENTIONAL HERO

As a prototypical Marvel character, Kamala's name and surname contain the classic alliteration that Peter Parker, Wade Wilson, Bruce Banner etc, all have, and her origin story follows in a similar traditional Marvel way. Kamala is an ordinary nerd who does not sit very high in her school's social hierarchies, but she finds solace in her friends, family and within her role models the Avengers, particularly Captain Marvel, often writing fan fiction about

them under the pen name “Sloth Baby”. Her life takes a dramatic turn when she gains superhuman abilities, including shapeshifting, accelerated healing, and polymorphing, allowing her to join the ranks of her idols as a superhero. However, these newfound powers also lead to significant internal conflict as Kamala struggles to reconcile her dual identities as a superhero and a South Asian American in a predominantly white American society. The narrative places a strong emphasis on Kamala’s journey of self-discovery, focusing on her search for identity and belonging within a world that often marginalises her because of her faith and ethnicity.

Kamala became part of the Marvel universe at sixteen when mysterious gas later discovered as Terrigen[11] mist activated her Inhuman DNA and subsequently activated her dormant superhuman abilities, awkwardly hurtling the newest Marvel legacy character into heroism. The comic book shows Khan as initially a bit of a social outcast due to race and religion. In the first volume of the story, she is an outcast; she is awkward and geeky like the prototypical Marvel lead, but her struggles extend beyond being unpopular and having nerdy hobbies as she struggles with her physical appearance as a brown woman and her cultural and religious identities in the White West. In contrast to Peter Parker, whose outcast status is based on appearance and class, her struggles focus on her identity as a minority. Her white peers mock her because her parents are strict, and they cannot understand her religion outside of stereotypes. She also struggles with how she looks, her skin, hair and eyes are not the right colour, she has dark brown skin, with brown eyes and

[11]A super race of humans called Inhumans exists In the Marvel universe. An Inhuman has altered DNA which can grant them superpowers. Terrigen Mist is a fictional mutagenic substance that activates dormant Inhuman genes when humans are exposed to the mist.

black hair as opposed to the golden locks, blue eyes, and fair skin of her hero and her popular peers. Kamala's constant comfort and sense of escapism are her role models, the Avengers. She idolises the heroic Avengers, especially Captain Marvel. Her great admiration is expressed in her penmanship as she spends her nights writing fan fiction about her heroes. However, Kamala's imaginative stories about the Avengers and their heroism transcend her imagination when she is granted superhuman abilities that position her in their world. The story places a strong emphasis on coming-of-age narratives, with Kamala establishing who she is as a hero and as a person.

COSTUMING MS. MARVEL

Is she wearing tights and a tunic? Yes, she is, but it is called a salwar/shalwar kameez. Kamala Khan further breaks the mould with her costume. Her colouring representing her allegiance and homage to Carol Danvers. Jamie McKelvie, the British artist responsible for designing Kamala Khan's *Ms. Marvel* costume, worked with the creators to fashion an outfit that aligned with both cultural and practical considerations. As Willow explained in an interview with Shabana Mir (2017, p. 239), the design process required careful thought, particularly given the prevailing norms of female superhero costumes, which often feature revealing elements such as "boob windows" and "butt floss for underwear". The creative team aimed for a more modest approach, ensuring the costume had long sleeves and provided full coverage while remaining functional. Her costume does not sexualise her, nor does it raise questions around practicality and functionality. Drawing inspiration from the burkini, the team sought materials that would be stretchy, sweat-resistant, and readily available to Kamala. Kamala is from a middle-class home, so her costume could not be full of

armour and expensive gadgets like an Ironman character. The creators emphasised that each element of the costume needed a logical and functional purpose and had to be something Kamala could realistically make herself. For instance, Kamala's utility bracelet was crafted from repurposed bangles, welded by her friend Bruno to include storage compartments. Though Kamala does not wear a hijab, she incorporates a scarf that she can drape over her head when needed. The overall goal was to design a practical and culturally respectful superhero costume that did not adhere to traditional sexualised aesthetics.

Kamala's preference is for more modest clothing, and the evolution of her costume mirrors her growing comfort in the Ms. Marvel identity. Her costume borrows from the burkini. Burkinis are modest swimwear covering the entire body except the head, feet, and hands. She experiences wearing Carol Danvers's revealing costume when she takes on the form of Carol Danvers in the first few issues. However, when she returns to her body, she affirms that her comfort lies in more modest wear compared to the revealing costumes she has seen throughout her superfan days. Her costume consists of red tights, a long blue short-sleeved shirt or tunic with Ms Marvel's 1978 lightning bolt on it, a long red scarf borrowed from Danvers' original designs, a long red sleeved shirt underneath her shirt, a mask, blue boots, and a gold bangle. Kamala's costume is the Ms. Marvel colours, red, blue, and gold and the design is a direct homage to the hero but simultaneously is a nod to South Asian fashion, specifically the salwar Kameez or a Kurti worn with churidar.



Fig. 3 Kamala Khan wearing her Ms. Marvel costume (Marvel Comics, 2014)

The Kurti, a long tunic worn by women in India and Pakistan, it is adapted in Kamala's costume to function as both a practical superhero uniform and a cultural homage. Her Kurti-inspired top is typically paired with churidar-like pants, which are fitted trousers with a narrow bottom that gathers at the ankles, creating a fuller and more traditional look. This combination of Kurti and churidar not only respects South Asian fashion but also offers Kamala a comfortable and functional outfit suited for her superhero activities. The costume design is completed with a dupatta, a long scarf often worn with traditional South Asian clothing, Kamala's red dupatta is inspired by Carol Danver's costume that has a red scarf but embodies Khan's personality and culture. In later issues, she adorns a gold bangle which is worn on her wrist and forearm. It is a vital part of her costume, symbolising her cultural heritage and family ties. This traditional piece of South Asian jewellery reflects her Pakistani roots as well as her family, as it is a family heirloom. All these elements tie together to ground her superhero persona in her cultural identity. Although the bangle does not possess any inherent superpowers itself; it serves as a significant aesthetic and symbolic element, blending traditional South Asian aesthetics with her modern South Asian look. By integrating

these elements, Kamala Khan's costume becomes a powerful symbol of her cultural identity, bridging her life as an American teenager and her Pakistani heritage. This thoughtful design choice reinforces the personality of her character.

KAMALA'S KHĀNDĀN[12]

Kamala's comes from a middle class, two-parent household in New Jersey. Her parents, Yusuf, and Muneeba Khan, are immigrants from Pakistan. Her father works at a bank as a clerk and her mother runs the household. Kamala also has an older brother, Amir Khan, who is religious and is likely in his early twenties. The narrative portrays Amir as unemployed and unproductive, making Yusuf the only one providing income for their household. Her parents fit into a traditional patriarchal model, her father provides for his family and her mother fulfils her duties at home. However, her father does not leave all the parental issues to his wife. Her parents both actively participate in her life and her upbringing. She enjoys a close bond with each of her family members. Although they might often disagree, a loving bond remains. A major source of motivation and comfort for the teenager are her closest friends, Bruno Carrelli, a white American Italian who works at the local convenience store Circle Q, and Nakia Bahadir, a Turkish Muslim who wears a hijab. Bruno and Nakia often take responsibility for Kamala and enjoy her peculiar traits. Bruno serves as Kamala's confidante in her heroic endeavours and often serves as a voice of reason. Nakia stands up for herself and Kamala when they face any microaggressions, often taking on the role of a protector. Among the principal supporting characters in the early parts of the narrative is Zoey Zimmer, a popular student who is a peer and at times a bully to Kamala. Kamala's enrolment

[12] Khāndān (خاندان) is Urdu for family. Urdu is the official language of Pakistan.

at Coles Academic High School highlights the importance of academics alongside her heroism. It is well-established that Kamala is a big superhero fan, and all her role models are other Marvel characters. She especially looks up to Captain Marvel and other Avengers as her heroes. Eventually, they all become mentor figures for her. These experiences and relationships shape Kamala's journey and inform her character.

WHY KAMALA KHAN? CHALLENGING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE SUPERHERO GENRE

Islamophobia has long been a fixture of the Western mainstream superhero comic book genre (Strömberg, 2011). Muslim characters are habitually represented through an Orientalist lens that dates to the Golden Age of comic books in the 1930s and continues into the Modern Age (1985-present). This has resulted in an array of racist and dehumanising portrayals of Islam and Muslims, particularly in comics originating from the Occident. The Orientalist perspective employed by Western superhero comics has often conflated and amalgamated diverse Muslim cultures and countries into a fabricated monolithic entity, frequently associated with themes of terror and savagery (Dar, 2010). Both before and after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the terms "Muslim" and "terrorist" have remained synonymous within these comics (Strömberg, 2011, p. 577-579). As a result, Muslim people are frequently reduced to "crude, essentialized caricatures" (Said, 1980) within American culture, perpetuating harmful and reductive representations of Islam, Muslims, and predominantly Muslim countries. Since the 1950s, major comic book conglomerates like Marvel and DC have attempted to incorporate diversity and inclusivity of marginalised groups to dispel the overwhelming whiteness associated with these brands (Singer, 2002). However, until the turn of the twenty-first century, characters from underrepresented

groups were often designed and written by predominantly white, heterosexual, cisgender teams (Strömberg, 2011). This often resulted in creating characters that embodied racist, sexist, and otherwise problematic stereotypes, particularly with representing "Oriental" cultures, religions, and races. Muslim characters were often essentialised into dehumanising stereotypes, especially through the medium of illustration, which allowed for the crafting of outlandish and exaggerated depictions. This mirrored patterns in Hollywood, where Muslim women are frequently portrayed as submissive, oppressed damsels, eroticised and fetishised to fit a white saviour narrative (Shaheen, 2001; Eissa, Guta and Hassan 2022) Meanwhile, Muslim men are typically depicted as a homogenous, violent, and uncivilised mob (Shaheen, 2001).

The consistent stereotypical representation of Muslims has cemented the "Oriental other" as the definitive narrative of Muslim people in comics. However, over the past decade, there has been a gradual introduction of Muslim heroes and characters who subvert Orientalism to varying degrees within mainstream comic book franchises. Khan is Marvel's first Muslim protagonist, a brown, first- American Pakistani teenager of a Pakistani immigrant family. She is the fourth character to assume the mantle of Ms. Marvel, heavily inspired by her predecessor, Carol Danvers[13]. Since her debut, Kamala Khan has been praised for providing a source of empowerment and representation for some minority groups (Jackson-Preece and Bhambra, 2021). She offers minorities the opportunity to see themselves as heroes and to feel seen and represented (Landis, 2019). Kamala Khan is notable for not being subjected

[13] Danvers made her first appearance in March 1968 as a side character in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #13 (Lee and Heck, 1968) and later debuted in her own series in 1977.

to the trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, 2015, p. 36), nor is she constructed through the lens of the white male gaze as the "exotic Oriental other" (Dar, 2010, p. 107). Instead, *Ms. Marvel* is especially praised for its portrayal of Islam without resorting to negative stereotypes, depicting each Muslim character as having a personal relationship with their faith (Karunakaran, 2011). Ms*. Marvel* has generally been well-received by critics and by minority and marginalised groups (Kent, 2015). Islamophobia often served as the source material for Muslim characters, thus Kamala Khan is symbolic of a departure from Orientalist narratives. Therefore, the construction of Islam within her comics is essential for a critical understanding of its representation in modern Marvel comics.

CAN A BROWN GIRL BE A SUPERHERO? THE SUPERHERO GENRE AND WHITENESS

Lund and Guynes (2020) attribute the persistence of these prejudices and biases in comics to the genre's legacy of whiteness. Whiteness is an intrinsic feature of the American superhero comic and the superhero genre, with the genre's very formation and existence deeply rooted in "whiteness" (Lund and Guynes, 2020, p. 4). The authors argue that the pervasive nature of whiteness, derived from Euro-American coloniality and imperialism, is so normalised within the genre that it often operates undetected, continuously advancing a Euro-American agenda. It is conventional for superhero comic books to be embedded with didactic moral influences, aiming to "educate" and "socialise" their readers (Dittmer, 2005, p. 627). These moral lessons and values help readers mediate their understanding of reality and provide guidance on how to navigate the world around them. However, the morality

and values championed by mainstream superheroes often support a master narrative rooted in whiteness (Guynes and Lund, 2020). As a result, comic books have become contributors to the colonial matrix of power, which nurtures and perpetuates whiteness in a manner that often goes unnoticed. Consequently, whiteness is the essence of the American superhero genre, with the white male American identity serving as the only standard for morality and justice, a core element of Marvel superheroes and the genre at large (Lund and Guynes, 2020). The superhero genre's whiteness is deeply ingrained, with characters like Superman (DC Comics, 1938) serving as the prototypical example of this phenomenon. Despite being an alien from Krypton, Superman is depicted "phenotypically" as a white man, which "confers him the social power metaphorically embodied by his superpowers" (Lund and Guynes, 2020, Chapter 2). Therefore, his whiteness protects him and grants him social capital without needing his superhero persona, enabling his seamless integration into American society and universal acceptance as the embodiment of the American Dream. This connection between whiteness and heroism reinforces the idea that the superhero genre is inherently built on white supremacy, where the "white male" standard is the norm. However, when superheroes deviate from this implicit norm, they are often marginalised or forced to conform to whiteness to be accepted. Understanding whiteness as a fundamental aspect of the genre has been a core area of research in academic comic studies and has produced knowledge that investigates how marginalised and underrepresented groups are portrayed within the genre, and how whiteness influences their characters and stories.

Whiteness is a key concept in the investigation of assimilation. Kamala Khan's relatability is a key aspect of her praise and has drawn criticism from postcolonial Islamic discourse

scholars. Santesso (2021, p. 110) argues that Kamala's acceptance as a Muslim South-Asian brown woman in American society is conditional, hinging on her relatability, which compromises her brown, Muslim, Pakistani identity. She argues that Kamala's assimilation into white American society is the primary condition for her acceptance. Assimilation, in this context, involves the forfeiture of a minority or colonised group's culture, values and social behaviours to dissolve into the dominant culture (Santesso and McClung, 2017). Postcolonial and decolonial scholars argue that assimilation requires colonised groups and immigrants to pledge their allegiance to maintaining the status quo established by imperialism (Lewis, 1962). Mignolo (2007) argues that assimilation means submitting to a dispossessing power, admitting one's perceived inferiority, and shedding this inferiority to integrate into a supposedly superior culture and society. Similarly, Fanon (1961), in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, discusses assimilation in the context of colonialism, stating:

> To assimilate the culture of the oppressor and venture into his fold, the colonized subject has to pawn some of his own intellectual possessions. For instance, one of the things he has had to assimilate is the way the colonialist bourgeoisie thinks (Fanon, 1961, p. 13).

Immigrants, minorities, and marginalised groups are expected to assimilate to be accepted into Euro-American societies, often at the cost of their cultural identities. This process of assimilation serves as yet another tool used to subjugate minorities and marginalised communities, a process that Kamala Khan appears to conform to. Also, assimilation is the cornerstone of the inherently colonial and Islamophobic concept of the "good" Muslim (Mamdani, 2002). Using Mamdani's ideas, the extent to which Western societies accept Muslims is directly correlated with their willingness and aptitude to assimilate Euro-American perspectives into their own thinking and behaviour.

Another common method employed by mainstream comic books to include minorities is tokenism (Singer, 2002). Tokenism involves the superficial inclusion of people from minority and marginalised groups, often reducing their race, ethnicity, culture or other aspects of their identity to mere marketing tools or symbols of inclusion. While characters from diverse backgrounds are included, they are often flat, stereotypical, and devoid of nuance and meaningful representation. Tokenism helps maintain the whiteness of comics by placing minorities into rigid, stereotypical categories. Ultimately, tokenism is a superficial act of inclusion and diversity that has been widely used throughout the history of comics (Singer, 2002). Understanding the roles of assimilation, tokenism and whiteness is fundamental to situating people of colour in comics, and this study is particularly concerned with positioning Kamala Khan within the superhero genre.

The next chapter provides a historical overview of the representation of Islam and Muslim characters in comics, focusing on Marvel and DC Comics. By examining past depictions, this chapter establishes a timeline that contextualises Kamala Khan and the *Ms. Marvel* series. Through this analysis, we can better understand how Kamala fits within the history of Muslim representation in mainstream comics and how her character contrasts with or builds upon those who came before her.

CHAPTER 2: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MARVEL AND REPRESENTATION LEADING UP TO MS. MARVEL

This paper examines Kamala Khan as a South Asian Muslim woman in mainstream Western superhero comic books. In order to achieve this goal, this chapter explores the question: **How have the American comic books historically represented the groups that Kamala can identify with?** It provides an overview of the representation of women and people of colour in comic books and the representation of minorities and marginalised groups. This section works to acknowledge and outline how people of colour, women, and Muslim characters have been constructed through racist, sexist, Islamophobic and Orientalist stereotypes and tropes. Establishing and emphasising the progress Khan signals, but also to identify if there are still ongoing remnants of harmful representations.

Orientalism serves as a critical pillar of this chapter because it is one of the core mechanisms through which colonial powers have constructed and maintained the "Otherness" of non-Western cultures, reinforcing hierarchies of power, knowledge and identity that persist in the modern world. The concept of Orientalism, as articulated by Edward Said (1978), reveals how Western representations of the "Orient" have historically functioned to assert and maintain Western dominance over Eastern societies. In the context of decolonial theory, Orientalism is not merely a form of cultural representation; it is a mechanism of control that operates within the larger structure of the colonial matrix of power. Through Orientalism, the West constructs the East as the "Other", reinforcing binaries of superiority and inferiority that are central to maintaining colonial power dynamics.

This Orientalist framing is not just a historical artefact, but continues to have real-world implications, as evidenced by the 2024 English Defence League (EDL) riots in England. The EDL, a far-right group known for its anti-Islamic rhetoric, organised these riots in response to what they perceived as the growing influence of Islam in Britain. Their actions were fuelled by the same Orientalist fears that Said described, fears of a Muslim "takeover" and the perceived incompatibility of Islam with Western values (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015, p. 179). The EDL's portrayal of Muslims during these riots directly echoes the Orientalist narrative of Muslims as a unified, dangerous force. The group's rhetoric and actions were steeped in the idea that Islam is inherently at odds with Western civilization, reflecting the deep-seated anxieties that Orientalism instils. By framing Muslims as a threat to national identity and security, the EDL's activities in 2024 demonstrated how Orientalist ideas continue to shape public perceptions and contribute to the marginalisation and vilification of Muslim communities. By creating a distorted image of the East, Orientalism legitimises Western domination and control, like the "colonial difference" (Mignolo, 2000, p. 58) making it an indispensable cog in the wheel's maintenance that moves colonial power. The distorted image seen in reality has been printed in superhero comics from the dawn of their production.

Another central phenomenon to dissect representation is Islamophobia. Deeply rooted in a long history of colonialism, Islamophobia has been perpetuated through the CMP, making it easy to associate Muslims with terrorism and to portray them as terrorists because it is a naturalised stereotype. Islamophobia fuelled by warped Orientalist perceptions manifests in acts of hate against Muslims in groups like the EDL. According to Ramón Grosfoguel in his paper *"The Multiple Faces of Islamophobia"* (2006), Islamophobia emerged from the

historical antagonism between Christianity and Islam. This "religious difference," which was prominent in pre-modern history, has evolved into a "racial/ethnic difference" in the modern world, a phenomenon Grosfoguel terms Islamophobia (2006, p. 11). Grosfoguel's analysis provides a comprehensive view of Islamophobia as a multifaceted imperialist tool, tracing its development from religious discrimination to a more complex and insidious form of racism, which he categorises as cultural racism and epistemic racism within a world-historical context. Islamophobia and Orientalism are distinct terms but work in tandem to maintain the historically imperialist hierarchical status quo (Isa and Muhammad, 2019). In *Ms. Marvel*, this historical and theoretical framework is essential for understanding how Islam and Muslim identity are represented in the comic. Kamala Khan must navigate a world where Islamophobia is part of her reality. She lives in a post 9/11 era where Euro-American expectations are imposed on Muslims regarding how they should exist in modern society. Mamdani (2002) argues that while acts of brutality have occurred throughout history and across all civilisations, when such acts are committed by white individuals or those associated with the West, they are not categorised as good or bad Westerners. In contrast, Islam has been politicised through the lens of modernity and coloniality, leading to an ongoing process of categorising Muslims into two distinct binaries: the "good" Muslim, who is fully assimilated and Westernised, and the "bad" Muslim, who is portrayed as an archaic fundamentalist, conservative, and, particularly after the events of 9/11, as a terrorist and an enemy of democracy and freedom (Mamdani, 2002, p. 766).

FROM TROPES TO TRUTH: THE SHIFTING REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM MEN IN COMICS

Muslim characters are rarely represented outside the realm of stereotypes and racism and are commonly subjected to the "superhero genre's long history of excluding, trivialising, or "tokenizing minorities"" (Singer, 2002, p. 107). The representation of Muslim characters and other marginalised minorities and underrepresented groups has been solely constructed and designed by white cisgender heterosexual American men because they dominate the comic book industry (Lavin 1998b, Turberville, 2016). This leads to one-dimensional representations that play into problematic stereotypes that harm and demean the communities these characters are part of.

Jack G. Shaheen is infamous for his work on Muslim and Arab representation in mainstream American culture and identifies the most common Western stereotypes of Muslims and the East in Western media. His most referenced work is his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001) that resulted in a highly referenced documentary, *Reel Bad Arabs* (Jhally, 2006). The book and film analyse multiple Hollywood productions that feature Muslim characters and investigate how the Orientalist gaze has carved each representation into a stereotypical and harmful image. Throughout his work, Shaheen identifies the common gendered archetypes which Arab people are moulded into within comics: "the repulsive terrorist," "the sinister sheikh," and "the rapacious bandit", "scantily clad and salivated-upon belly dancer" or a "faceless housewife, whose thick-set form is bundled up in dark robes" (Shaheen 1994, p.124,129). Subsequently, Muslim people often fall into the same categories in superhero comic books because it is a Western media

product and will often speak the same language as Hollywood, where all Muslims are Arab and all Arabs are Muslim (Shaheen, 2003). The superhero genre's history provides evidence of the presence and impact of Orientalism and Islamophobia.

BATMAN'S FEAR OF THE 'OTHER': CONFLATING MUSLIMS WITH TERROR ACROSS COMICS

In Jehanzeb Dar's paper, *Holy Islamophobia, Batman! Demonization of Muslims and Arabs in Mainstream American Comic Books* (2010), Dar draws on the various issues of DC's Batman that capitalise on the villainising of Muslim people to illustrate the deeply entrenched Orientalist and Islamophobic views that are normalised within the comic book industry from powerhouses like DC comics. Dar's (2010) discussion of the demonisation of Muslim people is best illustrated through his exploration of Jim Starlin's *Batman: A Death in the Family* (DC Comics #426-429,1988). In this story, Batman travels to the coast of Lebanon and the Lebanese capital Beirut in pursuit of Jason Todd[14] and the Joker. The first scene of Lebanon is war-torn with Batman's discovery that the Joker has come here to sell arms to terrorists. Arriving in the city, Bruce Wayne is met with a picture of hopelessness, citizens are armed or injured (Fig. 4), and Wayne feels unsafe in the city because "This is not a safe place for an American" (Starlin, Aparo and DeCarlo, 1988, p. 36).

[14] Jason Todd was adopted by Bruce Wayne and became his sidekick, Robin, after being taken in as an orphan.



Fig. 4: Bruce Wayne Arrives in Beirut from Batman: A Death in the Family (Starlin, Aparo & DeCarlo, 1988, p. 36).

The juxtaposition of a civilised American in an uncivilised nation is a recurring theme throughout the story. Batman's characterisation as a figure that thrives in Gotham, a city infamous for its unchecked crime, corruption and chaos, emphasises his ability to confront danger with composure. However, when placed in the context of Lebanon in 1988, his perceived vulnerability as an American reflects a stereotypical portrayal shaped by an American lens and bias. This depiction suggests that Lebanon is an environment even more perilous than Gotham, amplifying its danger to a degree that overshadows even the fictional city's exaggerated lawlessness.

This framing reflects the prevailing American narratives of the time, which often viewed Lebanon through a narrow geopolitical lens, defined by the Lebanese Civil War, regional instability, and anti-American sentiment. The portrayal reveals a tendency within American popular culture, including comics, to depict Lebanon as a chaotic and hostile place, shaped

more by U.S. political anxieties instead of a nuanced understanding of the region's complexities. This reinforces a stereotype that aligns with broader media depictions of the Middle East during the late Cold War era, perpetuating a one-dimensional image rather than fostering a more accurate or empathetic perspective.

This comic serves as a striking example of how Muslim men are dehumanised and reduced to stereotypes within the comic book genre. In the opening scene of the Middle East arc, Batman is shown battling Shiite[15] "terrorists," all of whom are portrayed with identical facial features, and body types, and dressed uniformly in stereotypical "terrorist" attire (keffiyehs[16]) whilst wielding guns. They are depicted as immoral gunslingers who are willing to do business with the Joker, a character notoriously void of humanity. When Iranian men are introduced into the storyline, also all drawn identically to each other. The Lebanese and Iranian men are essentially reduced to one image and stripped of individualism, using comic books to illustrate that Muslim men are all evil clones of each other. From the moment Bruce Wayne lands in Lebanon, Muslim men are homogenised, their individuality erased in favour of a monolithic portrayal that aligns with reductive and orientalist tropes. In the context of 1988, this portrayal is emblematic of the geopolitical anxieties of the time, influenced by the Lebanese Civil War, the hostage crisis and a general climate of tension between the U.S. and the Middle East. Rather than offering a nuanced representation of the region or its people, the comic perpetuates a dehumanising narrative that reinforces

[15] A Shiite or Shi'a is a follower of Shiite Islam, one of the two major branches of Islam,

[16] A keffiyeh is a traditional Middle Eastern scarf it is typically made of cotton and features a distinctive checkered pattern symbolising cultural identity thus the design changes according to different regions and can be worn in association with political resistance.

harmful stereotypes, feeding into the larger discourse of fear and misunderstanding surrounding Muslims and the Middle East.

One of the climactic moments in the story occurs when the Islamic terrorists strike a deal with the Joker and purchase a missile from him. The terrorists intend to send that missile to the Israeli city of Tel Aviv. The expensive missile is purchased by the leader of the Muslim terrorists, a man named Jamal, who is the embodiment of the stereotypical "dim-witted" Arab oil tycoon (Shaheen 2003, p. 172), a wealthy man devoid of morals. However, Jamal's plans are foiled and instead, the missile detonates on him due to a faulty launch, and the Joker escapes in the chaos. In these panels of the comic, Shaheen's stereotypes are all at play simultaneously Jamal's group of Arab clones are written as "the repulsive terrorist," while Jamal is "the sinister sheikh," and earlier Batman finds the location of the Joker's arms deal by beating up a man selling illegal medical supplies, "the rapacious bandit" (Shaheen 2003, p. 172). Such depictions reflect a common pattern of flattening Muslim identities in Western media, where Muslim men are often cast as antagonists defined solely by violence, their humanity stripped away in favour of caricatured traits.

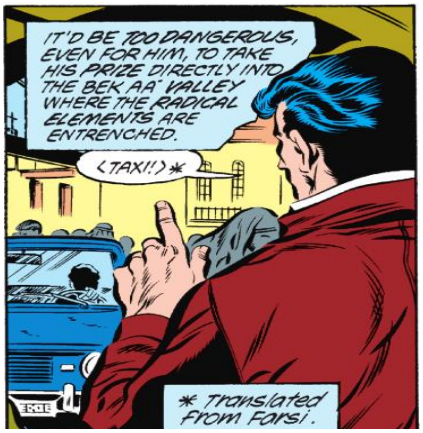

Fig. 5: Bruce Wayne speaking Farsi in Lebanon (Starlin, Aparo & DeCarlo, 1988, p. 37)

The comic's portrayal of Lebanon and Iran reveals a significant lack of geographical, cultural, and historical awareness, as it conflates Iran and Lebanon, which are two distinct nations with unique identities. The absent distinction is based solely on their shared majority Muslim populations. This is credited to the Occidental idea that all Muslim nations are one (Shaheen, 1994, p. 131). This reductionist perspective erases the profound differences between the two countries, including their languages, cultures, histories and geopolitical roles. An example of this is when Bruce continues to search for Jason and the Joker in Lebanon, he begins to speak in Farsi (Fig. 5) despite Lebanon being an Arabic-speaking country, confusing the languages spoken in Lebanon with the language of Iran, the other country involved in this storyline.

Iran is a West Asian and Middle Eastern country, but the story constructs the country by borrowing from multiple Muslim countries without observing if they share any commonality with Iranian culture. Furthermore, throughout this story Lebanon, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates are represented continually as one fictitious land based on Orientalist stereotypes. Iran is not an Arab country yet when the Joker appears adorned in "Iranian attire" as the Iranian ambassador. He is wearing an Arab robe and headdress. Although they might appear as minute details, they are unmistakable distinctions and confusing two vastly different nations illustrates the interchangeable nature of Eastern countries within the comic book genre often stemming from the writer's Orientalist views and lack of research on the people and countries they are attempting to represent (Dar, 2010).

The comic embodies a narrative rooted in the "Clash of Civilizations" (Huntington, 1996)[17] framework, where the divide between the West and the Muslim world is depicted as a fundamental opposition between progress and barbarism, freedom and violence. In this framing, Muslim nations are portrayed as inherently hostile to Western ideals, such as peace, democracy and liberty, while Western characters such as Batman become symbolic of these values. This reductive binary not only oversimplifies complex geopolitical realities but also reinforces harmful stereotypes that vilify Muslim-majority nations. This dynamic is evident when the Joker reunites with Batman and Superman at the UN General Assembly, but this time, he is attending the UN summit as an ambassador of Iran. The Joker is selected by the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, after Khomeini made an elaborate effort to contact the Joker and offer him a position in his government (Fig. 6).

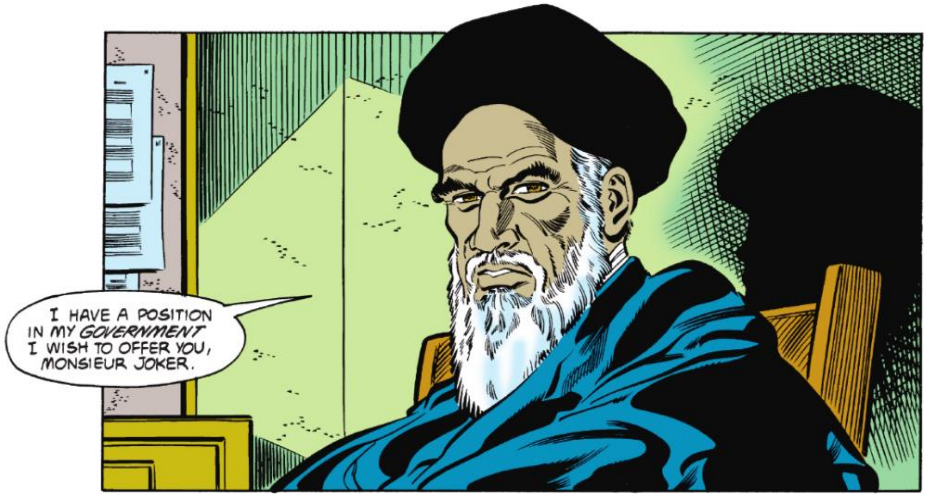

Fig. 6: Illustration of Ayatollah Khomeini depicted Iran's leader (Starlin, Aparo & DeCarlo, 1988, p. 112), a controversial portrayal that intertwines real-world politics with fictional storytelling.

[17] Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) is a much-contested book that argues cultural and religious identities will become the primary sources of global conflict. Critics often argue it oversimplifies complex socio-political dynamics and fosters binary thinking. For example, Jervis (1997, p. 308) highlights that Huntington often flattens complex issues and thus perpetuates geopolitical tension and undermines the societies he discusses as proof of his arguments.

At the UN assembly meeting, the Joker delivers a speech on behalf of Iran (Fig. 7): "I am proud to speak for the great Islamic Republic of Iran. That country's current leaders and I have a lot in common. Insanity and a great love of FISH" (Starlin, Aparo & DeCarlo, 1988, p. 135). This political affiliation directly implies that the people and government of Iran wilfully accept and embrace a psychopathic villain, the Joker, as their ambassador because they have the same extreme views and hatred of the West and Western Society and a similar disregard for humanity as well. This narrative plays into the wilful attribution of Muslim countries having the characteristics of being uncivilised and backwards. Iran, representing a conflation of Muslim countries, hates America to the extent they would ally with the Joker. This portrayal actively speaks to the notion that Muslim countries hate democracy, freedom, and civilisation and possess such a strong hatred of the United States because the USA encompasses all three. The comic book successfully distinguishes the United States' superiority over Iran by contrasting its endorsement of Batman against Iran's endorsement of the Joker (Fig. 7). The countries aligned with the United States like Israel are victims in the story, while the countries the United States has lost imperial control of and is not allied with



Fig. 7: Depiction of the Joker addressing the United Nations as Iran's representative (Starlin, Aparo & DeCarlo, 1988, p. 135)

are essentially evil. This comic book represents the standard for how most comics usually represent Muslim people and Muslim countries.

Jim Starlin's *Batman: A Death in the Family* (DC Comics #426-429, 1988) may be an older example from the comic book industry, but it's important to note that the industry has been evolving and becoming noticeably more diverse in recent years. The depiction of Muslim men as an oppressive, faceless and violent mob is still not considered as prejudicial or inaccurate in comics and continues to be a popular storyline across the mainstream industry. One of the most popular examples of this is Frank Miller's controversial graphic novel *Holy Terror* (2011). *Holy Terror* is another prime example of dangerous Islamophobic messages in mainstream superhero comics (Dar, 2010). Frank Miller is an acclaimed and well-revered American comic book writer and artist. He is praised for his work on Marvel's *Daredevil* series in the 1970s, but Miller is most well-known for his work on Batman as the "Dark Knight" that began in the 1980s. *Holy Terror* was originally meant to debut as part of DC Comics' repertoire as a Batman comic but was struck by the company and published by Legendary Comics LLC. In 2006, when the novel was meant to be a Batman story, Miller announced the title of the story: *Holy Terror; Batman!* at a comic book convention called WonderCon (Goldstein, 2006). There, Miller detailed the content of the comic as "a piece of propaganda," where "Batman kicks al Qaeda's ass" (Miller in Goldstein, 2006). However, the comic was abandoned by DC Comics, but Miller released the comic with slightly different characters that do not infringe on the intellectual property of DC. The novel was released in 2011 on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Miller intended the novel to be a "love letter" to his country as it is centred on notions of right-winged nationalism (Mehring, 2020, p. 16). The story holds a strong sense of patriotism, but it is rooted in Islamophobia. Based

on the idea that organisations like Al-Qaeda represent Islam, it alludes to Islam and Muslims being a danger to democracy and the United States.

The storyline of *Holy Terror* follows a masked vigilante called the Fixer, a counterfeit version of Miller's Batman, but unlike Bruce Wayne, the Fixer wields a gun. The Fixer and his sidekick, who is a copycat of Catwoman known as Cat Burglar, fight violent Muslim terrorists to save their version of a Gotham-like city named Empire City. In 2006, Miller stated that his comic book is "a reminder to people who seem to have forgotten who we're up against" (Miller in Goldstein, 2016). Miller makes sure to remind the audience that it is brown men in turbans who incorrectly speak words of the Quran that are the threat that "we are up against" (Goldstein, 2016).



Fig. 8: An excerpt from Miller's (2011) ***Holy Terror*** *published by Legendary Comics.*

The comic begins with a mistranslated quote from the Quran (Miller, 2011, p. 1). The line attributed to the Prophet Mohammed (Fig. 8), "If you meet the infidel, kill the infidel," distorts the context of Islamic teachings to frame Islam as inherently violent. The portrayal of Islam as a violent, fanatical, and intolerant religion begins from the very first frame. This misrepresentation aligns with propaganda practices used to vilify Islam (Zaidi, 2008). Scholars argue that such quotes are often taken out of context to demonise Muslim communities. Scholars such as Zaidi (2008) critique the use of selective Quranic

misinterpretations in media and popular culture to fuel Islamophobia and justify aggression against Muslims. Miller utilises the Prophet Muhammad's name to do so. Many Muslims consider the use of "Muhammad" to be the most respectful form of addressing the Prophet, as it closely mirrors the original Arabic spelling and pronunciation. Variations like "Mohammed" are generally seen as less formal or accurate, particularly in religious contexts. To convey respect, it is common to use phrases such as "Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)" and "Prophet Muhammad (SAW)" by Muslims or "Prophet Muhammed". Respect is shown through the name's usage, and its transliteration reflects cultural and linguistic preferences. This viewpoint aligns with the importance placed on maintaining accuracy in representing names, as names reflect a person and can represent core points of their identity, revealing their heritage, family/tribe and thus should be addressed with care (Al-Faruqi, 1986). Miller's dismissal of practices, usually upheld by Muslims like the correct spelling and respectful titles when addressing the Prophet, offers insight into the comic's trajectory.

Throughout the comic, the terrorist screams "Praise Allah," and voices hatred towards the West (Miller, 2011). Throughout *Holy Terror*, the Fixer battles brown Arab-looking Muslim men who adorn turbans and represent terrorists. Muslim men portrayed as terrorists bear a striking resemblance to a horde of weapon-wielding zombies. The Muslim "other" is drawn as almost faceless and identical silhouettes (Mehring, 2020). Muslim men scream about killing infidels and recite passages from the Quran that are taken out of context, reduced, and twisted to fit the image of terror equated with Islam in the novel (Mehring, 2020). The story crafts a pointed didactic message, that American values and Islam do not align,

America believes in democracy and freedom and Islam is rigid, conservative, and fanatical, like Batman's message in *Batman: A Death in the Family* (Starlin, Aparo & DeCarlo, 1988). Throughout the comic book, the barbarism of Muslim men is emphasised.



Fig. 9: A Muslim man makes crude and violent threats in the name of Allah and Islam (Miller, 2011)

The Muslim men in the comic objectify and sexualise Cat Burglar when they capture her (Fig. 9). They intend to behead her while she is naked and broadcast it. The terrorist threatening her laughs and mocks her, while gloating about the size of their organisation. He implies that this terrorist attack is minute, and the West is horribly unprepared for their forces and what is to come. This fuels rhetoric that the West is constantly under threat by Muslims and that they need to keep building their military and be armed against the threat of the Muslim. Again, this reiterates the uncivilised savagery native to Muslim men. Not only do the Muslim characters reinforce Islamophobic and Orientalist stereotypes, but they also incite hatred towards Islam.

While Starlin's (1988) Batman beats up the Muslim and Arab terrorists and bandits in the comic, Miller's depiction of violence against the villains (Muslim terrorists) is often gory and unending. The Fixer (Fig. 10) violently kills most of the Muslim men in the comic. The multiple images of killing Muslim and Arab men are represented as poetic justice and

retribution thus, the violence is justified (Mehring, 2020). The comic reads like a wish-fulfilment dream. The Fixer kills countless brown men in turbans by shooting bullets through their heads, stomping them to death or beating them to death. Superhero comic books are always concerned with morals and justice. In the comic books where Muslims are terrorists, the justice that is dealt to them is often violent and gory. Similarly, the violence in *Holy Terror* is represented as an act of retribution for America and freedom, making it palatable, acceptable, and even celebrated.



Fig. 10: Miller's (2011) one of many violent depictions of the hero killing Muslim terrorists

The sense of true justice is heightened as the Fixer's actions become increasingly violent (Fig. 10). He physically squashes and kills them, exerting excessive force as an act of power and justice over terrorism. The reception of this comic book was less concerned with racism and Islamophobia but rather readers on forums and in Amazon reviews complained that the art style was unappealing, and the ending was unsatisfying. Signalling the issue with Frank Miller's story was not in his anti-Muslim rhetoric, but in his stylistic choices.

FROM DAMSELS TO DEFENDERS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN COMICS

The sexualisation, sexism, and misrepresentation of female characters in mainstream superhero comics is a well-documented and imperative component of comic book studies. The history of female characters in the superhero genre reveals the disturbingly sexist nature of mainstream comic books. Since the inception of the superhero genre, women have commonly been reduced to fantasies of the male gaze (Facciani, Warren and Vendemia, 2015). Female characters are sexually objectified and illustrated in the image of Western beauty standards with "idealised bodies" (Cocca, 2015, p. 415). They often have unrealistic body proportions with extremely tiny waists but large breasts and thin long legs and appear in comics posing in impractical stances in hypersexualised outfits to emphasise their sexual appeal and satisfy the male gaze. Pin-up models inspired the depiction of female characters during the Platinum Age of comic books (1930s-1940s), their "beauty" serving as their defining personality trait and key attribute (Turberville, 2016, p. 74). While sexuality, beauty and a pin-up physique can be powerful, empowering women is not at the heart of this representation rather it is the opposite it is meant to reduce women to being objects to be looked at by the predominantly male audience (Cocca, 2020).

Sexism is evidenced outwardly and inwardly in female characters. Sexism is expressed outwardly in how women are conceptualised and designed. It is conceptualised inwardly through the construction of their personalities, their roles, and their relationships with male characters. Women in comic books have often been forced into the role of the damsel, a legacy that lingers on the pages of modern comics (Turberville, 2016). The damsel in distress

is always in need of a male saviour regardless of how powerful she might be. Often, male heroes have female counterparts with identical powers; however, these women still require rescue and are frequently deemed inferior to, and less skilled than, their male counterparts. For example, Super-girl often relies on Superman to save her and, despite their superpowers being almost identical, she is represented as less powerful than him.

Sexual objectification of women in comics often leads to depictions of sexual harassment and violence against women being represented as normal and without consequences. The mainstream superhero genre has a history of perpetuating destructive rape myths and victim-blaming women (Garland, Branch, and Grimes, 2015). Comic books frequently represent sexual assault and rape as the fault of a woman, blaming women for being assaulted because of how they dress or if they act outside of their established gender roles, where men dominate women who are powerful or challenge them (Garland, Branch, and Grimes, 2015). Sexual assault or rape against women is disguised as a trivial matter in comics by showing that women did not fight hard enough against the assault meaning that they consent to it happening. The comics frequently portray the women as secretly or eventually enjoying their assault. This promoted the notion that the victim may come to enjoy the assault despite it being non-consensual (Garland, Branch, and Grimes, 2015). However, in the past ten years, there have been significant improvements in the development and representation of female characters because of an uptake in diversity within the industry (Cardo and Curtis 2018). The steady improvement of authentic and empowering representations of women is largely due to increased collaboration and inclusion of women and diverse writers and illustrators in the creation and production of

mainstream comic books. While great strides are being made, their sexism and sexual objectification of women are still heavily prevalent in the superhero genre (Pratiwi, 2013; Stabile in Facciani et al., 2015), making heroes like Kamala Khan the exception and not the norm.

FROM VEILED VICTIM TO STANDALONE HERO: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN COMICS

In recent years there have been small and slow attempts by Marvel and DC to create Muslim women outside of an Oriental and Islamophobic lens. However, historically, Muslim women have been stuck in the same Orientalist stereotypes. Western comics often place Muslim characters in two rigid gendered roles, the Muslim man as a terror and the Muslim woman as an exoticised and oppressed damsel (Dar, 2010, p. 106). Muslim women have existed in mainstream superhero comics with barely any dialogue or brief appearances. The first DC Muslim woman was Salima Baranizar, starring in *Blue Beetle: Millennium Week 2* #20 (Wein, Andru, and Bulanadi, 1988). Salima is an Iranian niqabi selected to join a superhero group, but she is denounced for advocating for the American heroes because they are "agents of Satan" (Wein, Andru, and Bulanadi, 1988)(Fig. 11). She is subsequently locked up by the Ayatollah and saved by a white American hero.



Fig. 11: Salima Baranizar is saved in Blue Beetle: Millennium Week 2 #20 (Wein, Andru, and Bulanadi, 1988)

Later, she is stoned to death by the people of Iran for her involvement with the Americans. Regardless of her power, she is depicted solely as an oppressed victim, subject to the stringent laws of Islam. Salima is not only represented as the weak and submissive, oppressed Muslim woman, but also the exotic and sexual object stereotype. She is sexually objectified throughout the comic and even in death, the pose and image of her corpse are displayed to satisfy the white male gaze (Fig. 12). The position of her limbs and facial expression are drawn to evoke sensuality and draw attention to her curves and exposed skin. The suggestive angle disregards the brutality of her death, instead presenting her as an eroticised prop that reinforces her role as a sexualised "other" in the narrative.



Fig. 12: Salima Baranizar is stoned to death (Wein, Andru, and Bulanadi, 1988).

Fourteen years later, Marvel added a niqabi heroine named Dust to their *X-Men* series. Although she is Afghani and belongs to a different franchise, she was crafted from many of the same stereotypes that Salima came from. Scottish writer Grant Morrison's Dust appears in the *X-Men* comic series. Dust or Sooraya Qadir is an Afghani superheroine and mutant who can manipulate sand. She was created with the intention of being a "positive" Muslim representation of Muslim people after the onslaught of hateful representations Muslim

characters received due to the 9/11 attacks (Pumphrey, 2016, p. 794). Although Marvel's creative teams intended to produce diversity and nuance for Muslim characters, Dust's execution falls short of this goal. In comic book studies, Dust is often used as a prime example of the Oriental Other. Beginning with Sooraya's superpowers that are clichéd and again illustrate how the term Muslim and Arab are conflated. Sand and the desert are commonly associated with Arab nations. Orientalist constructions have exclusively designed Arab nations as exotic desert lands consisting of sand dunes and tents on dusty barren lands. The association of Muslims and sand has manifested as Dust's character, as she herself can turn into sand and manipulate sand particles. However, the main issue does not reside with the fact that Dust has cliched and lazily devised superpowers. The biggest issue with Dust's powers is that she is meant to be an Afghani character, yet she is designed with Orientalist ideas of Arab nations. Afghanistan is not purely a Middle Eastern country; it is also a Central Asian country and is distinct from Saudi Arabia and The United Arab Emirates. Therefore, people do not normally speak Arabic. Most of the population speaks Pashto and Dari, the official languages of the country. Sooraya speaks Arabic, which is not a common language spoken in Afghanistan. Mistaking a character's first language illustrates that little research has been invested in this character by her creators. Instead of creating inclusivity, she demonstrates the dominant logic that operates in comics.

When the X-Men hear of Dust's incredible sand powers, they decide to recruit her into their team by going to Afghanistan to save her. Despite being framed as incredibly powerful, Wolverine and the X-Men save Sooraya from slavers trying to take her niqab off. Within her debut, Dust is already catering to the white male gaze, as a damsel in need of a white

saviour to rescue her from the uncivilised East (Strömberg, 2011). Although Dust appears on the cover of the comic and makes her debut within the story, her dialogue throughout the entire comic is limited to a single Arabic word, “toorab,” meaning “dust,” spoken at the end. While the depiction of Dust as a voiceless damsel is not consistently maintained throughout her narrative, her character introduces several other problematic elements that warrant critical examination.



Fig. 13: Dust seductively posing in a skintight abaya (DeFilippis and Weir, 2005).

Dust’s characterisation is marked by inconsistency, as her personality frequently shifts and evolves in ways that lack coherence and a well-developed idea of the character. Throughout her storyline, she is portrayed as an outcast, even among other outcasts. Dust frequently explains and justifies her religion and the choice of wearing the niqab to her fellow mutants. Although mutants are meant to be the outcasts and misfits of the world, Sooraya is isolated from them because her niqab and religion are too different to be accepted, and she does

not receive the found family treatment that most other mutants experience. Sooraya's personality is inconsistent and her relationship with Islam and the mutants' changes from comic issue to issue. Her morals and values based on Islam are not based on research or authentic experiences, but rather they are based on the various writers' views on Islam. In one issue, she is depicted as someone tolerant and states she does not judge what other women wear as she chooses to dress modestly but, in another issue, she is openly shaming a female X-Men character for wearing revealing clothing. She is both intolerant and tolerant. Sooraya wears the niqab and states she wears a niqab and an abaya because she chooses to, and she does so to avoid the male gaze. Ironically, throughout the series, Sooraya is highly sexualised in similar ways to Salima.



Fig. 14: Sooray *(Marvel Comics)*

Her niqab is not respected by illustrators and rather her veil becomes an exotic fantasy. The hero appears naked in one issue, her sand form is often revealing of her body, and she appears in sexualised poses and skin-tight versions of her abaya which outlines the typical "perfect" coke-bottle body women are drawn within comics. While she was designed with

the intention to combat hateful images of Muslims after 9/11, often in Western comics, this intention is not executed instead she conforms to “othering” (Strömberg, 2011, p. 57).

While Sooraya Qadir largely failed to offer a positive representation of Muslim women, Faiza Hussein fulfils the role Dust was meant to. Faiza is a British Pakistani doctor, a superhero, and the noble wielder of the sword, Excalibur. Faiza is a Muslim and proud hijabi who defends and serves the people of the United Kingdom (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Faiza as Excalibur fighting an enemy agent in U.S.Avengers issues #7 through #9 (Ewing. and Medina, 2017)

She is known by her alias, Excalibur, and made her debut in Marvel comics in the Captain Britain series, Captain Britain, and MI*: 13* #1 (2008). Although Faiza only appears in a limited number of issues in the Marvel comics and is not the main character, she is a notable and important representation because she is one of the very first Marvel Muslim women who is not a complete embodiment of Orientalism and Islamophobia. The writers make a visible

effort to ensure that she is someone whose religion is a visible and symbolic but not the entirety of who she is.

> "I have two aims here: to make her a real person and not someone who has to represent the entire British Muslim world all the time -- I think superheroes are too prone to being standard bearers for whole communities -- and to make her an everyday religious person who you won't hear anything religious from until it would naturally come up" (Cornell in Ekstrom, 2008).

Faiza does not have to justify her choice of her hijab in the defence of Islam and is welcomed as a visible Muslim by her teammates. Similar to Kamala, she is talkative and passionate about her hyper-fixations, Faiza's being cricket. Creating a dynamic and confident hero whose hijab is never a sign of oppression. Although there is a romance between her and another character, Faiza is never sexualised and her relationships develop out of mutual trust and respect. Faiza dresses modestly and at no point is her modest dress fetishised like Dust's latex abaya. Faiza wears white non-form-fitting Western doctor's clothes as a civilian and her superhero outfit is similarly non-revealing to uphold her choice of modest dress. As Excalibur, she is dressed in traditionally masculine knightly armour with a blue tunic bearing the Essex coat of arms and a chain-mail hood that provides the same coverage as a hijab (Strömberg, 2011, p. 591).

Faiza's parents are also presented as modern, a subversion of the stereotypical traditional immigrant Muslim parents. Mr and Mrs Hussain are second-generation British Pakistani doctors. Faiza is the product of a "traditional British suburban home" and her dynamic with

her parents is joyful (Strömberg, 2011, p. 591). Although Faiza was created by two men Paul Cornell, and Leonard Kirk, the research put into developing this character is evident in the portrayal of Faiza and her family.

Although there have been attempts throughout DC and Marvel's comic history to better represent Muslim women beyond victims and objects. There are still recurring stereotypes that persist in mainstream comic books for Muslim women who are not represented as oppressed victims. These Muslim characters often face the stereotypical inconsolable inner conflict between self and religion. Muslim women in Western media who are powerful and empowered often face an issue with being empowered and being Muslim because they cannot be both. They cannot be their true selves and good Muslims at the same time because Islam is constructed as an intolerant religion that does not afford women the right to be independent and powerful nor can they have a voice. There are always Muslim women having identity crises because who they are does not fit in with what their religion dictates in all Western media including comics. One example of a strong and powerful Muslim plagued with inner conflict is Marvel's Monet St. Croix. Monet is a black Muslim mutant who is powerful but feels guilt and struggles with her power and personality because she feels that it is at war with her religion causing inner turmoil for the hero (Karunakaran 2017). Monet is also an example of the tokenised Muslim woman because her faith plays no major role beyond her mentioning it once or twice to an Islamophobic crowd, but it is never developed further than a mention (Karunakaran, 2017, p. 12).

While these examples explore harmful stereotypes in comic books, there are exceptions that have begun to emerge. For example, DC Comics has introduced Bilal Asselah a Muslim and Algerian hero known as Nightrunner who forms part of Batman's global team. DC has also introduced American Egyptian hero Khalid Nassour who is an incarnation of Doctor Fate, a hero that was appointed by the Egyptian Gods to uphold balance and justice. The most notable Muslim hero in the DC universe currently, is Simon Baz because he has the longest-running series and most appearances as the main protagonist. Simon takes on the mantle of the Green Lantern and is the main character for multiple issues of the Green Lantern. Simon Baz is especially notable because he is a black Muslim man which is a rare representation (Karunakaran 2017). Marvel has a new Muslim mutant part of their *Teen Titan's Academy* series, Summer Zahid. Summer is a young hijabi mutant who is immensely powerful, but she is a minor character, thus there is not much material on the character. Another new addition to the Marvel universe is Zarina Zahari. Zarina is the United Kingdom's friendly neighbourhood hero, known as Spider-UK. Zarina like Baz is a rarity because she is a black Muslim woman part of the Spider-verse and although her character is still relatively new and in development, she is a bright and formidable character who, like Kamala Khan, is not a victimised Muslim woman. Although some of these representations break the stereotypical mould, there may still be problematic elements within their characterisation or storylines, which is why it is important to celebrate these characters but still apply a critical lens in their representation.

CHAPTER 3: A DISSECTION OF THE COMIC

The first few volumes of a comic book series function similarly to a television series pilot, establishing the tone of the series, the main character and their relationships, which provides the groundwork for subsequent narratives. The first volumes of *Ms. Marvel* (Issues #1–#19) is the focus of this study because it introduces Kamala Khan and establishes the origin of the character as well as the base of the series. Although comics can significantly diverge from their canonical beginnings, a character's origin story is a core component of the series and the character's makeup. Kamala's origin story emerges as a powerful exploration of intersectionality. This analysis focuses on how Kamala's identity is constructed, specifically examining how her cultural heritage, religious beliefs, family dynamics and position as the daughter of immigrants are constructed and influence her superhero sense of justice. This chapter's analysis asks: **How is Kamala's racial, religious and cultural identity constructed through her establishing story arc?** While the comic book's narrative explores the influence of Kamala's Pakistani and Muslim heritage on her perspective and self-perception, this chapter explores the narrative's limitations and challenges within the American socio-cultural context. This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the comic book series, categorised by volume, focusing on the protagonist's relationships, experiences with assimilation, and the interplay between her spiritual and outward expressions of Islam as defining character aspects.

The series reflects the themes of generational conflict, cultural expectations and the pressures of assimilation while framing Kamala's development through her relationships with her family, friends and the villains she faces. The first volume highlights how the series'

characters tread a fine line between challenging stereotypes and reinforcing Orientalist narratives about Muslim femininity and masculinity. The critique focuses on how the moderate Muslim is represented through Kamala Khan as an acceptable standard of Islam in the mainstream media. Throughout the volume, Kamala is depicted as a moderate Muslim heroine, embodying Western values of individualism and self-determination while negotiating her cultural and religious heritage in a vague and inconsequential way. This negotiation is symbolic of the struggle of Muslim women in popular culture, where they are often forced to balance their cultural heritage with the expectations of Western society. The way Kamala challenges her family's traditional beliefs without completely rejecting them illustrates her role as a "moderate" Muslim, a representation that, according to Santesso (2020), perpetuates Orientalist biases by positioning Kamala as a palatable figure for Western audiences. Her modernity, framed against her conservative male figures, reinforces this dichotomy between progressive and backward, with Kamala embodying the former.

VOLUME ONE #1 MS. MARVEL

The first issue of *Ms. Marvel* (2014) plays a pivotal role in introducing Kamala Khan and laying the foundation for her character's journey throughout the series. Origin stories in comics are significant because they establish the central conflicts that will shape the narrative. The first issue serves as the audience's entry point, designed to capture attention and build interest. In Kamala's case, this introduction is important because it establishes her unique appeal within the superhero landscape.



Fig. 16: Kamala drooling over the BLT (Ms. Marvel, 2014, Issue #1).

Issue #1 effectively sets the stage for Kamala's internal struggle by humorously portraying her desire for a BLT (Bacon, Lettuce and Tomato) sandwich as she presses against the glass in a convenience store (Fig. 16). She refers to the BLT as "delicious, delicious infidel meat" (Wilson, 2014). She pines for the sandwich, but it is forbidden to eat pork products in Islamic tradition (haram) [18]. This small but significant moment immediately reveals Kamala's religious upbringing while also highlighting her desire to participate in American culture and fit in. Her craving for bacon, though humorous, establishes her struggle to balance cultural

[18] Islamic law states that pork products are forbidden from consumption, in Muslim culture forbidden foods, acts, behaviours and items are referred to as haram. Haram means forbidden or taboo in Arabic (Al Jallad 2008).

expectations (in this case refraining from haram food) with personal identity. This contrast becomes even more apparent when juxtaposed with Nakia, the other Muslim character in the scene. She does not seem fazed by her dietary restrictions, suggesting “fakon” (fake bacon) as an alternative. Kamala appears less attached to these principles. While Kamala’s craving for bacon does not diminish her religious identity, it functions as a form of virtue signalling, subtly conveying that she is a Muslim who embraces rather than rejects American culture. This moment establishes her as someone who, despite her faith, shares common cultural desires. Her BLT moment might mark her as an average American teenager, and while that does not directly make her any less Muslim, it does set her apart as someone less attached to her faith or the principles that guide it. The BLT scene foregrounds Kamala’s central struggle to reconcile her sense of “Americanness” with her Pakistani Muslim identity. Themes of identity and belonging frame the story, as Kamala tries to find her place within her cultural background and the world around her. The relationships introduced in this issue, particularly those with her family, friends and classmates, further explore how Kamala’s identity is constructed, emphasising her internal conflict between wanting to be normal and accepting her difference.

Kamala’s idea of normal aligns with a typical white American teenager’s lifestyle, being able to go to parties without supervision, eat a Western lunch for school instead of a South Asian lunch and not have to adhere to strict rules laid down by her parents. The entrance of the archetypal popular student, Zoe Zimmer, illuminates her idealised American lifestyle. Zoe embodies Kamala’s aspirations at the time, with her slender build, height, blonde hair, and blue eyes. Zoe is often accompanied by her jock boyfriend Josh to further cement her

popular status. In the first issue, Zoe approaches the trio and makes culturally insensitive, racist and micro-aggressive remarks. She offensively questions Nakia about her hijab, suggesting it was forced on her to prevent an "honour killing" (Ms. Marvel, 2014, Issue #1). While Nakia firmly defends her cultural practices and choice to wear the hijab, Kamala remains silent. Despite Nakia and Bruno's clear frustration with Zoe's ignorance, Kamala still describes Zoe as a "nice," "adorable," and a "happy" person (Wilson, 2014). Kamala's silence and naïve attitude toward the interaction illustrates her deep-seated desire to blend in, highlighting her willingness to conform to social norms, even in the face of discrimination. Zoe and Josh invite the trio to a party at the waterfront. Nakia immediately rejects the idea because of the presence of alcohol. Kamala responded hesitantly, a contrast to Nakia's assertiveness. This scene establishes Nakia as a direct juxtaposition to Kamala. Nakia visibly presents as Muslim and does not show the same desire to attend parties, climb the social hierarchy and blend in because she confidently rejects Zoe's attention and her offensive remarks. While Kamala continues to seek validation from those around her, and longs to be part of Zoe's world. Despite Kamala's discomfort, it is Nakia who courageously confronts Zoe, curtly, addressing her ignorance. This scene highlights Kamala's deep insecurities and her intense desire to fit in, while also exposing her lower social status within her peer group, largely because of her South Asian and Muslim identity. Popular students like Zoe cannot reconcile Kamala's differences beyond the stereotypical assumptions they hold about her culture. As a result, Kamala feels compelled to suppress the aspects of her identity that set her apart, whether consciously or subconsciously, to avoid being "othered" by those around her.

The next part of the first issue introduces the audience to Kamala's hobbies and family dynamics. Kamala retreats home and immerses herself in the fan fiction she writes under the pseudonym "Baby Sloth" (Wilson, 2014). She dedicates her fan fiction to her heroes, the Avengers. Writing fan fiction is both an escape and a labour of love and admiration for her. Kamala Khan's reverence for superheroes like Captain Marvel, Iron Man and Captain America, all of whom are white and symbolic of American military power, reflects the complexities of cultural identity and assimilation in the context of a Muslim, ethnically Pakistani American teenager. According to Ramzi Fawaz (2016), the visual representation of superheroes in American popular culture has historically reinforced ideals of whiteness and American exceptionalism, often intertwined with notions of military dominance and heroism. Kamala's idolisation of these figures can illustrate the internalised pressures to conform to these dominant cultural narratives, where heroism is frequently embodied by white, American figures who wield significant power, both physically and symbolically. Superheroes like Captain America and Iron Man often represent ideals tied to American military strength and cultural dominance. Her "Americanness" is clear in her deep connection to American pop culture. Her choice of role models reveals the Americanness of her ideals as she celebrates and admires the traditional portrayal of superheroes as icons of morality.

This speaks to a phenomenon among immigrant youth, where assimilation into American culture often involves adopting and idolising figures that represent mainstream American values and ideals. The desire to fit into the American mainstream often causes characters like Kamala, caught between their immigrant parents' expectations and American societal

pressures, to experience a dual identity conflict, forfeiting their cultural heritage and values. For Kamala, this symbolism becomes problematic in the post-9/11 context with U.S. military actions in Muslim-majority countries, coupled with domestic policies targeting Muslims and immigrants, creating a conflict between her Muslim heritage and American identity. The surveillance and targeting of othered bodies by institutions like the police, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) further complicate this dynamic. This serves to magnify the difficulty for Kamala to fully embrace these heroes who, in some ways, reflect the very forces that marginalised communities like hers. This complexity reveals the challenge of embracing Americanness when navigating multiple identities, Muslim, Pakistani, and American in a climate where American military and law enforcement actions have been violent and oppressive, particularly for minority groups.

The next scene provides insight into her relationship with each member of her family and establishes her as "different" from them because she has an Americanness they do not share. As Kamala furiously types, ignoring her mother's calls for dinner, Muneeba Khan enters the room, confused and irritated by Kamala's obsession with this outlandish hobby. Muneeba struggles to comprehend why her daughter is as engrossed in something as nonsensical as fan fiction, mispronouncing "fic" as "feek," a subtle indicator that English is not her first language. Kamala's irritation with her mother is clear in her facial expressions and body language, although she does not voice it. This brief exchange highlights the cultural disconnect between Kamala and her mother, establishing an early glimpse into the generational and cultural divide that shapes their relationship. The dinner scene in the first issue establishes the dynamics of the Khan family, particularly the tension between Kamala

and her father, Yusuf. It also highlights the strained relationship between Yusuf and Kamala's older brother, Aamir. The scene unfolds in the family's modest home, the table set with a traditional South Asian meal, illustrating their everyday routine. As Kamala enters the dining room, we are introduced to Aamir, who, like Nakia, wears clothing reflecting his Muslim identity. Aamir wears a white thobe, topi and adorns a beard[19], which are all common elements of dress among Muslim men. This attire is symbolic, like Nakia's hijab, as a direct and tangible signifier of their religion. Muneeba Khan, similarly, is dressed in a salwar kameez, highlighting the family's Pakistani and South Asian heritage and her ties to her culture. In contrast, Kamala typically wears jeans, graphic t-shirts, or sweaters, dressing modestly compared to characters like Zoe, but with no overt signifiers of her religion or culture in her daily attire. While her heritage is apparent through her features, Kamala's clothing choices subtly set her apart from the more visibly Muslim or South Asian characters.

Kamala Khan's identity as a moderate Muslim and more "American" is further iterated at the dinner table. Before eating, Kamala's brother Aamir is depicted reciting a Muslim prayer, or dua to bless his meal. This specific dua is often recited in Arabic. It is a brief, one-sentence prayer thanking God for the food and offering appreciation for the meal [20]. However, Aamir's father, Yusuf, expresses frustration, complaining that Aamir is so absorbed in his prayers that he might "starve to death" (Wilson, 2014). This frustration

[19] A topi is a skullcap Muslim men wear on their heads. A thobe is a long flowing robe worn by Muslim men; it goes by many names in different Muslim cultures.

[20] In Islam, supplication, known as du'ā, is a personal invocation or 'calling upon' Allah (God), where an individual privately requests help, guidance, or blessings.

suggests that Aamir frequently recites multiple prayers, such as those before and after eating, which has become a point of annoyance for his father. Yusuf's irritation is increased by the fact that his son, who is unemployed, spends most of his day praying instead of working. While prayer is typically thought of as a noble act, in Aamir's case, the narrative portrays it as an avoidance tactic, not genuine devotion. This characterisation establishes Aamir as an "overly" religious and excessively devout Muslim, whose piety is laziness and a lack of motivation. In the first issue, he is described as "penniless," a term used by his mother in frustration at his choice of drab traditional attire and apparent lack of economic productivity (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, 2015, p. 33). Kamala's brother is portrayed as detached from the material world, and thus unproductive, choosing to spend his time praying instead of looking for a job. Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2015) offer a critique on this depiction; they argue that the series often portrays religious Muslim men as backward and out of touch with modern, secular society. The comic implicitly portrays Aamir's relationship with his religion as a retreat from his responsibilities, reinforcing the Orientalist trope of the emasculated, economically unproductive Muslim man.

While Aamir is being defended by Muneeba, Kamala brings up the idea of attending a party at the waterfront. When her father enquires if there will be boys at the party, Kamala reluctantly admits there will be, leading to an immediate denial of her request. Her father takes her hand and calmly explains his reasoning, especially his concerns about her safety. He emphasises that Kamala cannot guarantee which boys will be there, and that she cannot guarantee the behaviour of the boys at the party, especially under the influence of alcohol, which further fuels his disapproval. Kamala, frustrated and feeling stifled, raises her voice in

objection, asserting that she is sixteen and capable of making her own decisions. When Yusuf suggests she stays with Nakia instead, Kamala's frustration deepens, and she becomes visibly upset. The tension escalates as Yusuf compares her to the high-achieving, family-focused Bruno; this prompts Kamala to retort that she would be free to go anywhere if she were a boy. This exchange pushes the argument to a breaking point, and Kamala asks to be excused from the table. Yusuf, in a sudden burst of anger, raises his voice and slams his hands on the table, causing the dishes to rattle and the food to spill. The few panels depict his transformation from a rational, considerate father to an irrationally angry one, his emotions escalating to an unreasonable physical display of anger (Fig. 17). Her father instantly ceased being the caring, gentle, and thoughtful parent capable of advising her. The drastic shift in his demeanour and his sudden and disproportionate outburst reinforce the stereotype of the irrational and enraged Muslim man (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, 2015). Her brother and mother remain silent observers as Kamala is screamed at. Frustrated and upset, Kamala storms off, leaving the table in a display of the growing division between her and her parents.

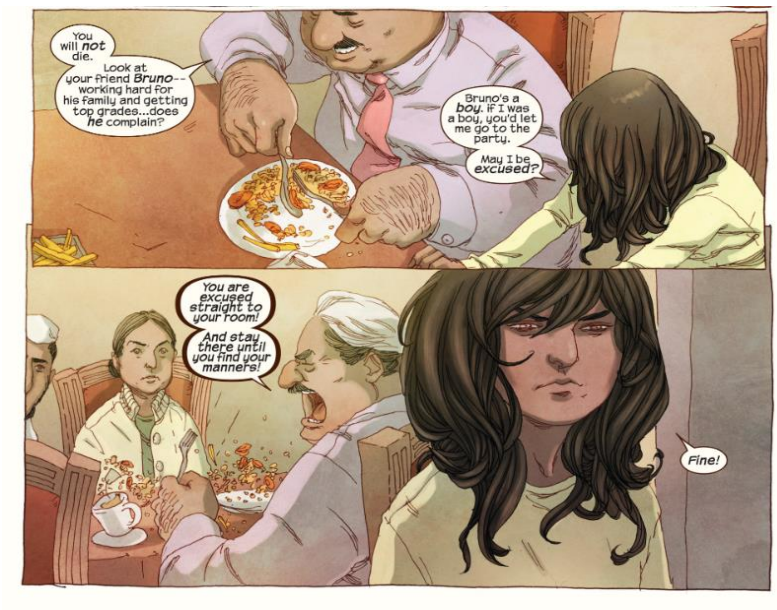

Fig. 17: Kamala's father shouting at her (Ms. Marvel, 2014, Issue #1)

The dinner scene intensifies the underlying tensions within the Khan family, particularly highlighting Kamala's struggle with her parents' expectations and her desire for independence and normalcy. While immigrant parents and Muslim parents in specific can be more strict, in this case it stems from a concern of safety, as Kamala is still a minor. It illuminates how Kamala Khan, despite being framed as a progressive departure from traditional depictions of Muslim women, remains a product of the American superhero genre, which is deeply rooted in Western, particularly white, values. The narrative positions her character as a foil to her father and brother, highlighting her agency, rationality, and modernity against their irrationality and conservatism. This also informs a critique of the representation of Muslim men in Ms. Marvel. The portrayal of Kamala Khan's brother and father in the first issue highlights some of the key critiques raised by scholars about the Muslim representation in the comic. To showcase female empowerment and Muslim feminism, portrayals of Muslim men are often relegated to stereotypical tropes of irrational anger, oppression, and incompatibility with modern ideals. Kamala's father and brother embody stereotypical characteristics often associated with Muslim masculinity in Western media: the irrational, angry father and the emasculated, overly religious brother. This moment is emblematic of the Orientalist framing of Muslim masculinity, where Muslim men are often depicted as volatile and oppressive, reinforcing the binary between reason and unreason, modernity, and backwardness. These depictions reinforce Orientalist biases, as Kamala herself is propped up against these male figures to emphasise her relative modernity and agency. This dichotomy highlights the persistence of Orientalist biases, even within a narrative that seeks to resist Islamophobia.

The previous scene subsequently leads to Kamala's retaliation and her need for freedom manifests in physical action. In her room, Kamala's mind races as she processes the events that just transpired. She feels a profound sense of disconnect from her parents, particularly from her father, whose outburst at the dinner table has shaken her. The emotional distance between Kamala and her family is more palpable than ever, and she questions her identity and her place within both her family and the larger world around her. Kamala's frustration is not only with the limitations imposed on her by her parents but also with her inability to reconcile her dual identities as an American and a Muslim. The argument with her father left her feeling profoundly misunderstood and suffocated by the weight of her family's expectations. As she sits in the quiet of her room, Kamala's thoughts spiral into a painful reflection on all the ways her religion, culture and parents have prevented her from living a normal life. Kamala begins to mentally outline the many restrictions that make her feel like an outsider. She questions why she alone has to bring lunch that looks and smells different like pakoras[21] for lunch, while her peers enjoy more typical American foods. She resents having to explain and celebrate holidays that her friends have never heard of, which only makes her feel more isolated. The burden of always feeling different and standing out in unwanted ways weighs her down. She feels that despite being a dutiful daughter and respecting her parent's wishes, upholding her cultural traditions, and following the rules, she is still not allowed the small freedoms that her friends take for granted. Her emotions running high and her deep-seated need to fit in, to feel normal overwhelms her. This leads

[21] Pakoras are deep fried fritters typically made from a batter coating vegetables and potatoes, a popular street food in its place of origin, the Indian Subcontinent.

to a burning desire to escape, even if just for one night, from the confines of her family's expectations that have shaped her life. In an impulsive act of rebellion, Kamala decides she can no longer bear to miss out on what she sees as a crucial teenage experience. She throws open her window and heads toward the party she was not permitted to attend. This decision is driven by a desperate need to assert her independence and find her own identity. It marks a significant turning point for Kamala. It is a moment of defiance against the constraints she feels, an act that is both bold and dangerous. This act of rebellion is a critical step in her journey, as it forces her to confront the consequences of her choices and the complex self-loathing she feels towards her cultural heritage and her desire for freedom. The aftermath of the dinner scene ultimately sets the stage for Kamala's decision to attend the party, a choice that will have significant repercussions for her journey as both a teenager and a new superhero. The emotional conflict she experiences in these moments illustrates the central theme of her story in the first several volumes: the search for identity and the struggle to reconcile the different aspects of who she is and who she wants to be.

Upon arrival at the waterfront party, despite parental disapproval, Kamala experienced a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Bright lights and loud music initially filled the scene, reflecting the carefree atmosphere Kamala longed to join. As she walks in, she spots familiar faces, Zoe, Josh, and friends. Zoe approaches her with a friendly smile, glad to see her but simultaneously armed with her usual ignorant comments, stating her surprise to see Kamala out as she thought Kamala was locked up at home. Continuing to ignore Zoe's prejudice, Kamala is happy to be part of the experience. Josh asks Kamala if she would like a drink and once ensuring there will not be any alcohol in it, she accepts the drink, but Josh

hands Kamala a red plastic cup filled with juice and alcohol. As Kamala sips the alcohol, she immediately tastes it, coughing, spitting it out and grimacing at the taste. Zoe and her friends find amusement in her reaction to the alcohol and laugh at her. Bruno emerges and intervenes, shouting at Josh while Zoe remarks she must stand away from Kamala because she smells like curry. Kamala does not confront the hazing and offensive comments and walks away, taking her pent-up frustration with her, which she directs at Bruno. Bruno, undeterred, tries to send Kamala home, having similar concerns that her father had. Stating that the jocks are drinking, which can lead to their behaviour becoming unpredictable. Hearing her father's words echoed by Bruno only fuels Kamala's anger. Feeling suffocated by the repeated warnings and what she perceives as overprotection, Kamala yells at Bruno, accusing him of treating her like a child, just as her parents do. In her frustration, she breaks away from him and storms off once again, leaving Bruno standing there, helpless to reach her. Her chance to feel normal and accepted has only made her feel more isolated and confused. The scene ends with Kamala slipping away from the crowd, seeking solitude as she reflects on the consequences of her actions and the realisation that who she is and who she wants to be is further than she had hoped. The depiction of party scenes is pivotal in Kamala's character arc, vividly illustrating the contrast between her desire for social integration and the alienation stemming from her race and religion, it depicts yet again her acceptance of insults and micro-aggressive racism during social interactions, laying the groundwork for her journey of self-acceptance and understanding.

The pivotal moment of her superhero origin story begins when Kamala comes face to face with her heart's desires and joins the world of the Avengers and achieves her dream body

all in one moment. As Kamala wanders off, a strange mist envelops her, causing her to become drowsy and pass out. The strange mist, known later as Terriggen Mist [22], triggers Kamala's transformation from an ordinary human to an inhuman[23], and represents the catalyst for her journey of heroism. When she wakes up, the mist is gone, and heavenly clouds surround her. Glowing through the clouds are Carol Danvers or Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America. Appearing like godly figures, they call out to her and oddly Carol is reciting a poem in Urdu[24]. Taking on the role of spiritual guides, the three heroes challenge Kamala's judgement, forcing her to confront the misguided belief that rejecting her parents, culture and religion will make her more acceptable to people like Zoe. They urge Kamala to see that distancing herself from these fundamental aspects of her identity will not bring her the acceptance or happiness she seeks. Kamala acknowledges that she never intended to reject her culture, religion or parents as inferior, but she still insists that she is from Jersey City, not Karachi. This important distinction underscores her persistent and difficult internal battle to integrate her American identity with her Muslim and Pakistani heritage, a struggle that is further complicated by her ongoing refusal to fully embrace significant facets of her own identity. In a moment of vulnerability, Kamala turns to Captain Marvel as if she were a deity, confessing her deep wish to be just like her, strong, beautiful, confident, and, most of all, accepted. Kamala expresses a desire to embody Captain Marvel's image, even down to wearing her politically incorrect outfit: a tight spandex

[22] In the Marvel universe Terrigen Mist is a mutagenic substance that activates dormant Inhuman genes within inhumans exposed to the mist.

[23] In the Marvel universe the Inhumans are a super race of human beings, their powers can be dormant as Kamala's was. Terrigen mist can surface the dormant inhuman genes and awaken superpowers.

[24] Urdu is the predominantly spoken official language of Pakistan. The poem Carol Danver's is reciting is called "Phool Rahi Sarson Sakalban" by Sufi Poet Amir Khushrow (1253–1325). Sufism relates to the mystical or deeply spiritual aspect of Islam.

leotard with thigh-high boots, and a red sash. As Kamala pours out her feelings, Captain Marvel listens with understanding and compassion, but she also gently warns Kamala that her desire to fit in by becoming someone else is misguided. The pursuit of acceptance through imitation, Captain Marvel implies, will not bring Kamala the fulfilment she craves. As Captain Marvel's warning hangs in the air, the glowing figures of the three heroes dissipate, leaving Kamala alone once again. In the next panel, Kamala finds herself trapped inside a large, black dome. Desperate to escape, she punches her way out, but the body that emerges from the spherical object is no longer her own. It is Carol Danvers' (Fig. 18).



Fig. 18: Kamala shapeshifting into Carol Danvers (Ms. Marvel, 2014 Issue #1).

Kamala's wish came true, completing her transformation: her hair is now blonde, her eyes are blue, and she wears Captain Marvel's iconic costume. Her powers, initially manifested through this act of mimicry, symbolise the start of her path toward understanding that true strength comes not from becoming someone else, but from embracing who she truly is. The transformation into Captain Marvel is not just a physical change, but a metaphorical one, representing the beginning of Kamala's internal struggle to reconcile her multiple identities.

The first issue challenges the usual Orientalist tropes by constantly juxtaposing Kamala's South Asian and Muslim identity against the predominantly white and secular American society she inhabits, but the story simultaneously conforms to Orientalist stereotypes. Kamala's character represents the tension between her religion and secularity, where her cultural and religious identity becomes hyper-visible against the whiteness that dominates her surroundings. This tension is further explored in Kamala's interactions, as she navigates the cultural pressures from her family, represented by traditional values, and the societal expectations of American youth, represented by characters like Zoe. Her powers, instead of freeing her from these pressures, force her to confront them head-on, making her superhero identity an extension of her struggle with being a "permanent foreigner" (Muñoz in Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 2015, p. 24). Ms. *Marvel* serves as a narrative that challenges Western stereotypes of Muslim women. Kamala's emergence as a superhero who is both South Asian and Muslim disrupts the stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed damsels. Through Kamala's character, the comic reclaims the narrative of Muslim identity, presenting her multifaceted identity, while grappling with the weight of cultural and familial expectations, she embodies strength, agency and the ability to forge her own path. However, her character is often made relatable by juxtaposing her against the Muslim men in her life, her father and brother, while she leans away from stereotypical Orientalist stereotypes, her father's sudden angry outburst and her brother's piety linger in Orientalist ideas.

VOLUME ONE #2 ALL MANKIND

In *Ms. Marvel* Issue #2, titled *All Mankind* (Wilson and Alphona, 2014), Kamala Khan continues her journey of self-discovery, now burdened with her newfound polymorphic abilities. After saving her classmate Zoe from drowning at the waterfront party, Kamala realises that her powers are not just a gift or a burden but a significant responsibility she must carry. Her origin story mirrors that of the prototypical teenage Marvel hero like Peter Parker and the various mutant heroes, learning how to navigate newfound powers as an outsider. This issue highlights Kamala's struggle with the weight of her new identity as a superhero or in this issue, a superpowered person.

The narrative centres on her anguish in her dream body instead of the solace that she was determined she would find in a blonde, thin and tall body. Kamala's initial transformation into a copy of her idol highlights her desire to embody American beauty norms to escape the awkwardness of her own features. She wears Ms. Marvel's politically incorrect outfit; she is technically an Avenger, and she is her idol in a physical sense, but she is scared and uncomfortable in her ideal body. The realisation struck her: being outwardly who she wanted to be meant nothing if it was not reflected inwardly. Her rebellion of her parents is put on hold as she runs around in her revealing costume, desperate to cover up while she spirals through an existential crisis. If she is everything she's ever wanted to be, why is she still not satisfied?

This issue introduces glimpses into Kamala's polymorphic abilities, which include the power to stretch, enlarge, and heal herself; her superhuman abilities often act as a metaphor for her fluid identity. She is a polymorph, she can change her appearance and limbs, but the ability to transform brings her no closer to fitting in or feeling secure in who she is, instead her polymorphic abilities further her from the conformity she often desires (Gibbons, 2017). Kamala's powers visually express her complex identity: her ability to "embiggen" [25] symbolises both her strength and her struggle to define herself across multiple, often conflicting spaces. Kamala may have superpowers but unlike Peter Parker or many other heroes, she does not get a superhero makeover, her body does not develop overnight to suit the superhero body. Definitions of the superhero body rigidly adhere to physical perfection and idealised, often hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine forms that project power through perfect symmetry and physique (Gibbons, 2017). However, Kamala's body remains the same, marking her as being different in the superhero world as well. This ties into the theme of identity central to the series, Kamala's powers represent her internal desire to blend in seamlessly into multiple worlds at once: her life as a high school student, her Pakistani American background, her Muslim faith and her role as a superhero. Yet, her powers also reinforce the reality that being different remains. Her form may change, but her difference remains visible, reminding readers she cannot escape being "othered" in both her personal and superhero worlds.

[25] Kamala Khan's power to "embiggen" is her unique ability to enlarge parts of her body or the entirety of her body at will.

The teen's newfound powers also serve as a metaphor for her adolescence, reflecting her emotional and physical struggles specifically with her self-image. Her ability to "embiggen" resonates with her fluctuating sense of self-worth and the awkwardness of adolescence (Hosein, 2019, p. 57). The manipulation of her limbs emphasises her unique space in the superhero genre, deviating from typical hero narratives, where outsiders obtain superpowers and subsequently fit in or find self-confidence because of their physical change and enhancements. Kamala's powers make her feel more at odds with herself by incorporating a superpower that mimics the psychological complexities that come with being an awkward teenager.

A key moment in this issue comes from the last few panels, where Kamala begins to form her superhero ethos. Kamala returns home to her worried family in her original body. After her mother storms out blaming Yusuf for bringing them to America, which has resulted in a disobedient daughter and a "penniless" son (Wilson, 2014). Kamala receives a punishment of no social activities besides school. Despite her dissatisfaction with her parents' disciplinary action, her primary focus is on contemplation of her life-saving act and its significance. She looks towards her poster of Captain Marvel, asking herself if this is her chance to become part of something, the opportunity she has been awaiting now that she knows she is capable of saving a life. She is resolved to undertake more heroics inspired by her role models and their acts of good. This moment of introspection serves as another milestone in her origin story as a hero. It is the moment she has decided to use her abilities; it is a moment she finds purpose.

The first two issues deepen Kamala's relationships with key characters like Bruno and Zoe. Bruno, her close friend, emerges as a supportive yet concerned figure, trying to help Kamala to be more responsible for her safety. His concerns mirror those of her family, particularly her parents. Meanwhile, Kamala's complicated relationship with Zoe becomes symbolic of her desire for acceptance. Zoe represents the American ideal, Kamala feels pressured to conform to blonde, carefree, and part of the in-crowd. However, after saving Zoe, Kamala realises that true acceptance cannot be won by suppressing parts of herself or by trying to become someone else. The incident illustrates Kamala's realisation that her powers, and the responsibility that comes with them, demand authenticity and self-acceptance. Issue #2 of *Ms. Marvel* establishes important relationships and character moments while advancing the overarching themes of identity and belonging. Kamala's struggle to balance her ordinary life with her superhero responsibilities mirrors her search for identity. This issue supports Kamala's development as both a hero and a young woman and also explores deeper cultural critiques of how Muslim and immigrant identities are framed in Western contexts.

VOLUME ONE #3: SIDE ENTRANCE

In this issue, Kamala experiments with her powers and takes on her first real challenge as a superhero when she attempts to stop a robbery at a convenience store owned by her friend Bruno's shot. This moment marks Kamala's first real lesson in heroism: having powers does not automatically make someone a hero, and she still has much to learn about responsibility and control. However, this issue also features a significant cultural moment where Kamala attends her local mosque and confronts the gender segregation within it, which highlights Kamala's relationship with her religion and her depiction as a moderate Muslim.

In *Ms. Marvel* Issue #3, Kamala attends a lecture at her local mosque. Although the scene illustrates the navigation of her Islamic identity in a positive light, it demonstrates moments where masculine Muslim identity is constructed through an Occidental lens yet again. Kamala arrives at the mosque with Nakia, where they are instructed to enter through a separate side entrance for women while men enter through the main entrance. The title of the issue speaks to issues of gender within Islam, but the issue narrowly explores this theme in a few panels. Women entering through the side entrance, along with the partition that separates the men's and women's prayer sections, represents the traditional, gender-segregated practices often found in conservative Muslim communities. As Kamala expresses frustration at this separation, she questions why she and other women are relegated to the back, when this was not a tradition of the Prophet Muhammed.



Fig. 19: Kamala at the Mosque with Nakia, questioning the partition between men and woman (Ms. Marvel #3, 2014).

Kamala is hastily dismissed by the men on the other side of the partition and subsequently her and Nakia leave the masjid before the end of the lecture. This scene is critical to further examine the establishment of Kamala's Islamic identity. Safiyya Hosein (2019, p. 59) argues that Kamala embodies the "modern Muslim woman" archetype, navigating her Pakistani Muslim identity within the framework of American teenage values. Her challenge to the mosque's gendered practices is an important engagement with how her specific mosque engages with Islam and her question aligns her with progressive values in a way that Western audiences might find appealing. While her judgement and arguments reflect an interest in her faith and a belief in equality, the scene ends with her disinterest and disengagement after her conversation with the imam.

This depiction aligns with more conservative portrayals of Muslim men, who are presented as embodying more rigid, conservative beliefs. The first two issues portrayed her brother and father through the lens of stereotypes as the penniless Mulla[26] and the irrationally angry Muslim man, respectively. Kamala's interaction with Sheikh Abdullah, another Muslim male authority figure, further highlights this contrast between Kamala as the progressive American figure and the conservative backwards Muslim man. While the Sheikh does not berate her for questioning the mosque's setup, he expresses annoyance and frustration that the mosque is being questioned by her. He answers her question but in a dismissive and autocratic tone. Nakia tells Kamala to leave the matter alone because the men will not be interested or willing to engage with her. The imam's role serves as another foil, reinforcing

[26] A mullah is a title given to a Muslim who is educated in the teachings and laws of Islam, they often serve in masjids as advisors and leaders.

her stance in opposition to his adherence to conservative practices. This dynamic positioning of Kamala as the "good" Muslim who is not overly religious and rebellious against more conservative Muslim men both validates her progressive values and frames her in alignment with the Western ideals of modernity. While Kamala's character is groundbreaking in offering a positive portrayal of a Muslim woman, the reliance on conservative, stereotypical depictions of Muslim masculinity risks reinforcing the notion that only moderate Muslims, who embrace certain Western values, are acceptable or relatable. Nakia is framed as more traditional although she questions and challenges Zoe and she seems in agreement with Kamala's views. Nakia does not challenge the Sheik herself or support Kamala in her inquiries. Kamala, as the progressive character, is the one to question gendered systems; however, she refrains from further exploration and leaves once she is dismissed by the men. This narrative suggests that Kamala's integration into Western society is made possible through her impartial practises, a framing that plays into imperialistic representations of Islam and the West as binary oppositions of modernity versus tradition. Her engagement with her faith in the first three issues is limited to a certain level of disinterest from Kamala, who is supposedly a Muslim character. While not being visibly Muslim is not problematic, her inward relationship and lack of spiritual reflection on Islam shows a limit to her engagement with her faith. She does not make duas even in times of need or turn to her faith when she was having a crisis, she looks towards Ms. Marvel as a guiding force instead. While she is culturally Muslim, her engagement with religion thus far reveals no connection with the spiritual or practised elements of Islam.

As the issue continues, it further develops the storyline of Kamala's struggles with controlling and using her powers and her frustration with her body and image. When Bruno's store is robbed, she instinctively transforms into Carol Danvers, believing that embodying a traditional hero will allow her to effectively handle the situation through mimicry. Although she manages to fend off the robber, who happens to be Bruno's brother under the orders of a villain name-dropped as the Inventor, the encounter ends with her getting accidentally shot. Her choice to transform into Carol Danvers reflects her uncertainty about her image of what it means to be a hero and what a hero looks like. Feeling the need to appear as someone else, particularly a hero whose appearance aligns with Western norms of beauty and strength and someone who has a superhero body, reinforces her insecurity. Her injury directly results from trying to fit into an identity that is not her own. This issue allows insight into Kamala's political and cultural views, but through a limited and brief interaction at the mosque, it also serves to highlight Kamala as progressive but simultaneously continues to use Muslim men through Orientalist framing to illuminate her. While she makes progress on accepting her outward appearance, inwardly she is still at odds with herself.

VOLUME ONE ISSUE#4: PAST CURFEW AND ISSUE #5: URBAN LEGEND

In the fourth and fifth issues, Kamala's dual life takes its toll as she tries to keep her superhero activities hidden from her family. While still learning the extent of her powers, Kamala's relationship with Bruno further strengthens as he becomes her confidant and aids her in developing her superhero persona after discovering she is superhuman. Kamala also faces her first mission and a major villain in this issue, the Inventor, who kidnaps Bruno's

brother, Vick. The Inventor's introduction establishes a major conflict for the first volume and introduces the readers to the first villain in the series, whose manipulation focuses on the exploitation of vulnerable youth.

This issue is especially important because Kamala reveals her identity to Bruno, establishing him as Ms. Marvel's first ally. This issue also marks the moment she stops hiding behind Carol Danvers' image and uses her powers as a hero of her own design. She spends this issue costuming herself, which is a pivotal moment in the superhero's journey signifying an acceptance and willingness to undertake the role of a hero. The superhero's costume reflects their identity and becomes a symbol of the character. Her costume represents the character's balancing act between her culture and her American nationality. From a visual perspective, she represents the middle ground.

Kamala's superhero persona visually distances itself from explicitly signifying her Muslim identity, offering a more ambiguous representation that allows her to be widely acceptable to Western audiences. Instead, Ms. Marvel's costume design nods primarily to Kamala's South Asian heritage, incorporating stylistic elements like her dupatta and later her gold bangle that reflects her cultural background without explicitly showing her faith. Her costume's palette, composed of bold colours like red, blue, and yellow, recalls American superhero aesthetics more than it aligns with any specifically Islamic symbolism or South Asian aesthetics.

This moderate portrayal, though empowering in some respects, aligns with what Elora Shehabuddin (in Hosein, 2019) refers to as a Western-invented archetype that aligns with U.S. interests by fostering images of "good Muslims" supportive of American values and ways of life (Hosein, 2019, p. 65). The absence of religious iconography on her costume allows Ms. Marvel to remain comfortably within the Western superhero mould, making Kamala's faith almost invisible when she assumes her superhero identity. The visual ambiguity of Ms. Marvel's costume enables her to be read as a Muslim superhero without the potential cultural friction that might arise if her superhero form visibly signified Islam. Consequently, this lack of visible religious identity in her superhero persona subtly reinforces the idea that to be an "acceptable" Muslim hero in the Western media, the character should avoid overt expressions of faith, particularly those associated with Islam. Kamala's moderate, relatable Muslim identity, grounded more in personal values than visual indicators of Islam, positions her as a safe Muslim character, one who can integrate into Western society by aligning with secular visual standards. While progressive in its inclusion of a Muslim protagonist, this design choice also represents a limitation within Western media: a hesitancy to embrace religious diversity fully, opting instead to package Kamala's Muslim identity in a way that minimises potential discomfort for non-Muslim audiences. By not displaying visible markers of Islam, Kamala as Ms. Marvel becomes a neutral figure who avoids alienating Western readers who may associate obvious religious symbols with "otherness" or controversy. Her costuming as a hero breaks sexist costuming designs and pays tribute to her culture, but she still occupies a space as a "moderate" Muslim, a character who embodies universal values of heroism without overtly challenging Western norms. This approach, while still groundbreaking for Muslim representation in comics,

suggests that Western media continues to frame authentic representation within the bounds of secular or neutral visuals, particularly with characters of othered cultures.

The secular nature of Kamala's physical form and superhero persona largely aligns with Western conceptions of heroism. While she actively challenges stereotypes associated with Muslim women, her role as a justice-seeking superhero in her New Jersey community aligns her with the established American paradigm of heroism. The alignment and representation of the moderate Muslim often resonates with what postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (1985) describes as "worlding", a naturalised imperialist project that reconfigures Third World subjects to fit Western narratives (Hosein, 2019, p. 66). In this case, Kamala Khan, despite offering a nuanced portrayal that avoids glaringly stereotypical representations of Muslims, Kamala's character nonetheless operates within a Western framework, implicitly perpetuating colonial perspectives on legitimate expressions of Muslim identity in both physical and philosophical forms.

In Ms. Marvel Issue #5 (2014), Kamala takes a significant step toward solidifying her identity as a hero. After training with her friend Bruno to better control her polymorphic abilities, she attempts another high-stakes mission to rescue Vick after failing once before. Kamala's confrontation with the Inventor's henchmen marks a major moment in her heroic journey. She successfully utilises her powers in direct combat, displaying courage and growing confidence in her abilities. By the end of the mission, she emerges victorious, rescuing Vick and earning the respect of her community in Jersey City.

A defining moment in this issue is Kamala's public declaration of her superhero identity as Ms. Marvel. She no longer tries to resemble Carol Danvers, the blonde superhero she idolised; instead, she embraces her appearance. This decision represents Kamala's acknowledgment of her own heroism and self-acceptance. She has undergone a full transformation, manifest in both her actions and her philosophy, as exemplified by her stated principles and heroic code, "Good is not a thing that you are. It is a thing that you do" (Willow, *Ms. Marvel* Issue #5, 2014). This line encapsulates her philosophy on heroism as an active, ongoing effort, rather than an inherent trait or appearance. This forms the basis of her hero persona, a manifesto of her morals and values at this point in her journey, drawing from general and universal understandings of morality. The issue concludes Volume 1 of *Ms. Marvel* by showcasing Kamala's growth from an unsure teenager into a more confident fledgling superhero. By overcoming her struggles to save Vick, she shows her capability to fight for her community on her terms. Her powers and identity establish her as a hero who defies traditional moulds and embodies her ideals. However, from a decolonial perspective, the ideals she embodies still belong to Western ideals of morality and her expression of religion is made palatable to avoid a Muslim hero who would disrupt the discomfort of the American/Western population.

VOLUME 2: GENERATION WHY, ISSUES #6-#11

In *Ms. Marvel* Volume 2 (2015), Kamala Khan's character continues to evolve as she learns to balance super heroism with the daily life of a teenager. Kamala investigates a series of kidnappings in Jersey City linked to the Inventor, a villain using kidnapped teens to power

his machines. As Kamala attempts to locate and confront the Inventor, she gains insight into the value of teamwork and community. Her main ethical question in this volume revolves around violence and force and her confusion on how to enforce justice without unnecessary violence. Unlike the first volume, which introduces Kamala's family and community as conservative and rigid, Volume 2 presents a more nuanced relationship between Kamala and her community's religious figures, particularly Sheikh Abdullah.

In contrast to his earlier portrayal as dismissive and narrow-minded for not engaging with Kamala on valid questions and concerns she had, Sheikh Abdullah is shown as approachable and wise. In *Ms. Marvel* #6 titled *The Healing Factor,* Kamala is summoned to the masjid to talk with the Sheikh about her strange behaviour of late, as reported by her parents. She is out past curfew and while she cannot tell him why; she insists it is just to help people, although she is not proficient at helping people and often struggles. The Sheik guides Kamala toward finding a mentor to help her aid her community responsibly and how to become "good" at helping people (Wilson, 2015). While he acknowledges he might not be that mentor, he comforts her with the fact that guidance will find her if she has good intentions. This interaction highlights the Sheikh as supportive rather than restrictive, suggesting that Kamala's culture and faith can shape her heroism (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020). However, Kamala's superhero identity remains largely influenced by her admiration for iconic Western heroes, particularly Captain Marvel and in this volume, Wolverine, who, like Captain America, embodies a more traditional American value of strength, resilience and independence. Wolverine serves as Kamala's first mentor. Wolverine and Kamala investigate the Inventor's activities in the sewers and through her time with him fighting

technologically advanced crocodiles, Kamala is faced with the harsh reality that at times she will have to hurt someone. Wolverine explains that the "hurt" will impact someone whether it be her or someone else at times it is unavoidable (Wilson, 2015). Although Kamala is resistant to this idea and has not yet found a way to navigate ideas of force and violence that result in hurt, she asserts that she will take on the role of a protector for her city. Her time with Wolverine boosts her confidence as she serves as a reliable companion to one of her inspirations and understands a heroism from a veteran. Kamala's Islamic faith and cultural background continue to be portrayed in ways that do not explicitly mark her as "other" in her superhero role and do not explicitly inform her of developing superhero ethos. Although Kamala privately respects her faith, she never recites duas or uses religious moral stories and values in her superhero form or moments of need. This approach to her faith is subtle and aligns her with a "safe" representation of a Muslim character (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020), continuing her wide reach and relatability to Western audiences who may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with Islamic symbolism and morals beyond Kamala having an Arabic name, a Muslim family and attending mosque.

The remaining issues of Volume Two (Wilson and Alphona, 2015), reflect on the value of community and the exploitation of youth. Kamala is searching for teenagers kidnapped by the Inventor, a villain who uses disillusioned youth as energy sources to power his machines. Initially Kamala believes she has the kidnapped youth but to her dismay, these young people willingly offered themselves to the villain. The young teenagers profess to Kamala that they want to help the inventor by being used as energy sources because they felt they had little value and saw the world as beyond repair. They understand the world as a hopeless

because it is “overpopulated” and slowly dying because of climate change and conflicts over resources (Wilson, 2015). The teenagers view their generation as “parasites” who fuel the economic and environmental disarray of the world (Wilson, 2015). The Inventor has manipulated these teenagers by giving them purpose under the pretence of saving the planet. This storyline prefaces important issues that youth across the world face and through Kamala’s leadership the youth of Jersey City find a resolution.

Kamala foils the Inventor’s plan and ultimately succeeds in rallying the teenagers he has exploited by expressing her belief in the future of their generation. She asserts every person has value and has an opportunity to fix the problems plaguing their planet. This prompts the youth to join her fight against the Inventor. Through her battle with the Inventor, she attempts to fight him alone but ultimately realises she needs help, she begins to understand the value of collectively and community at a deeper level. In this Volume, Kamala’s empathy and encouragement inspires her peers to see their worth and potential, empowering them to reclaim agency over their lives. This story arc highlights Kamala’s growth as a leader, emphasising her belief in community and collective empowerment, which can be viewed as rooted in her cultural and personal values. However, Kamala never questions the systems that caused the disassociation and hopelessness her peers experience. She rallies the youth, but her solution to their plight does not negate or address their reasons for joining the Inventor. Her value on community does not manifest itself beyond a speech; rather, she sidesteps the Youth’s issues with environmental capitalism and climate change. This reopens the discussion of her morality, exemplifying Westernised heroic ideals within the developing hero. Kamala’s morals and development are rooted in more universal and

general ideas on morality and while she can question the construction of gender in the mosque, she does not question the systems that are affecting her generation.

Kamala's journey in this volume continues on an individual path with the discovery that she is an Inhuman rather than a mutant, as she had previously thought. She is transported to Attilan, where Medusa, the queen of the Inhumans, explains her heritage. This revelation complicates Kamala's self-identity; being part of an alien race with unlocked, rather than genetically inherited, abilities adds yet another layer to her already complex identity. This newfound status as an Inhuman introduces Kamala to the Marvel universe's broader world of "outsiders," further challenging her understanding of herself and her place within her community and society. Through her journey in volume 2, Kamala learns a critical lesson: that she cannot achieve heroism alone. Her interactions with Wolverine, Medusa and her supportive community members allow her to understand the importance of mentorship and collaboration. By the end of the volume, Kamala's battle with the Inventor teaches her that teamwork is essential to achieving meaningful change. Her evolving ethos as a hero merges traditional American superhero ideals of courage and bravery with the communal and moral values she holds, allowing her to be both an empowered individual and a supportive member of her community (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020). While this volume touches on her philosophies and attempts to incorporate Islamic principles of collectivism, it is incorporated in a vague, superficial manner that consequently does not meaningfully acknowledge or speak to the issues Kamala's peers are plagued with. Although her approach does reflect Kamala's deepening understanding of responsibility, resilience and the strength found in

collective action; her understanding is framed to avoid questioning systems that create the issues she fights against.

VOLUME 3: CRUSHED, ISSUES #13-#15

In *Ms. Marvel* Volume 3 (2015), Kamala Khan's personal life takes centre stage as she navigates a new relationship with Kamran, a fellow Pakistani American and Inhuman. Kamran initially appears as an ideal match for Kamala; he is Muslim, understands her Pakistani heritage, and shares her interests, especially in more niche spaces like Bollywood films, allowing them to bond over their shared cultural humour and family dynamics. When spending time with Kamran, Kamala freely discusses her Desi[27] interests with pride and affection rather than the embarrassment she felt stemming from her ethnicity in volume one. Finding someone she can relate to on culture, religion and hobbies has Kamala instantly smitten with Kamran and the comfort she feels with him. Kamran's initial appearances do not serve as a foil for Kamala rather, he presents a Muslim and South Asian man in a romantic light. This is a rare representation in the genre. Kamran's character design, like Kamala's, offers readers the opportunity to see ethnic South Asian features on a character who is meant to be the attractive love interest and desirable to the main character. This representation might be a minor role in the grand scheme of the comics, but it is significant in breaking the mould in Western media, where the South Asian man is stereotypically the comedy relief or another undesirable side character but almost never the romantic lead (Ali, 2021). Kamala and Kamran's connection to each other deepens when

[27] Desi is a term used to refers to the people, traditions, and products of the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora, fostering a shared South Asian cultural identity.

Kamala learns that he possesses Inhuman abilities. This revelation creates an exciting sense of camaraderie and trust between them, as Kamala finally meets someone who does not make her feel othered. However, this newfound bond quickly deteriorates as Kamran's true intentions are unveiled. As the narrative unfolds, Kamran is revealed to be aligned with Clan Destine, a villainous organisation with extremist ideologies about Inhuman superiority. Kamran's attraction to Kamala is thus not rooted in genuine affection but in a desire to recruit her to his cause, pushing her to join their cause of reshaping human society according to Inhuman supremacy. This twist portrays Kamran as a duplicitous character, adhering to the trope of the villainous Muslim man. According to Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2015), such portrayals often frame Muslim men as threats to progressive Muslim women, positioning them as barriers to women's empowerment and autonomy. Kamran embodies this archetype, appearing to be Kamala's perfect romantic interest, only to reveal himself as a manipulative force who tries to coerce her into a dangerous ideology.

Kamala's conflict with Kamran escalates when he tries to persuade her to abandon her principles and join him in Clan Destine's mission. Kamran's belief in Inhuman supremacy draws unsettling parallels to extremist ideologies. His character in *Ms. Marvel* problematically aligns with existing stereotypes of Muslim men as extremist figures, adding layers to his antagonistic portrayal. His portrayal of a zealot advocating Inhuman supremacy mirrors extremist ideologies, employing harmful and prevalent tropes; he emotionally manipulates Kamala and disregards her moral compass. Kamran's attempts to sway Kamala away from her moral stance reflect an archetype where Muslim men are portrayed as radical influences that manipulate or control women to further their causes. Although

Kamran is not depicted as a Muslim extremist, his character conforms to stereotypes associated with that archetype, evoking traits such as deceitfulness, coercion and fanaticism that are often unjustly attributed to Muslim men in Western media. When Kamala resists, Kamran's hostility escalates, which paints his character as an embodiment of unchecked radicalism and control. The narrative further complicates Kamran's character by having him kidnap Kamala's brother in volume four, to pressure her emotionally and weaken her resolve. This betrayal weaponised Kamala's familial bonds, demonstrating Kamran's willingness to exploit her vulnerabilities and showing his extremism as a departure from Kamala's values of compassion, inclusivity and respect for all people. His character reflects Western fears and stereotypes of Muslim men as fanatical or as seeking control over others, especially women, even though religion is not the explicit driver of his actions. By aligning Kamran's actions with tropes of radicalism and supremacy, his character risks reinforcing the perception of Muslim men as inherently dangerous. His actions highlight a disregard for moral boundaries and only deepen his role as a symbol of the clash between radical ideology and Kamala's more balanced worldview, ultimately reinforcing his portrayal as a dangerous, one-dimensional extremist.

Kamala's experience with Kamran ultimately reinforces her values and guiding principles, which are rooted in empathy, justice and independence rather than radicalism or superiority. Unlike Kamran, Kamala embraces her Inhuman identity without viewing it as a marker of supremacy, embodying the idea that her powers should be used to protect and uplift rather than control. Through this storyline, *Ms. Marvel: Volume Three*(2015*)* critiques extremist ideologies and emphasises the importance of individual moral agency. This

diverges from the last volume's emphasis on collective actions and ideals. Although she is demonstrating her fortitude and development as a hero capable of addressing community challenges without compromising her principles, a pattern emerges in this chapter. Muslim men are used religiously as disposable foils to highlight Kamala as a good and moral character. The first few instances of her family, specifically the men, acting as a foil to demonstrate her progressive qualities, continue through Kamran.

VOLUME 4: LAST DAYS, ISSUES #16-#19

The fourth volume (2015) brings Kamala face-to-face with the impending end of the world, and Kamran when he kidnaps Aamir as the *Secret Wars* crossover[28] event threatens to destroy the universe. In these issues, Kamala must not only save her city but also confront her heartbreak over Kamran. The imminent apocalypse forces Kamala to reconcile her relationships with her family, friends and superhero identity. This volume although short, hosts major milestones in the heroine's life, including meeting her hero, Carol Danvers. Danvers, like Wolverine in volume two, serves as Kamala's mentor figure when she afraid and confused about how to navigate her life. Their time together serves as a developmental arc for Kamala as she reflects on her morals and philosophies in a time of hopelessness.

After Kamala embraces and excitedly squeals upon meeting Carol Danver's, she relays her feelings of anguish and her confusion with the current events unfolding. Danvers tells Kamala that there is nothing she can do to change the fate of the world, but she can still

[28] The *Secret Wars* crossover event (2015) was a Marvel Comics storyline that merged alternate realities into a single, fragmented world. The heroes and villains from different timelines fought for survival and to restore the multiverse, changing the Marvel Universe stories in the process.

protect what she values until she meets her fate. The idea of facing the end of the world recalls a lecture Kamala heard in the masjid. “We all face the end alone and we alone have to account for our time on earth” (Wilson, 2015). Faced with a hopeless situation, Kalama looks towards her religion and spirituality, one of the first major moments where her relationship with Islam has influenced her heroism and resolve directly. The saying calls for accountability from every person and a reflection on what they have decided to do with their time gifted to them. With the Sheik’s words in mind, Kamala’s determination replaces her fear, and she decides to fight and protect using her remaining time. Her impact on the fate of the world may be limited, but her final actions will determine her legacy, a defender of her city and its people, a fighter for good. With her hero as a sidekick, Ms and Captain Marvel seek out Aamir and Kamran. Although, a seemingly minor moment in this issue, her inward reflection of her religion holds importance in her actions, this serves as a more profound moment of her religion in her ethos.

When Kamala and Captain Marvel find Aamir, he is enveloped in a synthetic Terrigen Mist, which temporarily grants him powers as an unintended side effect. Seizing the moment, Kamran urges Aamir to embrace his newfound abilities and join the New World Order of Inhumans. He insists that Aamir is no longer human, that he will never truly be understood, and that he should be grateful for his transformation. However, rather than succumbing to Kamran’s persuasion, Aamir rejects the notion outright. This moment marks a shift in Aamir’s representation as he sheds his passive role to illustrate the power in his character and morality. Aamir asserts that he was always content with who he was, even as someone often labelled a “freak” for his deep religious devotion (Wilson, 2015). He refuses to let

Kamran dictate his identity, clarifying that his values remain unchanged despite the promise of power. Above all, he declares he will never side with Kamran over Kamala. Aamir supports Kamala and proves his strength and progressive values when he states that unlike many men who act as they please without consequence, Aamir refuses to blame Kamala for whatever transpired between her and Kamran (Wilson, 2015). Instead, he chooses to stand by her, proving that his loyalty and principles are stronger than any temporary power. This moment is pivotal not only in cementing a closer bond between Kamala and Aamir but also serves as a pivotal moment in Aamir's representation. Aamir in previous issues has been shown as a kind brother towards Kamala. However, he has also been depicted as lazy, overly religious, self-righteous, and unproductive. In this scene, Aamir displays not only his inner strength and his self-confidence in who is and what he believes in, but he displays his own progressive beliefs in believing Kamala over any man. The significance of this representation lies in the character's development; as a practising Muslim man, he evolves from a counterpoint to his sister into an independent character.

In *Ms. Marvel* #17 (Wilson and Alphona, 2016), Kamala's family learns about her secret identity, leading to a poignant moment where Kamala's mother expresses her acceptance and pride in her daughter. This scene is significant as it reveals the shifting dynamics within Kamala's family, where traditional values begin to make room for Kamala's new role as a superhero and as an independent person. The family interactions that Kamala experiences in this specific volume stand in stark contrast to the stricter and unyielding portrayals of her mother, father and brother that were shown in the preceding volumes. While Kamala's father initially reacts with concern and disapproval, his eventual acceptance of her superhero identity signals a softer, more nuanced depiction of Muslim masculinity. This shift

reflects the authors' attempt to move away from the stereotypical portrayal of Muslim men as oppressive figures, offering a more complex understanding of familial relationships within a more traditional Muslim household.

Volume 4 moves beyond Kamala Khan's origin story, focusing on her as an established hero rather than a newcomer. It challenges rigid representations of Muslim men through her father's acceptance and support, offering a more nuanced portrayal. It also depicts greater insight into Kamala's philosophy and practice of justice. While Kamala faces an apocalyptic crisis, and seeks strength in her heroes. She finds strength and clarity to protect her community through a reflection of Islam. Although earlier volumes did not explicitly draw from her cultural or religious background to form her ethos, in this volume she offers a significant moment of reflection on morality through Islam. However, her overall engagement with Islamic values and cultural ideals remains surface-level. These values are primarily expressed through motivational speeches rather than through deeper systemic awareness. This reinforces the idea that despite her identity as a Muslim superhero, her heroism largely operates within a secular framework, avoiding direct engagement with faith or structural issues that impact her and her community. The limited praxis of Islam in her justice, which abstractly draws from Islamic principles, will be further explored in the next chapter as a critique that seeks to understand how her brand affects her superhero ethos.

CHAPTER 4: MARVEL, DIVERSITY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF REPRESENTATION

This chapter critically examines Marvel's approaches to diversity, focusing on the intersections of tokenism, commodification and cultural narratives. It explores the following question: **How do characters like Kamala Khan, alongside other protagonists of colour from marginalised communities, embody a paradox of representation if they offer authenticity but are simultaneously constrained by the necessity to conform to Marvel's brand identity and, by extension, American nationalist/capitalist ideals?** A hero's manifesto or ethos is at the core of the superhero and the genre, which often reflects their individual and cultural identities. However, in the Marvel Universe, despite the extremely different backgrounds of its heroes, their sense of justice and morality frequently aligns with a distinctly Western, capitalist, and individualist framework.

By exploring Marvel's portrayal of diversity, this analysis highlights how such representations promote conformity to systems of modernity, which may reinforce systemic inequities faced by the communities these characters represent. While these characters signify a progressive step toward inclusivity, this chapter argues that Marvel's efforts to diversify its narratives often function primarily as a tool for profit and branding rather than as a genuine engagement with social equity. This chapter explores this further by examining Kamala Khan's construction of justice and heroism, interrogating how Marvel's commodification of diversity intersects with cultural and economic imperatives. This chapter considers how the construction of Kamala's morality and her definition of justice reflects the superhero's journey's emphasis on individual responsibility rather than collective action, an

inherently capitalistic idea. Her experiences explore the apprehension between embracing her cultural identity and navigating the expectations of a society that demands assimilation. The chapter investigates **if her portrayal adopts an Islamic perspective on justice, or does it ultimately adhere to the prevailing American nationalist ethos characteristic of Marvel heroes?** This duality grapples with Marvel's struggle to balance authentic representation with narratives that ultimately conform to hegemonic norms. By situating Kamala within this framework, Marvel's storytelling exemplifies the limits of the genre's ability to address systemic issues, raising questions about whether true justice and equity can ever be fully realised in a medium so embedded within commercial imperatives and notions of American exceptionalism.

MARVEL COMICS AS AMERICAN PROPAGANDA: PAST AND PRESENT

Coloniality perpetuates the Western domination established during colonialism by continuing to define key aspects of life, such as culture, labour, inter-subjective relations and knowledge production, far beyond the formal end of colonial rule (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). While colonialism may have formally ended, coloniality has not only persisted but has embedded itself deeply into global systems, influencing our mindsets, behaviours, and experiences with the world. It operates in the same way that colonialism once did, but with an even wider reach, shaping every aspect of contemporary life (Mignolo, 2007). Cultural objects like the comic book continue this tradition in popular culture, with some comics serving as explicit forms of propaganda, while Marvel is not a branch of the American government, through observing the companies' historical positions on real world history a thread between military and Marvel is made visible.

WORLD WAR II AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF MARVEL PROPAGANDA

Marvel comics have historically functioned as a vehicle for American propaganda, particularly during the mid-20th century. Captain America's debut in 1941 epitomised this propagandistic role, with its iconic cover depicting the hero punching Adolf Hitler, a visual that clearly communicated the moral imperative of defeating Nazism (Dittmer, 2005). Captain America's debut preceded the United States' entry into the war but represented America's political interests and stances on the war. The cover positioned the hero as a defender of democracy and a personification of American strength (Dittmer, 2005). The comic's creators, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, were motivated by a combination of personal convictions and commercial strategy, tapping into public sentiment against Hitler, Germany, and the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, Japan).



Fig. 20: Captain America #1 December 20th, 1940, by Timely Comics.

This imagery (Fig. 20) was not just entertainment but a deliberate effort to foster patriotism and support for the war effort, aligning with other forms of American propaganda that

utilised American exceptionalism as a marketing tool. By portraying the United States as a global saviour, these stories reinforced a worldview that valorised military power and depicted conflict as a binary struggle between good (America) and evil (Steinmetz, 2008).

The moral frameworks embedded in these comics often promoted values such as bravery, sacrifice and justice, contextualised as the marker of concepts like good and morality. Captain America was designed to personify these virtues, becoming a symbol of unwavering righteousness that fought not just enemies of the state but the ideologies they represented (Dittmer, 2005). Besides representing American morality, Captain America embodied the moral clarity of the wartime narrative: a super-soldier who fought for justice and liberty. His enemies have caricatured representations of Axis powers, reducing complex geopolitical realities into a simple dichotomy between good versus evil, which often came with dehumanising portrayals of the enemy (Pineda and Jiménez-Varea, 2023). This extended beyond the battlefield, as the comics also addressed domestic values, promoting civic duty, and unity during times of crisis (Sostaric, 2019). According to Murray (2012), the representations and sentiments of civic duty were instrumental in stirring public support for the war effort and bolstering national morale. In this period, Marvel's comics served as a unifying force, promoting collective action against American enemies through civilian efforts like enlistment. Therefore, in addition to morale-building, Marvel Comics actively encouraged recruitment into the armed forces.

Advertisements and storylines directly appealed to young readers, framing enlistment as both a patriotic duty and an opportunity for heroism. An example of this can be observed in Captain America's storylines that often featured ordinary characters joining the military and rising to hero status, thus normalising and glorifying military service (Murray, 2012). These narratives were tailored for young male audiences, who were the primary readers and targets during the Golden Age (1938 to 1956) of comics, leveraging their aspirations and sense of adventure to encourage support, and morale while enhancing the image of the patriotic soldier and boosting enlistment. Marvel comics, therefore, not only provided entertainment but also served as a cultural instrument for encouraging action towards the American idea of justice and morality.

Despite evolving cultural contexts, contemporary Marvel narratives continue to champion American ideals. The emphasis on individual freedom, justice and heroism often aligns with a distinctly Western, capitalist ethos. This is evidenced in past and present storylines in *Captain America* and *Iron Man* that reinforce the moral righteousness of American interventionism. Even when diverse heroes such as Kamala Khan and T'Challa (*Black Panther, 1966*) are introduced, their narratives seldom critically engage with America's systemic inequities. Instead, they depict personal struggles within frameworks that ultimately validate American exceptionalism. Kamala Khan's journey, while highlighting her South Asian American Muslim identity, often prioritises assimilation into Western norms of heroism (Chung, 2019). This focus on individual success over systemic critique consistently illustrates Marvel's loyalty to neoliberal values.

THE COLD WAR AND THE RISE OF THE SUPERHERO INDUSTRY

The Cold War era saw a transformation in Marvel's approach to propaganda, reflecting the shifting anxieties of American society. With the rise of Stan Lee's leadership in the 1960s, Marvel's stories began to explore more nuanced themes, but the overarching narratives continued to uphold American ideological dominance. The Fantastic Four, introduced in 1961, embodied the technological dominance of America, with Reed Richards symbolising the intellectual superiority of the American scientific establishment (Johnson, 2012). Similarly, Iron Man, who debuted in 1963, reflected Cold War-era concerns about technological warfare, military-industrial power, and capitalist ingenuity.

Tony Stark, the alter ego of Iron Man, epitomises the archetype of the rugged individualist, a beacon of American capitalism. A billionaire industrialist and inventor, Stark's journey to becoming a hero is rooted in his technological prowess and personal wealth. He was introduced during the Cold War as a weapons manufacturer; his character reflected both the anxieties and the aspirations of an era dominated by technological competition and the military-industrial complex. As Stan Lee noted, Stark was conceived as a challenge to readers' scepticism of military and technological figures (Pardy, 2019).

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Iron Man's origins were updated to place him in the context of the War on Terror[29]. The War on Terror is the USA governments response to

[29] In the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Tony Stark (Iron Man) debuted in *Iron Man* (2008), the film is set against the backdrop of the War on Terror, as Stark is captured by terrorists in Afghanistan. This marked the beginning of Marvel's interconnected movie universe and ties reflects the MCU's ties to real politics.

the attacks on September 11, 2001. There is no definite date to mark the end of the response but its symbolic conclusion is often discussed as the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, though counterterrorism efforts continue in various forms. Stark's transformation begins with his capture by terrorists in Afghanistan, where he realises the destructive impact of his weapons. His subsequent creation of the Iron Man suit symbolises his redemption because he is combating the terror, violence, and injustice of the world with his invention. Stark's approach to resolving the violence caused by his weapons, by creating more weapons to be used in combat demonstrates neoliberal and capitalist values by proposing that global challenges can be solved through privatised, technocratic interventions rather than systemic reform (Pardy, 2019). However, Stark's embodiment of these ideals raises critical ethical questions. McKoy (2024) contends that such narratives often glorify individual agency while avoiding acknowledging the structural inequalities perpetuating injustice. Stark's assertion that he has "privatised world peace" (*Iron Man 2*, 2010) exemplifies this paradox, as his actions inadvertently contribute to the conditions that create the villains he opposes. The MCU frequently positions Stark's technology as both a solution and a catalyst for conflict. The power Stark wields, unchecked by collective governance, reflects the neoliberal tendency to praise the exceptional individual and sidelines systemic critique.

The portrayal of Stark also reflects the colonial undertones of heroism in the Marvel universe. By positioning Stark as a benevolent saviour who imposes order and progress

through his technological inventions, the narrative aligns with modernist colonial ideologies that rationalise intervention in non-Western contexts under the pretence of humanitarianism. This dynamic is especially evident in the film *Iron Man* (2008), where Stark's captivity in Afghanistan and subsequent transformation constructs a narrative of redemption predicated on his unilateral ability to restore order through advanced technology. Such portrayals reinforce Western-centric hierarchies by implicitly glorifying the technological and moral superiority of the individual hero while erasing the agency of those affected by Stark's actions and inventions, reducing them to passive recipients of his interventions (Turzi, 2021). Additionally, Turzi (2021) argues that the superhero genre often reflects and perpetuates power imbalances by portraying the hero's perspective as inherently just, even when their actions have harmful consequences and Tony Stark as a beacon of the military industrial complex is often depicted as just, despite creating destructive weaponry capable of mass violence. Marvel Comics and the MCU's reluctance to engage deeply with the systemic issues fuelling global conflicts reflects a tendency within the superhero genre to simplify complex realities into binaries of good versus evil. By celebrating Stark's heroism, the MCU perpetuates a colonialist vision of power that prioritises dominance and intervention over the empowerment and autonomy of those it claims to protect. McKoy (2024) asserts that such narratives reinforce neoliberal ideals by celebrating individual agency while ignoring structural inequalities, especially inequalities perpetrated by the American military industrial complex.

POST-9/11 AND THE CINEMATIC EXPANSION

The attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, marked a significant turning point for Marvel's narratives, particularly as the company transitioned into its cinematic phase with the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). In the post-9/11 context, themes of terrorism, surveillance and global security became central to Marvel's storytelling. Captain America's portrayal in the MCU, particularly in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), exemplifies this shift. While the film critiques the government overreach and surveillance, it ultimately reaffirms faith in individual morality and American ideals (Romagnoli and Pagnucci, 2013). During this era, Marvel's stories also functioned as soft recruitment tools, implicitly encouraging patriotism and explicitly using the stamp of Uncle Sam[30] via military collaborations. Collaborations with the U.S. Department of Defence in films and comics emphasised the heroism of military personnel. Promotional materials for films like *Captain Marvel* included acknowledgements of military partnerships, framing the armed forces as integral to national security and heroism. Notably, screenings of *Captain Marvel* featured U.S. Air Force recruitment advertisements, reinforcing the association between military service and superheroic ideals (Pardy, 2019). These narratives, initially prominent in comics, have evolved with the birth of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), catapulting these messages to a global audience and shaping societal perceptions of American military strength as central to global justice and security, further embedding these ideals in international popular culture (McKoy, 2024).

[30] Uncle Sam is an icon representing the United States Government, he is visibly represented as a white, white-haired man with a beard, dressed in colours resembling the American flag. He was widely used as propaganda during World War I and World War II, to encourage enlistment and to promote nationalism.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF REPRESENTATION AND ITS LIMITATIONS

In recent decades, Marvel has made strides toward greater diversity and representation in its comics and films. Characters such as Kamala Khan and T'Challa (*Black Panther, 1966*) reflect efforts to engage with underrepresented communities and global audiences. However, as Chung (2019) observes, these narratives often still prioritise individual assimilation into Western frameworks of heroism, rather than critically examining systemic inequities through the lens of the groups each character represents. The representation of diversity within Marvel's narratives is entangled with the logic of coloniality and imperialism. Mignolo (2007) explains that coloniality refers to the enduring patterns of power that originate in colonialism and persist in shaping global hierarchies, particularly through cultural production. Marvel's storytelling framework reflects these logics, as it often appropriates and reconfigures non-Western identities into narratives that align with Western norms and market-driven imperatives. T'Challa and Kamala Khan's characters, while an impressive step forward in representing marginalised communities, are a salient example of this dynamic. Both storylines frequently adhere to an individualistic hero's journey rooted in American exceptionalism, disregarding communal values and systemic critiques that are integral to their respective cultural and religious backgrounds.

Black Panther positions Afro-centric perspectives at the forefront of its storytelling, with Wakanda celebrated as a technologically advanced African utopia untouched by the devastations of colonialism. These characters have been heralded for reshaping the cultural landscape of superhero media, demonstrating Marvel's willingness to engage with global audiences and issues of representation. Nevertheless, these efforts warrant critical scrutiny.

As observed in "*Drawing Fear of Difference*" (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020), Kamala Khan's and T'Challa's narratives often prioritise cultural reconciliation and personal development within an overarching framework of Western ideals. This approach risks portraying diversity as a symbolic gesture that integrates marginalised characters into pre-existing structures without addressing the foundational inequities shaping their struggles. T'Challa's *Black Panther*, while an iconic character and emblematic of Afro-futurism, remains tethered to ideological constructs reminiscent of an American industrial complex. As discussed in *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics* (Guynes & Lund, 2020), Wakanda's depiction, despite its rejection of colonial histories, aligns with a vision of technological and economic power that parallels capitalist-industrial values celebrated in American storylines. This narrative reinforces the righteousness of American interventionism, as T'Challa's alliances with Western heroes affirm the inevitability of global interconnectedness under American leadership. Black Panther's refusal to explicitly address contemporary social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, signals Marvel's cautious approach to politicisation when the government and modernity are challenged and critiqued. Instead, T'Challa's narrative prioritises themes of leadership, unity, and moral introspection, sidestepping confrontations with structural racism or colonial legacies. This avoidance reflects a trend within Marvel's storytelling to engage with social issues perpetuated by American history and governance in abstract terms, minimising their radical or transformative potential. These representations, though empowering on the surface, often reinforce ideals of individualistic heroism and state sovereignty without sufficiently critiquing the global power dynamics they evoke.

Miles Morales[31] (2011) like Kamala, has become a core character in diversifying Marvel's repertoire and shares similar critiques to Kamala. Miles, a Black, Puerto Rican teenager living in Brooklyn, New York City and Kamala, a Pakistani American Muslim from Jersey City, they navigate their dual identities while embodying the mantle of Spider-Man and Ms. Marvel. These characters are celebrated for their representation, but their stories often neglect the critical issues that directly impact the communities they represent. Both characters are of similar age, placing them in a demographic profoundly affected by contemporary socio-political events. Policies such as Trump's Muslim ban, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) [32], and the ongoing momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement are not just abstract headlines; they are realities that shape the lived experiences of the communities surrounding Miles and Kamala. Yet, their narratives seldom confront these issues head-on. For Kamala, whose character draws deeply from her Muslim and immigrant identity, the Muslim ban could have provided a meaningful opportunity to address Islamophobia and xenophobia directly. However, she is still portrayed as a proudly American hero (Fig. 21) despite Islamophobic policies and statements made by the American government and governmental figures. Similarly, Miles, whose story emerges from a rich legacy of racial justice movements, could have been a powerful narrative vehicle for engaging with the systemic injustices that animate movements like Black Lives Matter.

[31] Miles Morales debuted in *2011*. He was introduced as the new Spider-Man in Marvel's *Ultimate Universe* following the death of Peter Parker.

[32] *Roe v. Wade* (1973) was a historical U.S. Supreme Court decision that established a woman's constitutional right to choose to have an abortion, grounded in the right to privacy. The ruling holds importance because most state laws in America restricted abortion. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), ending the federal constitutional right to abortion, therefor the rights of women to choose an abortion varies across states within America.



Fig. 21: Kamala Khan as Ms. America in Ms. Marvel Vol 4 13. Art by: Joelle Jones and Rachelle Rosenberg

These omissions reflect a pattern within Marvel's storytelling to render its characters as universal beacons of "good" while carefully avoiding the contentious, systemic critiques that justice demands. While it could be argued that their youth and inexperience render them ill-equipped to tackle the complexity of these issues, this perspective overlooks the inherently political nature of the superhero genre. As symbols of heroism and hope, characters like Miles and Kamala are uniquely positioned to reflect and engage with the realities of the communities they represent. Although they might lack direct social leadership skills, heroism itself is a type of social activism; when heroes develop their values, global issues become part of their self-reflection and the creation of their personal mission statements. This can be noted with Captain America and Iron Man, however, the same cannot be applied to Kamala and Miles to the same degree. However, by avoiding the major injustices affecting their respective cultural and religious groups, their narratives risk losing meaningful engagement with justice that truly speak to their communities. The argument that fictional narratives should not delve into political territory neglects the reality that

justice itself is a political construct, and the superhero genre is fundamentally rooted in political themes. As Guynes and Lund (2020) argue, narratives of heroism are shaped by the socio-political contexts in which they are created. For characters like Miles and Kamala, whose identities intersect with histories of racial and religious marginalisation, ignoring issues like systemic racism, reproductive rights or immigration policies is not a neutral choice. Instead, it reflects Marvel's cautious approach to political engagement, a strategy that prioritises marketability over the transformative potential of storytelling.

While an argument can be made that addressing such issues risks alienating audiences or lobbying entertainment, the reality is that selective engagement with socio-political themes already politicises these narratives. By aligning themselves with the values of inclusivity and justice, superheroes are inherently positioned to critique systems of oppression. Their failure to engage with contemporary grassroots movements within marginalised communities dilutes their potential to act as catalysts for real-world reflection and change. To fully realise the promise of their representation, Miles and Kamala must transcend the boundaries of sanitised narratives.

The commodification of diversity within Marvel's narratives reflects the conflict between representation and authenticity. While characters like Black Panther, Miles Morales and Kamala Khan signify progress in diversifying superhero comics, their stories are constrained by market-driven imperatives that prioritise inclusivity as a branding strategy. This dynamic undermines the social justice and moral lessons embedded in the superhero genre, limiting

its capacity to challenge dominant ideologies. Ultimately, Marvel's approach to diversity highlights the challenges of integrating meaningful representation into a medium rooted in American exceptionalism and neoliberal values. Kamala Khan, as *Ms. Marvel*, represents a valuable although highly constrained attempt to represent a Muslim superhero. While her character resonates with Muslim audiences through cultural and religious authenticity, her justice framework remains rooted in Western super-heroism.

ISLAMIC LIBERATION THEOLOGY, KAMALA KHAN AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF REPRESENTATION

Kamala Khan serves as a pivotal figure in Marvel's push for diversity, but her representation remains shaped by the corporate incentives of the brand. While she is rightfully celebrated as Marvel's first Muslim superhero, her faith and cultural heritage are largely underutilised in informing her superhero ethos and her philosophy on justice. This creates a disconnect between the character's identity and the moral framework of her narratives, which predominantly align with Western notions of individualism rather than the Islamic principles of justice and collective responsibility, which form the foundation of Islamic justice in frameworks like Islamic Liberation Theology.

Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT) is a dynamic and evolving framework that seeks to address systemic oppression and uplift marginalised communities by integrating Qur'anic principles with a focus on praxis and social justice. ILT is rooted in principles such as adl or adala which means justice (Rahemtulla, 2023), and Shura, which believes in democratic and collective

decision-making through consultation with the needs and choices of the people (Sulaiman and Moshood, 2016). ILT provides a powerful ethical framework for addressing systemic oppression. Kunnummal (2023) explains that Islamic liberation Theology has been interpreted differently by various global South scholars but ultimately shares core themes. The core themes commonly focus on the liberation of the oppressed, the critique of unjust systems, and the practical application of beliefs. Leading scholars in the field, however, emphasise different aspects. Asghar Ali Engineer emphasises balancing spiritual and worldly goals while empowering the oppressed through a structured ideological framework (Kunnummal, 2023). Engineer (Akhtar in Kunnummal, 2023) focuses on grassroots-driven theology that prioritises the poor and tackles systemic oppression. Grassroot movements depend on a group of local people in a community, district or region to drive change. It relies on collective action from the ground up, but often grassroots movements can influence policies or movements not only at a local level but at a national, or even an international level. Farid Esack (1997) emphasises freeing religion from systems that demand uncritical obedience to authority, advocating for a participatory and liberating process (Kunnummal 2023). Hamid Dabashi takes a global perspective, highlighting the need for dialogue with ideological rivals and exploring Islam's role in a divided world. By integrating these Islamic principles, ILT emphasises spiritual and material liberation (Engineer, 1990; Esack, 1997). However, this framework contrasts starkly with the justice paradigms portrayed in mainstream superhero narratives, including Kamala Khan's story as Ms. Marvel.

Central to ILT's transformative process is the use of tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis), which functions as a critical tool for interpreting and applying Qur'anic teachings to engage with daily or systemic struggles. Historically, tafsir traditions have provided a framework for understanding the Qur'an's guidance by relying on linguistic analysis, historical context and prophetic traditions (hadiths) to clarify its meanings. In modern contexts, tafsir has evolved to address pressing issues such as gender equality, social justice and systemic oppression. Egalitarian tafsir plays a particularly crucial role within ILT by re-examining traditional interpretations to uncover liberating principles that support marginalised groups, ensuring the Qur'an remains a dynamic and actionable text. Scholars like (in Rahemtulla 2023) connect tafsir traditions to ILT by integrating principles such as qist (fairness) and adl (justice) into actionable ethics, emphasising the equitable distribution of resources and dismantling oppressive systems. This approach aligns with ILT's mission of using Qur'anic principles as practical tools for promoting justice and equity (Abou-Bakr in Rahemtulla, 2023). By engaging with both classical and contemporary tafsir, Abou-Bakr asserts that Islamic traditions remain relevant in addressing modern challenges through ILT. Thus, tafsir serves not only as a method of understanding the Qur'an, but also as a means of implementing ILT's liberating goals. It bridges the gap between theological principles and social praxis, enabling a nuanced, culturally grounded approach to justice that resonates with global struggles against systemic inequities and oppression. Kamala, while celebrated as a Muslim superhero, operates within Marvel's overarching ethos of individual heroism. Through the content analysis of her views on justice, her portrayal aligns more with American exceptionalism, a cultural framework which posits that the United States, and by extension, its cultural exports in this context comics, embodies unique moral ideals. According to Shafer (1999), American exceptionalism prioritises individualism and a mission-

oriented philosophy. These values, like most Marvel characters, underpin Kamala's heroism, but also limit her narrative potential to engage with systemic issues like Islamophobia, racism and economic inequality.

JUSTICE THROUGH THE LENS OF ISLAMIC LIBERATION THEOLOGY

ILT challenges systemic inequities, advocating collective liberation over individual action, embodying the spirit of Subaltern modes of being like Ubuntu. Kamala's faith and cultural background could have enriched her heroism by embedding her morality in ILT principles, emphasising community welfare over personal victories. Yet, Marvel's depiction of justice reflects the individualistic ethos of American exceptionalism. These principles mirror the cultural narrative where the U.S. is portrayed as a "city upon a hill," the entire world looking towards the United States (Winthrop in Shafer, 1999, p.446) because it is inherently different and superior in its approach to governance and societal organisation. Kamala's focus on localised threats in Jersey City aligns with Marvel's universalist moral compass rather than the systemic critiques central to the ILT framework.

Marvel's portrayal of Kamala rarely incorporates Islamic values meaningfully. While she is shown engaging with her local mosque and questioning gender dynamics, and in the last volume she incorporates the Sheik's words in her resolve. However, these moments consistently exist as minor subplots and do not substantively influence her actions as *Ms. Marvel* (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020). Her heroes and role models are the Avengers and most of her guidance is drawn from them and thus, her ideas of justice and good are often situated in their ideals. Her justice code reflects the universalist moral compass typical of Marvel heroes, prioritising individual heroism over culturally specific moral values and

practises. She touches on ideas of collectivism and the idea of the greater good, but it is confined to speech and without reflecting on why her generation feels hopeless as expressed throughout volume two. This lack of integration is particularly glaring given Kamala's potential to represent the lived experiences of the daughter of immigrants and Muslim communities in America. Such framing limits the depth of her character, reducing her heritage to a background element rather than an active driver of her heroism.

Moreover, Kamala's portrayal is shaped by Marvel's corporate framework, which prioritises marketability over authenticity. The constraints on the brand's capacity to engage with contentious social and political themes are reflected within its protagonists (Guynes & Lund, 2020). This tension manifests itself in the sanitised narratives surrounding characters of colour; these narratives deliberately sidestep the systemic issues of Islamophobia and discriminatory immigration policies, despite the fact that these issues are profoundly relevant to the communities Kamala and similar characters are intended to represent. Her character is thus positioned as a beacon of hope and resilience, but one whose moral clarity ultimately aligns with Marvel's patriotic branding strategy. The limitations of Kamala's representation also highlight a larger issue within the superhero genre. While the genre is rooted in themes of justice and resistance, it often reflects the power structures of its creators. As Hammonds (2021) argues, narratives tied to corporate entities frequently commodify diversity, offering representation without meaningful engagement with the inequities faced by marginalised groups. Kamala's stories exemplify this dynamic, as her identity as a Muslim superhero is celebrated while her potential to critique systemic oppression through religious ideas of justice is muted.

Kamala's portrayal offers insight into the inherent contradictions of diversity within a commercial framework. Her character reflects progress in representation, but her narratives remain limited by Marvel's prioritisation of broad appeal over authentic engagement with the socio-political realities of her community. To fully realise her potential as a hero, Kamala's stories must embrace the complexities of her identity, incorporating the ethical and political dimensions of her faith and heritage. Only then can she transcend the confines of corporate branding to become a genuine force for justice. Her praxis of justice resists acknowledging systemic failings, preferring narratives that celebrate perseverance within the existing order without disturbing it. While Kamala navigates her identity as a South Asian American Muslim, these struggles are primarily relegated to subplots, failing to substantially influence her heroism. The portrayal thus reflects the commodification of diversity, where representation is celebrated, but meaningful engagement with the injustices faced by marginalised communities is curtailed (Guynes & Lund, 2020). ILT could have provided a foundation for her approach to addressing systemic injustices within her community, but she would forfeit the values of Marvel in turn. By disregarding Islamic liberation theology and its systemic critique of power, her portrayal reflects Marvel's commercial priorities rather than a bold engagement with the full spectrum of her Muslim identity.

CORPORATE KHAN

This study explores how racial capitalism influences the *Ms. Marvel* narratives and characterisation, particularly in how Kamala Khan's identity is constructed within a media

culture that commodifies race and culture. This section's interest is in understanding how the commodification of her identity influences her authenticity. The concept of racial capitalism provides a critical lens through which to understand the intersection of race, culture and capitalism in the construction of Kamala Khan and how it may influence her identity and behaviour in *Ms. Marvel*.

Kamala's character's adherence to Western-centric ideals of justice exemplifies the selective apolitical branding strategy used by companies like Marvel for a wide appeal (Zaman Malik, A., Ahmad, F. and Guzmán, 2025). For instance, her engagement with the local mosque and her questioning of gender hierarchies highlight her progressive values and cultural identity but do not substantially drive her superhero narrative. As a product of Marvel's corporate framework, Kamala's story avoids contentious social issues, such as Islamophobia or discriminatory immigration policies. This omission underscores the inherent contradiction of diversity within a commercial context. Despite being positioned as a revolutionary figure, Kamala's justice framework avoids the systemic critiques central to ILT. Her portrayal, therefore, aligns with the "two-edged phenomenon" of American exceptionalism, which celebrates individual freedoms while often failing to address deeper systemic inequities (Lipset in Shafer, 1999, p. 458). The commodification of Kamala Khan's identity has priority over her authenticity which could apply to any Marvel character. This indicates that no matter how diverse and complex characters may be, their voices will always be muffled by the Marvel muzzle.

Marvel's track record in representing socially marginalised groups is complicated by the company's marketing strategies that commodify diversity for profit. This issue became particularly evident during the controversy surrounding Marvel's rap parody variant covers, which mimicked iconic hip-hop album art, such as *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* by Lauryn Hill (Ruffhouse Records, 1998) and *Ready to Die by* The Notorious B.I.G (Bad Boy Records and Arista Records, 1994), for their comic book issues. The covers were generally well received because they acted as a tribute to iconic artists and their music. Critics, however, highlighted that most of the musicians were black and their art was being used by a company that still sidelined black stories, black characters and black creatives. Critics highlighted the disconnectedness between Marvel's use of Black cultural imagery for profit and the lack of Black creators producing these comics (Hudson, 2015). Marvel's editor-in-chief at the time, Axel Alonso, deflected criticism by framing the initiative as a method to spark discussions about diversity, yet his dismissive responses to concerns such as accusing critics of "snap judgments" (Alonso in Hudson, 2015) because he is a Mexican man who grew up on Hip-hop music and considered it a tribute, appreciation not appropriation. While it may be a tribute to black culture, the lack of black creatives was an issue that was sidestepped. The concern that heroes like Miles Morales (2011) were still being created by white teams, in this case American writer Brian Michael Bendis and Italian artist Sara Pichelli were ignored by Alonso. This demonstrated a common trend of superficiality in the company's commitment to genuine inclusivity.

Marvel's reluctance to empower marginalised voices within its production teams exacerbates these limitations. The absence of diverse creators, writers, artists and editors

results in narratives that reflect an external perspective on marginalised identities rather than an authentic expression of those experiences. Critics have indicated that the superficial incorporation of diversity in Marvel's storytelling serves more of a branding strategy than a genuine effort to challenge systemic inequities or foster meaningful representation (Kent, 2016). This dynamic not only constrains the potential of characters like Kamala Khan but also reflects a cultural trend of commodifying marginalised identities for profit while neglecting the systemic barriers those identities face in reality.

The insights from Lozenski and Chinang (2019, p. 88) further emphasise how media industries commodify marginalised identities into "narrative commodities" that serve to reinforce rather than dismantle nationalist ideologies. In their analysis of *Black Panther* as a "black narrative commodity", Lozenski and Chinang (2019) argue that media representations of racial diversity often mask the structural inequalities perpetuated by the nation-state. In this instance, police brutality against the black community, incarceration and over policing are some systematic issues that consistently affect the black community in America and especially in black areas and grassroots movements like BLM meant to engage with these issues can never be addressed by Miles in any meaningful capacity. This critique is equally applicable to Kamala Khan's portrayal, which celebrates visibility without addressing the systemic barriers faced by Muslim and immigrant communities. By framing her heroism as a series of individual triumphs, Marvel effectively transforms Kamala's identity into a product for consumption, devoid of its political and cultural roots. Ultimately, Kamala's portrayal and Marvel's approach to diversity show the contradictions inherent in corporate-driven representation. By prioritising marketability, profit and universality and

sidestepping systematic oppression, Marvel undermines the authenticity and transformative potential of its characters, reinforcing the very structures of inequality it claims to challenge.

Scholars such as Ahmed (2012) discuss how inclusion within hegemonic structures often comes at the cost of assimilation, where marginalised voices are co-opted to maintain existing power dynamics. Kamala's character arc demonstrates this phenomenon, as her identity is celebrated but sanitised to avoid confronting the structural injustices affecting Muslim and immigrant communities. Moreover, the lack of structural critique in Kamala's narratives and her representation as a moderate Muslim clarify Marvel's investment in maintaining a palatable form of diversity that aligns with Western capitalist ideals. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains, coloniality sustains itself through the naturalisation of Eurocentric values, often at the expense of alternative epistemologies. Kamala's portrayal reflects this dynamic, as her storylines rarely challenge the hegemonic frameworks of nationalism or capitalism that marginalise her community. Instead, her heroism is depicted as an extension of American values, reinforcing rather than subverting the narratives of inclusion shaped by colonial power structures. These dynamics highlight the limitations of representation within corporate media, where the commodification of diversity often serves to obscure the systemic inequities faced by marginalised groups. The insights of Mignolo (2007) and Maldonado-Torres (2007) illuminate how Marvel's approach to diversity mirrors the logic of coloniality, as it appropriates cultural identities to reinforce Western ideologies while sidelining the potential for genuine theology and practices of social activism. Consequently, Kamala Khan's character, despite her transformative presence, exemplifies the constraints of diversity within a framework still rooted in colonial and imperial legacies.

Although owned and trademarked by Disney, outside of Marvel's corporate structure, Kamala Khan has taken on a life of her own as a symbol of change and justice in the hands of fans. While Marvel may frame her as apolitical, her fan base views her as a revolutionary figure. Through fan art and cosplay, people use her likeness to rally for real-world causes, challenging systemic injustices in ways exceeding the comic book industry's confines. Although Kamala cannot speak without censorship, her fans have given her a voice, using her image to advocate for change. Whether it is through attending protests in her costume or creating artwork reimagining her as a symbol of resistance or critique of government (Fig. 22), her presence extends far beyond the pages of Marvel comics.



Fig. 22: A subversion of a Ms. Marvel Cover by fans posted on Tumblr by angelophile (2017) Tumblr.

This grassroots engagement highlights how superheroes, when embraced by the people rather than corporations can be reclaimed as symbols of justice. They are unbound by financial interests and buoyed by the real struggles and hopes of those who see themselves in them.

THE INDEPENDENT MUSLIM HERO

This thesis argues that Kamala Khan's advocacy for women's rights and other social justice issues is limited by her corporate image. This prompts a key question: **How are Muslim superheroes depicted outside Marvel's universe?** One compelling example is *Qahera* (2013), a Muslim superhero webcomic that offers a glimpse into the world of self-made Muslim heroes. Qahera, an Egyptian webcomic, is written and designed by Deena Mohamed. The comic was released in a similar time frame to Kamala's debut and circulated through social media. The titular character, Qahera, is a witty and often sarcastic niqabi Muslim woman who patrols the streets of Egypt, protecting women from misogynistic men while also challenging white feminism. Although the comic might appear to be visually simple, drawn in black and white, the comic delivers complex social commentary. Like any superhero, Qahera spends her days defending those in need, but her role extends beyond physical protection. She actively engages with issues of social justice that are deeply tied to her identity as an Egyptian Muslim woman.

Qahera's sense of justice contrasts sharply with that of Marvel superheroes, stemming not only from her Egyptian context but also from her values and religion, which are not moulded by broad appeal or commercial viability. In contrast with Kamala Khan, whose Muslim superhero identity is often presented within a Westernised framework for mass appeal, Qahera's identity is firmly grounded in her personal reality. She does not navigate her identity through the lens of assimilation or compromise; instead; she confronts the issues that affect the women around her directly and without hesitation. Qahera is not an apolitical figure. Her pursuit of justice extends beyond typical crime-fighting; it is intrinsically

linked to social justice and activism. Her work goes beyond the immediate challenges Egyptian women face; unlike many Western superheroes, that often placed in politically neutral roles, Qahera is allowed to take a stance. For instance, one of the key themes in Qahera is female empowerment. She addresses gender-based violence, the sexualisation of women in her country, and the failures of institutions to protect women globally. The comic critiques both individual acts of harassment and the systematic societal failures that enable such behaviour. Through Qahera's actions and her reflections, the webcomic explores her ideas of justice and her critique on injustice. It explicitly informs her morals and values. For example, Qahera confronts the problematic aspects of white feminism. This comic uses the contrast between "Free the Nipple" [33] (as empowerment) and the niqab (as oppression) to critique white feminist views. By highlighting this contradiction, Qahera argues that white feminist ideals cannot recognise the autonomy of Muslim women, reinforcing the misconception that the niqab is inherently oppressive. She openly expresses her solidarity with Palestine, not by inserting herself as a saviour but by amplifying the voices of those suffering. Her activism is not performative; she does not attempt to provide a solution but rather uses her platform to express unwavering support. Through her character, Qahera serves as a powerful counter-narrative to mainstream representations of Muslim women in superhero media, offering an independent and unapologetically Muslim perspective on justice and feminism (Fig. 23).

[33] "Free the Nipple" is a social movement that challenges the notion that men can be topless in public, but women cannot enjoy the same freedom or right because they are inherently sexualised forming part of a larger movement against gender discrimination.

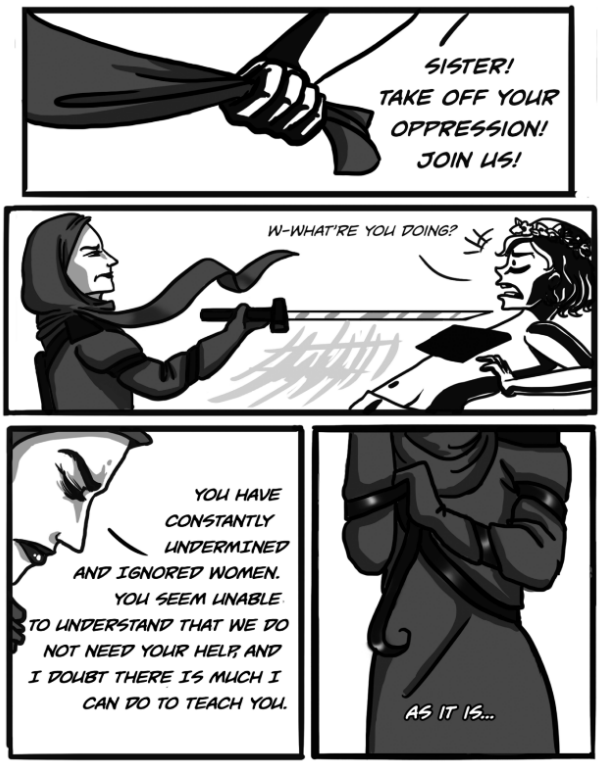

Fig.23: Qahera on white feminism (Mohammed, 2014)

This political consciousness sets *Qahera* apart from Marvel's portrayal of Muslim superheroes, which often leans into a depoliticised or sanitised representation. In contrast, *Qahera* exists entirely outside of these constraints. Her character is not designed to be palatable to Western audiences or to fit within the American superhero mould. She is created by an Egyptian artist, for an audience that understands and relates to her struggles firsthand. Qahera's depiction reclaims the superhero narrative for Muslim women in the Global South. She is not an object to be interpreted and related to by a wide audience, but an active participant in shaping her own story. By allowing *Qahera* to address issues like white feminism, Western imperialism, and gender oppression in an Egyptian context, Deena Mohamed counters the dominant whiteness that dictates morality and justice in the superhero genre. More than a lone crusader, this superhero embodies resistance against

worldwide and local injustices. While *Qahera* does not have the same platform and reach as Ms. Marvel, she does have the power to speak, and she addresses injustice directly.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of the study was to examine how Kamala Khan and the *Ms. Marvel* series challenged colonial paradigms of Islamophobia, whiteness, and Orientalism by posing the question: **How do colonial paradigms operate within *Ms. Marvel*, particularly within the context of its production by Marvel under the Disney conglomerates, where profit often drives creative decisions?** This includes ways in which the comic still played into those spheres. This study explored the complex identity of Ms. Marvel within the framework of coloniality and global cultural production, examining whether her character is inherently colonial as a product of Marvel Entertainment. At its core, the analysis interrogates the intersection of identity, representation, and corporate power, raising critical questions about the implications of diversity in mainstream media.

An extensive historical and contemporary review of Marvel comics and the superhero genre reveals Kamala Khan's historic shift in representing Muslim, South Asian, and female characters. Her franchise represents a progressive shift in mainstream storytelling, allowing for a reimagining of the superhero genre through the lens of marginalised identities. Her stories reflect her struggles with cultural duality, her Muslim faith, and the expectations placed upon her by American society and her community. The initial chapters of the study established that she challenges popular stereotypes of Muslims in Western media. Her storylines do not prescribe to the idea that all Muslims are Arab by displaying distinct dress, language, and cultural traditions belonging to her South Asian heritage. Her household does not paint a picture of oppression associated with a Muslim home in Western media. Kamala and her family practice Islam without having to justify that it is not an extremist religion.

Most comic women are subjected to flat characterisations (Cocca, 2020), but she possesses a colourful and fleshed-out personality. As a female character, she is drawn without sexualisation, and her features are not whitewashed, offering an accurate character design free of the male gaze. By centring these elements, *Ms. Marvel* challenges reductive portrayals of Muslim women in Western media and presents a multidimensional, relatable character that resonates with diverse audiences.

This representation must, however, be contextualised within the corporate structure of Marvel Entertainment, a global media conglomerate that commodifies diversity for a wider, often Western-centric, audience. As a Marvel product, *Ms. Marvel* is subjected to market forces and branding considerations that may dilute her cultural authenticity or limit the radical potential of her representation. Her storylines often balance progressive messaging with palatability, appealing to global audiences while avoiding narratives that could disrupt hegemonic power structures. This dynamic highlights the inherent tensions between representation and commodification in corporate-controlled media. Kamala is praised as a universal character and a typical Marvel hero. This is the point of convergence where this thesis found several key issues. Through an extensive analysis of *Ms. Marvel,* volumes one and two, three and four, the study still maintained that Kamala Khan is progress, and she is authentic. However, Kamala Khan is also a Marvel product, and that has limited her as a hero and as a character. She is an asset that is commercialised for profit because her representation and story rely on marketability. Her saleability crafts her in a universal light to appeal to a larger audience but being a South Asian Muslim woman in America is not a universal experience. While certain parts of her story, like the theme of adolescence, self-

discovery and self-acceptance, may be universal, the nuances she faces are not, especially regarding the politics of values and justice.

While she embraces her identity, it ceases before she can fully engage with the historical and systemic struggles that shape her and her family's existence. Popular culture's struggle to balance authentic representation with the commercial need for universal relatability exposes a larger problem: progress will always have limits. By analysing the sample of *Ms. Marvel* comic issues in this study, Kamala's narrative shows the path that people of colour tread in comics. They offer visibility to under-represented groups while conforming to mainstream expectations. As a result, her story resonates with many but dilutes the complexities of her identity to avoid veering too far away from the Marvel template of whiteness.

This study frequently cites *Captain America* as a representation of the American Dream, and like Steve Rogers, Kamala is a first-generation immigrant, though she is not explicitly a symbol of American nationalism. Her assimilation tale follows a similar path. Steve Rogers joins the military and, through this service to America, he successfully assimilates and progresses to embody patriotism, military might, and democracy. However, a decolonial perspective reveals his character also reinforces imperialist and exceptionalism ideologies, positioning America as the global saviour, while ignoring histories of colonial violence, racial segregation, and systematic oppression. As an immigrant who is assimilated, he does not question the system because he has become part of the system. He is one of Kamala's

heroes/ mentors. Although not entirely assimilated or part of the militia, she embodies Marvel. As a corporate creation, highlighted in chapter four, the emphasis is on the fact that to become part of Marvel, she still needs to assimilate into the whiteness which dictates the genre Marvel sells. A decolonial reading of her character through the brand she represents reveals similar notions of patriotism and affection for assimilation. To be part of Marvel, Kamala must also form part of the system. As Captain America assimilates to uphold his title, so does Kamala Khan, and to assimilate into the whiteness of the superhero genre means to conform to it. To conform to whiteness means to be a Muslim hero seeking justice in a palatable manner.

Unlike the white superheroes, who are often free to embody their ideals of justice, rebellion, and systemic change like Captain America fighting authoritarianism in WW2, heroes who have been marginalised are expected to embody a binary version of heroism. This is achieved without explicitly acknowledging the systematic structures that create and maintain the struggles they may face. In Kamala's case, these include Islamophobia, racism, sexism and xenophobia. Examining *Ms. Marvel* through a decolonial, Global South lens reveals the dominant narratives about power and identity and even in a diverse and authentic story like *Ms. Marvel,* it reveals that whiteness, Orientalism, and racial capitalism persist. The examining of Marvel and the superhero genre distinguish patriotism and American nationalism as pillars of this genre and addressing systematic oppression would crack the foundation by demystifying the land of the free. However, being blindly patriotic to Marvel and America, directly conflicts with her gender, heritage and religion to deliver an apolitical hero. An apolitical stance like neutrality is still a political choice.

Kamala is sixteen years old, and she is still attempting to determine who she is and what justice means. The expectation is not that she should dismantle coloniality or the patriarchy or represent every Muslim teenager, but it is difficult to reconcile an apolitical stance because it does not align with Islamic teachings on justice that Kamala is supposedly drawn from. Islamic conceptual frameworks like Islamic Liberation Theology call for Muslims to empower the oppressed by using Islamic teachings as a framework for justice, resistance, and liberation. Liberation, according to ILT, is not only spiritual but also social, economic, and political (Kunnummal, 2023). It calls for active resistance against structures that uphold inequality, including religious, political, and economic hierarchies (Esack, 1997). It is an inclusive movement that advocates for interfaith solidarity in fighting injustice and engaging with issues of race, gender, sexuality, nature and the environment, as well as uniting against global systems of power (Kunnummal, 2023). Kamala does not openly discuss racism, systemic oppression, or social movements like Roe vs. Wade, Free Palestine or Black Lives Matter which reveals the censorship and limits of heroism within corporate-driven cultural artefacts like the superhero comic. In this sense, her identity is authentically crafted by creatives but policed by the Disney Corporation. This reflects a larger issue in how corporate diversity efforts, like Disney's former DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives, function. They seek representation without disruption and inclusion without challenging the status quo. Kamala Khan can be *Ms. Marvel*. Miles Morales may be *Spider-Man* and Sam Wilson can be *Captain America*, but their motivations must remain within the safe, apolitical framework of individual responsibility rather than collective struggle. Their duty remains saving lives, but they are never to question the systems that endanger them. Ms. Marvel might be a hero with strength and superhuman abilities, but she cannot speak out.

By contrast, Qahera, an independently created Egyptian superhero, offers a compelling counterpoint to Ms. Marvel. Qahera, the creation of artist Deena Mohamed, operates outside corporate systems, allowing her character to embody a more radical critique of global and local systems of oppression. As a veiled superhero who openly challenges oppressive constructs like Islamophobia and sexism, Qahera addresses issues that are deeply rooted in her specific sociopolitical context without the need to cater to a global market. Her independent nature allows for greater narrative freedom, resulting in a character who is unapologetically situated within an Egyptian and Muslim framework, unconstrained by Western storytelling conventions or a corporate leash.

Qahera's independence ensures that her portrayal prioritises authenticity and cultural specificity over marketability. For example, her comics often tackle issues such as street harassment and Western media's reductive portrayals of Muslim women, directly engaging with the lived realities of her audience. This stands in contrast to Ms. Marvel, whose storylines, while culturally nuanced, are necessarily filtered through the broader goals of Marvel as a corporation. This comparison demonstrates the structural limitations faced by characters like Ms. Marvel, who, despite their progressive representation, remain embedded within systems of commodification and coloniality.

The inclusion of Qahera in this analysis highlights the potential of independent media to provide narratives that are more closely aligned with the needs and realities of marginalised communities. It also raises critical questions about the compromises required when

representation is mediated through global entertainment conglomerates. While Ms. Marvel breaks significant ground in mainstream media, Qahera illustrates the possibilities of representation when liberated from the constraints of corporate frameworks. Together, these two characters illuminate the spectrum of representation in media, from corporate diversity initiatives to grassroots, independent storytelling.

This study has established that, while Kamala is a hero, she serves as a starting point rather than a transformative force. Fundamental issues are revealed by criticisms regarding moderation, visibility, and profit generation. If heroes remain under the control of corporate entities, their capacity for meaningful change is constrained. While they can shape representational landscapes with symbolic weight, their ultimate allegiance lies not with the people they claim to represent but with the financial ambitions of their trademark. The goal is ultimately not to break societal boundaries, but to break box office records and dominate monetary leader boards. Although meaningful stories can still be produced; their full potential will remain centred on superficial inclusion. Therefore, Marvel can effectively produce a meaningful Muslim hero that challenges stereotypes, but in the hands of a conglomerate she will wear a leash and the Marvel in her name signifies that her brand identity will always be bigger than her identity.

The structural whiteness embedded within mainstream comics remains inescapable under the constraints of large conglomerates, while independent comics offer a compelling counterpoint. They illustrate how superheroes prioritising justice can engage with political

issues free from the demands of commercial success. These stories do not seek to solve complex societal problems in oversimplified ways, but open discussions about real-life struggles, portraying justice in a nuanced and less binary manner. In doing so, independent comics uphold the traditions and values of heroism while expanding their scope to include more profound and community-focused narratives. In the end, true justice in the superhero genre comes not from corporate boardrooms, but from creators who boldly tell stories free from market concerns.

This study has experienced limitations through its sample size and historical timeline analysis. One of the primary limitations is its sample size, which examines *Ms. Marvel* within a specific context but does not extend to analysing the entire franchise through investigating spin-offs, television adaptations, or films. Each requires dedicated space and chapters for a thorough exploration of its history, connection to colonial paradigms, and current socio-political implications, particularly in contrast to comics. This thesis could not accommodate the space for such extensive research. Examining how the different media formats reframe and re-contextualise characters will inform a more robust understanding of how Kamala's representation shifts based on format, audience, and creative intent. This study focuses on the character and the comic series at a particular phase (2014-2015) during the series introductory phase rather than conducting a longitudinal analysis of how her reception and cultural significance have evolved. A more detailed, historical approach, examining her trajectory from her inception in the comic to present-day adaptations could

offer deeper insight into how her meaning has changed over time, especially in response to the fluctuating socio-political climate.

Another key limitation is the study's geographical focus on Western comics. It explores independent comics as a counterpoint to corporate superhero storytelling. However, it does not analyse independent comics produced outside of the West with sufficient detail, which may present alternative models for superheroes, justice, and political engagement. A comparative study including superhero narratives from the Global South would have also been beneficial to this study. Examining comics from Latin America, Africa, or Asia, where different storytelling traditions shape heroes differently, may provide a clearer perspective on how superheroes function as symbols of justice and representation in various spaces. Webcomics versus traditional comics in this space would also need to be discussed, as independent comics have usually used web-based applications to publish their work. This research would require its own chapters and a thorough examination of another sample of comics within this thesis. The scope and scale of this research, with the detail and investigation necessary, would not allow for it therefore, independent comics are only touched on through *Qahera.*

Despite these limitations, this study serves as a starting point for understanding the complex relationship between coloniality, corporate ownership, fan engagement, and dominant narratives and trends in the superhero comic world. Future research, which expands the scope to include multimedia adaptations, historical analysis, and global comparisons, could

further enhance the critical discourse surrounding superheroes as cultural products and tools for social change. This analysis prompts further investigation into how narratives of heroism can more truly engage with political realities, particularly those affecting Muslim and other marginalised communities.

This study of whiteness and representation in comics as popular culture appears at a crucial time of worldwide social upheaval, where tensions between America and the Global South, including South Africa, influence the cultural and media landscape. The return of Donald Trump to office and his administration's decision to significantly reduce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives mark a significant shift in how media conglomerates, including Disney and Marvel, approach representation. With companies moving away from DEI commitments, the result might not be limited to a reduction in diverse storytelling but a lack of accountability regarding who gets to tell stories and whose perspectives are prioritised. This shift represents a complete reversal from initiatives such as the Marvel NOW! campaign. Marvel NOW! (2012) was a bold effort to shift the Marvel Universe by introducing diverse heroes and fresh creative voices, including characters like Kamala Khan. These stories reflected a changing audience and inspired new generations. Disney's "Reimagine Tomorrow" (2021) ensured that voices from underrepresented backgrounds were not only present but shaping content. By removing this initiative and shifting DEI efforts toward a broader talent strategy, Disney risks reducing opportunities for marginalised creators and limiting the variety of perspectives in its storytelling.

This shift may move further away from authentic representation by signalling to executives and creators' diversity is no longer a priority in decision-making. Without concrete DEI goals tied to executive performance, there is less incentive to approve projects expanding representation or to guarantee production teams mirroring diverse backgrounds. This may lead to a resurgence of safer, more conventional narratives that prioritise mass-market appeal over inclusive storytelling. These changes mark a regressive step for Disney's commitment to diversity. Bob Iger's[34] assertion that Disney prioritises entertainment over a political agenda implies that the company views diversity as a political position instead of an integral element of storytelling (Danziger, 2025). The success of franchises like *Black Panther (2018), Coco (2017), Encanto (2021)* have proven audiences crave stories reflecting different cultures and identities. By pulling back from structured DEI initiatives, Disney risks alienating the very audiences it sought to engage within previous years and may reverse the progress made toward a more divergent representative media culture.

Given that American media has a dominant influence on South African popular culture, this retreat from diversity policies predictably impacts narratives produced and consumed in the country. However, despite this saturation of Western media, South Africa has continued to centre justice and humanity in its political ethos rooted in the philosophy of Ubuntu. Unlike the corporate-controlled justice narratives seen in American superhero franchises, South African resistance movements have showed grassroots solidarity with oppressed people

[34] Bob Iger is the CEO of The Walt Disney Company, having served in the role from 2005 to 2020 and returning in 2022. He is a controversial figure because he was part of Donald Trump's business advisory council in 2017 although he did resign in protest after Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement. His association with Trump at all is the where the controversy lies.

worldwide. This is clear in the South African government's vocal support for Palestine and the Democratic Republic of Congo, even as the United States retaliates in various ways. This response shows a fundamental difference: whereas American superhero narratives often depict justice as charity or intervention from a powerful force upon the helpless, the South African ethos of justice is rooted in collective resistance and solidarity with the oppressed.

From a decolonial perspective, this distinction is critical. Marvel superheroes, despite their grand narratives of justice, are fundamentally tied to the imperial structures that create the very suffering they seek to ease. They can rescue the poor, the helpless, and the desperate, but they can never question or work to dismantle or protest the system which causes poverty and oppression. By contrast, the teenagers, activists, and ordinary people who look like these heroes, fans who wear Miles Morales' mask to protests or fans who create art as resistance using Kamala Khan, are the ones who embody a true fight for justice. Unlike Marvel's corporate-controlled superheroes, they function outside a system that upholds empire and capitalist structures. Their grassroots justice is built on solidarity instead of intervention, on collective struggle instead of isolated heroism.

This thesis, written from a Global South perspective, in each chapter challenges the limits of American superhero narratives and their portrayal of justice using people of colour. It calls for a rethinking of heroism outside of corporate storytelling, reclaiming justice not as an abstract ideal but as a lived reality shaped by the resistance and resilience of those who they seek to represent and subsequently profit from. Superheroes are not just fictional characters; they are integral to culture and media worldwide. This is especially true for Marvel heroes, as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has become central to

contemporary popular culture. With each new instalment, these stories influence global audiences, shaping perceptions of justice, identity, and power. While the MCU and Marvel Comics have made strides in representation, these advancements are still deeply rooted in whiteness, leaving space for problematic narratives like assimilation fantasies to persist. These narratives may not always be explicit, but they are embedded within the storytelling structures that Marvel operates within. One of the most enduring myths within superhero media is the American Dream that anyone, regardless of background, can succeed if they work hard enough. In theory, this dream appears inclusive, but it often demands conformity to specific values and norms to "make it". The American Dream, as depicted in Marvel narratives, does not challenge power structures. Instead, it suggests that success is about fitting into the system rather than changing it.

Kamala Khan, while a powerful and groundbreaking character, is not immune to these constraints. She is a business asset and trademark of Marvel and Disney. Her story is one of struggle and empowerment, but ultimately, she must still wear the Marvel mask, literally and metaphorically. This means that while she represents a step forward in terms of diversity, she is still confined within the ideological boundaries of the superhero genre as shaped by whiteness and racial capitalism. While Kamala and other diverse heroes may symbolise progress, their stories remain tethered to a system that is reluctant to fully challenge white, Western, and capitalist narratives of heroism. They can inspire, they can fight for justice, but within the confines of Marvel and the MCU, they can never fully challenge the structures that cause their heroism. Ultimately, the question of whether Ms. Marvel is inherently colonial resists a definitive answer. Her character embodies a paradox:

she is both a groundbreaking figure in her celebration of marginalised identities and a product of a media conglomerate that operates within the structures of coloniality. This duality reminds us that the politics of representation are rarely straightforward. While Ms. Marvel may not escape the colonial undertones inherent in its production, her existence sparks crucial conversations about identity, inclusion, and power in contemporary media.

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