

The "Embiggening"
Marvel's Muslim Ms. Marvel and American Myth

Adrienne Marie Resha
Naples, Florida

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Kamala Khan is the first Muslim-American superhero to hold her own title as Ms. Marvel and the *Ms. Marvel* series has succeeded despite Kamala being, by almost every definition of the word, a minority figure: female, teenaged, Pakistani-American, and Muslim. Kamala Khan is a Muslim superhero in a post-9/11 world marketed towards a generation growing up in America in the aftermath of major Islamic terrorist attacks and subsequent Islamophobia. I will argue that it is through the explicit representation of the Islamic faith in the series that *Ms. Marvel* incorporates the Islamic tradition and Islamic culture into the greater body of American popular culture and, in doing so, presents a character that embodies a new American Dream: to *redefine* what it means to be American. *Ms. Marvel* does so through the explicit incorporation of Islamic texts, cultural markers, and feminism, in addition to the disavowal of both racism and terrorism through allegory. Kamala Khan, like her predecessors, cannot be understood out of context.

These predecessors include Superman and Spider-Man, American icons. Superman, created in the midst of the Great Depression by two Jewish-Americans, embodied the American Dream of the time: to *become* American. Spider-Man, created three decades later during the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, embodied that period's American Dream: to *be* American. Each of these characters is implicitly attached to an Abrahamic religious tradition, Superman to his creators' Jewish faith and Spider-Man to Christianity. Kamala Khan, a superhero whose debut comes more than a decade after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, deviates from this canon of American comics.

That context will be established within this body of work by first examining the history of comics, then moving into a discussion of American myth and its role in American history, especially concerning the idea of citizenship. Superman and Spider-Man will be introduced by

way of scholarship previously conducted on their characters and creators as well as through analysis of each of their origin stories. Afterwards, Kamala Khan will be introduced more formally, first through the *Captain Marvel* series, and later through the four books that collect the *Ms. Marvel* (2014-2015) series: *No Normal*, *Generation Why*, *Crushed*, and *Last Days* which encompass her origin story. Her origin story encompasses her transition from Kamala Khan to Ms. Marvel and this paper will follow her throughout that transition, navigating its nuances through critical reading and interpretation. Prior knowledge of the series surveyed will not be necessary in understanding this work. Finally, I will address media response to the *Ms. Marvel* series, before and after its initial publication, and look to the future of Muslim representation in comics. Before one can look to the future, however, one must look to the past.

A History of Comics

American superhero comics date back to the Great Depression, but the history of comics can be traced back much further. Using Scott McCloud's definition from *Understanding Comics*, "comics" may be understood as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). McCloud positions one beginning of what can be understood as comics per his definition in the 1500s, citing the usage of pictographs "in a pre-Columbian *picture manuscript*" depicting a mythic account found by explorers around 1519 as an example (10). The civilizations that used these kinds of pictographs, in what we know today as Central America, employed images in a specific sequence so that they would convey meaning to their audiences. Images were not aligned with sounds, in the way that Egyptian hieroglyphics were or modern alphabets are, but instead they themselves conveyed meaning and often acted as a means of recording myths that would have previously been maintained by way of oral tradition. Hundreds of years before the

discovery of the Central American pictographs, tapestries were being used in Europe to record historical events in such a way as to also be understood as comics. Comics, despite being misunderstood today as a lower form of art, have been used as a means of preserving and transmitting culture as it is recorded in myth and in history.

Modern comics, McCloud continues, began in the 1800s, when Rodolphe Töpffer introduced cartooning as an artistic style, panel borders, and “the first interdependent combination of *words* and *pictures* seen in Europe” (17). When McCloud includes “other images” in his definition of comics, he is referring to the use of words. Words, as we know them, are combinations of letters that represent individual sounds. Two hundred years after Töpffer this interdependence would continue, although not without variation, in the Western world. It is the use of words alongside images that necessitate an analytical approach with equal attention paid to the literary and artistic qualities of the *Ms. Marvel* series. Text is just as important as art in comics. Both are used “to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” The aesthetic response inspired by superheroes in modern American comics is one that can still be found in *Ms. Marvel* and it is one that has existed for the better part of a century.

American Myth

Beyond, or perhaps beneath, words and images there is a narrative subtext to American comics that dually incorporates religious and national narratives. These narratives may be understood as part of a greater body of American myth. Richard T. Hughes, author of *Myths America Lives By*, defines a myth as “a story that speaks of meaning and purpose, and for that reason... speaks truth to those who take it seriously” and defines American myths as stories that convey “commonly shared convictions on the purposes and the meaning of the nation” (2). It is through these myths, Hughes argues, that Americans affirm and reaffirm “the meaning of the

United States.” Religious and national narratives in American myth intersect at the point that Hughes identifies as the “American Creed,” Thomas Jefferson’s declaration that all men are created equal and endowed with “certain unalienable rights.” During Jefferson’s time “all men” would have meant white, land-owning men, but, as Hughes writes, “Over the course of American history... we have enlarged the meaning of that story to include not only men but also women, and not only people of light complexion but also people of every race on the face of the earth” (3).

As such, this American Creed not only determined what it meant to be American during the revolutionary period, but also has continued to determine what it means to be an American up until the present, prioritizing citizenship, regardless of the time period. Hughes identifies a number of myths that have either contributed to or built upon the American Creed, although I will be focusing on the Myth of the Chosen Nation, Myth of Nature’s Nation, and Myth of the Christian Nation here for their relevance to the superhero narratives, that of becoming and being American, addressed earlier.

The first myth, the Myth of the Chosen Nation, has its roots in the Puritan colonization of the “New World.” Hughes writes, “In the Puritan imagination, England became Egypt, the Atlantic Ocean became the Red Sea, the American wilderness became their own land of Canaan, and the Puritans themselves became the new Israel” (30). The narrative that they crafted for themselves, as religious individuals fleeing persecution, mirrors Old Testament accounts; however, the Puritans were not, as some would believe, fleeing persecution in order to obtain freedom for all peoples to practice their own religion, but for themselves to be able to practice their religion under the authority of God rather than the authority of government. The “Puritan” narrative of fleeing persecution would eventually become one that would resonate with many

immigrant groups. It established the United States as a holy land, a new Israel not unlike that written about in the Bible, despite the Puritans not believing in a plurality of religious practice. The United States would eventually become a refuge for immigrants drawn to this myth, which promotes the idea that they would have a place here.

In the context of comics, this myth would have been a driving force for Jews who sought to escape religious persecution in Eastern Europe and fled to the United States beginning in the 1800s. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, were both born in 1914, the former in the United States and the latter in Canada, to Jewish immigrants (Kaplan 4). Their families would have been amongst the exodus of Jews from Europe, who, it could be argued, fled to America in search of a new “Israel,” in the absence of the modern Jewish state as it is known today, which would not be founded until 1948.

The second myth, the Myth of Nature’s Nation, would expand upon the previous myth. Hughes relates this myth back to Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers as he writes,

What Thomas Jefferson did not say is as important as what he said. He said nothing in the Declaration about Jesus, or the Trinity, or the church, or the Virgin Mary, or Moses, or Buddha, or Mohammed. He did not appeal to the New Testament, the Old Testament, the Koran [*sic*], or to any other body of sacred scripture. Instead, he rooted the American Revolution in the existence of a God, apparent to all human beings in nature, and in a moral order that he proclaimed as self-evident. (53)

If God could be found in nature, according to Jefferson’s beliefs, then America was the ideal place to find God, in whichever manifestation of God was appealing. If the United States could first be understood as a refuge for immigrants, according to the Myth of the Chosen Nation, then

the Myth of Nature's Nation is the one that promotes the idea that they may be free to practice whichever religion that they choose. Jefferson's own religious views would have negated the next myth, had it not been for the malleability of the declaration.

The third myth, the Myth of the Christian Nature, was born of Jefferson and the founders' deliberate ambiguity. Hughes writes, "The founders sought to guarantee religious liberty by allowing for particular doctrines and creeds but by pushing those doctrines and creeds off the center stage of the Republic and into the wings" (67). At once, they managed to prevent potential religious conflict while unintentionally paving the way for the dominance of the Christian faith. According to Hughes, this dominance was established during the Second Great Awakening, during which Protestantism, as opposed to any other branch of the Christian faith, became the "national" religion. There was also a sort of socio-religious syncretism that allowed for this dominance, but only when the religion adapted itself to existing American culture. Hughes writes, "Christianizing the culture, therefore, involved a trade-off: The world might absorb bits and pieces of the Christian faith, while the church would absorb bits and pieces of the values common to the larger society" (77). Being American, thereafter, meant being Christian so long as being Christian meant being American.

The myth of America as a Christian Nation becomes especially important, when considering comics, during the 1960s. While neither of Spider-Man's creators, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, publically identified with a particular religious tradition, their work was born of the tradition that Siegel and Shuster pioneered. That they did so during the 1960s rather than the 1930s meant that their work reflected more on an American-national narrative than an American-immigrant narrative. Where Siegel and Shuster desperately felt the need to assimilate into American culture, Lee and Ditko would have felt the need to reaffirm American culture as a

preexisting establishment. If the creators of comics once used their creations as a means of assimilation, then Spider-Man may be understood as either an assimilated Jewish narrative or a socially Christian narrative and as such he is a character conforming to the idea of America as a Christian nation. If Superman's mythic role is that of wanting to become American, like Jewish immigrants in the beginning of the 20th century, and Spider-Man's mythic role is that of being American, conforming to the American Creed of the mid-20th century, then Kamala Khan's mythic role is that of redefining what it means to be American in the beginnings of the 21st century. To understand Kamala Khan's role in modern comics, Superman and Spider-Man must be addressed as both national and religious figures.

Not a Bird, Not a Plane

Laurence Maslon's *Superheroes!* marks the beginnings of the superhero genre just before 1938, when America's first "supermen" were introduced to popular media by way of comic books, themselves born of the comics strips which had existed as an American institution since the turn of the century. In the midst of the Great Depression, which would not come to an end until 1939, Americans found distraction in the "funny papers." Otherwise known as the Funnies, Maslon writes, they were "humorous digressions into American life, usually rendered through the antics of misbehaved children, gently embattled families, mismatched friends, or communities thrown into conflict by a variety of implacable or goofy characters" (14).

Adventure comics debuted in the 1920s to an audience that was looking for something more serious than the Funnies to match the national mood. In the 1930s characters like The Shadow and Doc Savage entered into popular media. They were human men gifted with exceptional strength and intelligence who used their considerable gifts to fight crime. While they certainly left their mark on the genre, the first true superhero was not a super man at all. He was

a super immigrant, an alien from a distant planet who was sent to Earth as a child by his parents in order to survive the destruction of his homeland that America would come to know as Superman.

Maslon quotes Jules Feiffer as he writes,

Superman came at a time when, as many people saw it, particularly Jews, a superhero in a wheelchair had entered the White House—and that was [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]. The notion that you could have a superhero who was going to stand up for you, who would be your advocate, was connected to the hope brought on by this larger-than-life figure in the White House... F.D.R. had this secret identity, taking off into outer space and solving problems with the New Deal...

Superman was an underground New Dealer. (32)

Created by Siegel and Shuster in 1933, Superman did not take off initially (35). The delayed success of Superman, coming after Detective Comics brought it into circulation, was directly connected to the social atmosphere into which he was adopted. Superman may not have been an American by birth, but he was certainly one by popular choice, and just as he may not have been Jewish by birth or in practice, his ties to Judaism are clear from the very beginning.

Harry Brod, in *Superman is Jewish?*, notes that the juggernauts of the superhero comics industry in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, the “Golden Age,” were predominantly Jewish men, including Siegel and Shuster. Is it enough to say that because the creators of these characters happened to be Jewish that their work belongs to this tradition? No, but in the same way that Kamala Khan’s Muslim identity plays into her assumption of the Ms. Marvel superheroic alter ego, the Jewish identity of the creators of Superman plays into the creation of Superman. Siegel is quoted by Brod as having said, “... I thought that someday I might become a

newspaper reporter and I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn't know I existed or didn't care I existed. It occurred to me, What if I was real terrific? What if I had something special going for me..." (8). Superman was their superheroic alter ego, but does that make him Jewish? Brod puts forward three approaches for discerning whether or not a character may be considered Jewish.

Brod's first approach is to look to the creators and ask, "are they Jewish?"

Acknowledging that the religious identity of the creators does not necessarily mean that the creation must share in their identity, his second approach is to "... look for explicit Jewish references in the piece, typically characters identified as Jewish or references to Jewish religious practices, perhaps the use of Yiddish or Hebrew phrases, etc." (xxi). The third approach combines the previous two, giving the criteria against which a character or body of work can be decisively understood as Jewish: there must be Jewish themes or ideas present, either explicitly or implicitly, and there should be "... some line of transmission by which the creators could plausibly have come into contact with these Jewish elements, accounting for the possibility of their presence in the work" (xxii). Any of the Abrahamic traditions could be used in place of Judaism and through substitution the roles of these religious traditions can be measured against the conditions from which they emerged in American popular culture.

Returning to Superman, Brod argues that he can be understood as Jewish because there are Jewish themes or ideas present and there is a clear line of transmission of these elements; as previously noted, Siegel and Shuster were both Jewish. He puts forward two Jewish narratives that are communicated through Superman. On one hand, Superman's story parallels that of Moses, a Jewish prophet who was also "sent off in a small vessel by his parents to save him from the death and destruction facing his people" (5). On the other hand, Brod posits that this origin

story may be a metaphor for the exodus of Jews from Europe to the United States in the pre-WWII period. Superman, however, never identified himself as being Jewish. Neither he nor his alter ego, Clark Kent, has ever communicated an explicitly Jewish identity so any reading of Superman as Jewish is understood by way of implicit features of the original body of work produced by Siegel and Shuster. Later interpretations of Superman would implicitly align him with Christianity.

Tied to the original Jewish narrative, however, is the immigrant narrative that echoes both the story of Moses and the experience of Jews leaving Europe as it headed towards a second world war. Quoting Michael Chabon, Maslon asserts,

Superman is an alien. He comes from Krypton. He emigrated to Earth, he left everything behind. That world is gone. He comes here, he changes his name to something that sounds really Gentile... It's an unintentional metaphor for the American immigrant experience... He transforms himself into the ultimate symbol of the American way of life... That was a powerful expression of both a wish that immigrants felt and also that this is the way that you went about doing it and making good in this country. (33)

Superman is an expression of patriotism and of heroism during a time when it was not always so great to be an American. By crafting a new narrative out of the immigrant narrative, Siegel and Shuster were able to draw in an audience that was just arriving and hoping to be adopted into the great American narrative.

At best, Superman could serve as a reminder of the contributions made to American society by immigrants, but this does not necessarily reflect on the actual experiences of immigrants just arriving in America. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn

writes, “Congress, in the twenties, put an end to the dangerous, turbulent flood of immigrants (14 million between 1900 and 1920) by passing laws setting immigration quotas” (382). The quotas favored Anglo-Saxons, barred “black and yellow people,” and limited “Latins, Slavs, [and] Jews.” These narratives, for and against immigration, are just as relevant to understanding Superman as they are to understanding Ms. Marvel, except that Kamala Khan is not an alien, at least not in the same sense that Superman is, and she is the child of immigrants, herself born in the United States. Spider-Man, created by Lee and Ditko and first published in 1962, bridges the distance between the two.

With Great Power

Spider-Man is created within the same tradition that Superman was, as Christianity was born of Judaism, but in an entirely different context. The 1960s were a time of racial upheaval. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing and the country was suffering the consequences of the ongoing Vietnam War. Lee wanted to move towards characters that broke the mold. Maslon writes, “Lee conferred unsought heroism onto a character not unlike many of his readers: a bespectacled teenager who was shunned by the popular kids in high school” (*Superheroes!* 131). He continues, “The ultimate genius of Spider-Man was that there were millions of so-called “normal teenagers” who saw in the web-slinger an avatar of their own problems and conflicts...” (146). Spider-Man is especially noteworthy as an avatar because he chooses to wear a mask. Peter Parker ceases to be Peter Parker when he dons the blue and red suit, and in doing this he also distances himself from his racial identity. Spider-Man could be anyone. During a time period in which it seemed as though Americans had little control over the state of the world around them, Peter Parker’s Spider-Man was a means through which readers could escape from

their everyday lives and, at the same time, learn for themselves how to distinguish between right and wrong through the guise of Lee's beloved "Spidey."

Where Superman is an alien, Spider-Man is a human experiment. Superman is an adult while Spider-Man is a teenager. Superman represents not only the Golden Age of comics, but also the pre-Holocaust generation of Eastern European Jews that immigrated to the United States and gradually assimilated into American culture. To Brod, Spider-Man is a product of the Silver Age, the post-Holocaust, pre-assimilated, American Jewish narrative; a narrative that did not need to assert itself as Jewish, instead opting for more subtle cues indicative of the Jewish identity of the hero and his alter-ego, Peter Parker. Peter Parker is as human as Superman is not, until a radioactive spider bite endows him with incredible powers that are all spider-inspired and effectively turn him into a superhuman. Peter Parker originally dons the red and blue Spider-Man suit in order to pursue fame and fortune, but turns to vigilantism after the death of his Uncle Ben, his caretaker in the absence of his parents. He can be understood as being motivated by survivor's guilt. Brod writes, "Spider-Man is a post-Holocaust American Jew, and the guilt that plagues and motivates him is a specific post-Holocaust American Jewish guilt" (95).

Brod introduces the ideas of "character" and "personality" to differentiate between Spider-Man and Superman. Thomas Winter, as quoted by Brod, would define character as "a self-sustained notion of the self, grounded in the ideals of independence, sobriety, self-control, and civilized morality" and personality as "a new notion of the self... the ability to play act, to win friends, and to influence and convince others" (97). Brod, using these ideas, writes,

These concepts illuminate the shift from the Golden Age DC superheroes to the Silver Age Marvel superheroes. In that evolution of comic book superheroes, the Jewishness of the characters shifted from their *character* to their *personality*, from

the interior, deeper psychodynamics that motivate Superman to the more surface personality traits that manifest themselves in the Marvel superheroes. In stark contrast to Superman, Spider-Man's Jewishness lies in his demeanor, his personality. (98)

To Brod, Spider-Man's Jewishness was heavily coded, evidenced by the physical location in New York in which he was said to reside and in the manner of humor that he employs. His ties to Judaism are not entirely analogous to those that Superman has and the line between the Judeo- and the Christian identities that Spider-Man may be associated with is not drawn as sharply. Only a Jewish person would be able to tell whether or not Judaism influenced Spider-Man as a character. The distinction that Brod then makes regarding the personality of the character becomes less important in defining religious identity and more important in national identity. Spider-Man is an American and his character, his personality, is one that has resonated with the American people for more than 50 years.

Like Clark Kent and Superman, however, neither Peter Parker nor Spider-Man ever explicitly declare themselves to be Jewish. Peter Parker's religious identity is also more fluid because his writer, Stan Lee, does not identify as Jewish, although evidence points to a connection with the post-Holocaust American Jewish identity that Brod uses to establish Peter Parker as a Jewish character. Spider-Man does not have to be explicitly Jewish for Jewish readers to identify him as such, just as he does not have to be explicitly Christian for Christian readers to identify him as such. B.J. Oropeza, in his chapter "'Behold! The Hero Has Become Like One of Us.' The Perfectly Imperfect Spider-Man" in *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, writes, "In the Spider-Man Myth we perceive humanity trying to earn forgiveness through 'good deeds,' which for Peter are sacrificially attempted at the expense of happiness" (137). Oropeza's

understanding of Peter's guilt is not that it is a survivor's guilt, but a guilt derived from what parts of the Christian tradition understands as the fall of man from God's grace: guilt over the original sin in the Garden of Eden.

Oropeza reads Spider-Man as a Christian allegory; to him, Spider-Man's decision to fight crime, distances the work from whatever the creators may have intended for it to communicate. His understanding of the guilt that Peter Parker experiences in the aftermath of his uncle's murder is one that relies heavily on his own understanding of original sin. Oropeza's reading of Spider-Man is no less valid than Brod's reading. Using an adapted version of Brod's approach, Spider-Man may be understood as being Christian if there are Christian themes or ideas present and there is a means of transmission of those themes and ideas from the creators to the creation. Neither Lee nor Ditko expressed their personal religious affiliations in a strong enough way to suggest that they would communicate a religious identity through Spider-Man in the context of his origin story; it is up to the reader to identify religious narratives. Using either Brod or Oropeza's readings, there are Judeo-Christian themes present. Later adaptations may also deviate from these readings. Oropeza reinforces the validity of the multiplicity of understandings as he writes, "Reading Spider-Man is like looking into a mirror" (129). G. Willow Wilson has used the metaphor of a mirror to refer to her own work in writing *Ms. Marvel*.

Wilson, while presenting in a series of talks during TEDxRainier 2015, said,

The secret [of the success of the *Ms. Marvel* series] is the audience... All Adrien and Sana and I did was hold up a mirror. That might not seem like a lot, but at a time when Millennials and their younger siblings in Gen Z are the subjects of angry screeds in newspapers and magazines almost every week, it was enough.

What I am proudest of is not writing Marvel's first Muslim leading lady, I am

proudest of the fact that within a few months no one was calling her that anymore.

They were calling her this generation's Spider-Man. (1:58:43-1:59:26)

Wilson, throughout the talk, emphasizes the importance of the Millennial audience to which the *Ms. Marvel* series is marketed and how the series is meant to reflect on that audience. Her statements about “angry screeds” in news media could just as easily be applied to Muslims, and it is within the body of work that she has produced alongside her creative and editing team that those parallels become even more apparent.

“Could it be that what just happened to me is part of something... more?”

Ms. Marvel #2

Part of Something... Bigger

Having placed Superman in the context of the Jewish tradition and the Great Depression and Spider-Man in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the 1960s, Kamala Khan can now be put into historic context. Kamala Khan's creation comes almost thirteen years after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11th, 2001. Kamala Khan would have grown up in a New Jersey drastically impacted by the attacks that had occurred in nearby New York City. Her target audience, now reaching maturity, could have either been in elementary school during the attacks or not yet born. For Millennials in the United States, it is impossible to imagine a world in which 9/11 had not happened as it has had a profound impact on both domestic affairs concerning Muslim-American citizens and international relations between the United States and the Islamic world.

September 11th, 2001, three planes were hijacked and used to attack the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Zinn writes, “It was an unprecedented assault against enormous symbols of American wealth and power, undertaken by 19 men from the Middle East, most of them from Saudi Arabia” (678). Evelyn Alsultany, in her article, “Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a “Postrace” Era,” wrote,

... at the same time that sympathetic portrayals of Arab and Muslim Americans proliferated on US commercial television in the weeks, months, and years after 9/11, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially.
(161)

Even as President George W. Bush differentiated between friendly and unfriendly Muslims while addressing the nation, violence against Muslims and those perceived as being Muslim increased after 9/11. Alsultany argues that positive representations of Muslims in the media were used to support the idea that the United States was “postrace,” that the country had moved beyond discrimination, allowing for the passing of legislation that would marginalize American minority citizens because it would protect the nation as a whole.

Kamala Khan becomes a foil to this, as a character existing in post-9/11 media, because she is South Asian and Muslim, not Arab and Muslim. She lives in a post-9/11 America, but not a “postrace” America. Kamala is not explicitly affected by discrimination, she is never the victim of a religiously-motivated hate crime or the subject of malicious speech in the texts, but she has internalized the effects of discrimination, expressing through her thoughts a sense of not belonging, of not being normal. Unlike Superman and Spider-Man, which were published within

periods of severe social upheaval, Ms. Marvel's entry into the world did not occur until a decade after a national trauma and this was, in part, because her addition to the Marvel roster was primarily initiated by two things: Marvel's rebranding in an effort to incorporate more diverse characters into their publications and the promotion of Carol Danvers to Captain Marvel.

The *Ms. Marvel* series editor, Sana Amanat, has a personal connection to Kamala's narrative as an American of Pakistani descent. Amanat, is largely responsible for Marvel's incorporation of more diverse characters. Amanat has not only developed Ms. Marvel into a bestselling series, but also brought a Korean-American Hulk, Afro-Latino Spider-Man, female Thor, and the female Captain Marvel into the Marvel universe (Klassen). Comics, once considered hallow grounds for white male superheroes and their white male audiences, are actively engaging readers outside of their traditional demographic and adapting their content in such a way as to not only engage them, but to keep them coming back. Carol Danvers's Captain Marvel did not assume the title until 2012, when she was awarded her own on-going series, leaving behind the Ms. Marvel title. Originally, Carol Danvers was a background character picked out, given powers, and assigned the title of Ms. Marvel by Gerry Conway in 1977 (*Ms. Marvel (1977) #1*). That first series would run through 1979 and Carol Danvers would be benched, with the exception of some minor appearances, until 2005.

Carol Danvers would take on a number of names during her lifetime in comics, but it was not until 2012 that she would be promoted to Captain Marvel, assuming a name previously held by a male hero in both DC and Marvel canons. In a history written by Mark O'English, Rob London, and Mike O'Sullivan in the collected edition of *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight* authored by Kelly Sue DeConnick, Carol Danvers is said to have been affiliated with the Department of Homeland Security as a chief of tactical operations, NASA as a security chief,

and US Air Force Special Operations as an intelligence agent. Carol Danvers is intimately connected to the United States through her service, especially concerning the United States Air Force, as it is her identity as a pilot that she uses as context for her own super heroics. That Kamala Khan admires Carol Danvers as fervently as she does is a way in which her creators tether her to an American identity.

Kamala Khan's first appearance in comics, after all, is in *Avengers: The Enemy Within*, a collection of Avengers and Captain Marvel comics published as the third installment of the *Captain Marvel (2012-2013)* series. In the last page of the text there is a box alerting the reader that the scene has shifted from New York to Jersey City (see Appendix A). A girl, with her back turned to the audience, pins a flyer up against the wall of her bedroom. On the same wall, there is a Pakistani flag hanging, primarily green with a white crescent moon and star. In the subsequent panel, which is zoomed in on the flyer that the girl is pinning to the wall, the reader can then see that the flyer is for Captain Marvel and is being placed next to another image associated with her. Captain Marvel is shown flexing the muscles of one arm. As the girl brings her hands away from the wall she moves into the same pose, but when she flexes her muscles rip through the fabric of her shirt. In the final panel, which reads, "Next:" the reader then sees what will become the basis for the cover of the first issue of *Ms. Marvel (2014-2015)*, a black shirt with Carol Danvers's Ms. Marvel lightning bolt. This girl, although the reader does not know it just yet, is Kamala Khan.

“Maybe this is what I’ve been **waiting** for. Maybe I’m finally part of something... **bigger**.”

Ms. Marvel #2

No Normal

Even before the first pages went to print, the world knew that Marvel’s newest Ms. Marvel would be Muslim. Headlines declared, “Mighty, Muslim and Leaping Off the Page” months before the series debuted in February 2014 (Gustines). Front and center on the first cover is Kamala Khan, not yet Ms. Marvel, wearing what would become her signature lightning bolt, multicolored scarf, and her name on a bracelet in an Arabic-derived script. Kamala’s first words are “I just want to smell it” (*Ms. Marvel* #1). We see her staring down a case of BLTs and being told, “Either **eat** the bacon or stick to your **principles**.” Kamala Khan’s principles are those of a Muslim, meaning she is forbidden from eating pork. Her dietary restrictions highlight tensions between her national and religious identities; she wants to be able to consume the same kinds of food as her American friends, but cannot. Dietary restrictions are not the only markers of the Islamic faith that are visually and textually communicated. The first issue introduces us not just to Kamala, but also to her best friends: Bruno and Nakia. Nakia is a *hijabi*; she chooses to wear the Islamic headscarf that covers her hair, ears, and neck. In a box set in the foreground of the central panel of the page, we find out that the story takes place in Jersey City, New Jersey, twelve miles outside of Manhattan.

Marvel’s superhero stories distinguished themselves from DC’s early on by taking place in the real world, most often in New York City. Superman serves Metropolis, Spider-Man serves New York, and Kamala Khan serves Jersey City. Placing Kamala Khan in Jersey City is a noteworthy shift because it takes the medium away from being national, New York City

representing America as a whole, to being local in scope. Kamala Khan is not out of place in a state that has a larger population of both Muslims and immigrants than most of the United States. Jersey City becomes a proxy for suburban areas throughout the country, even if it is not suburban in the traditional sense of the word. To understand Jersey City as suburban, New York City must be understood as the epitome of what it means to be urban. If Peter Parker is New York City's "Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man," Kamala Khan is Jersey City's "Friendly Neighborhood Ms. Marvel," and her neighborhood is significantly smaller.

Kamala is distinguished from both Superman and Spider-Man in another way, through her family. Lacking a tragic backstory in which she is left orphaned, Kamala Khan lives at home with her mother, father, and brother: an exceptionally nuclear family for any superhero. When we first see Kamala's mother, in *Ms. Marvel #1*, she is dressed conservatively. She wears a sweater, long dress, and pants, and although she is not wearing a *hijab* while in the privacy of her home she can be seen wearing one in later issues. Kamala's father is dressed in accordance with Western fashion: button down top, tie, and dress pants. Of all of the Khans, Aamir seems to be the most out of place at first glance, dressed in a traditional outfit made from entirely white fabric. Aamir sits at the family dinner table reciting prayers in Arabic while Kamala's father reads a newspaper. They are, in more ways than not, an average American family. So it should come as no surprise that when sixteen-year-old Kamala asks to attend a party that her father denies her request. When she asks if it is an issue of trust he responds, "Of course I trust **you**, beti. But it's not safe for a young girl to be out late at night with strange boys, **drinking** God knows what and thinking God knows what" (*Ms. Marvel #1*).

Wilson's choice, using the English "God" over the Arabic "*Allah*," here should not be overlooked. The page before Aamir says, "May Allah forgive you, Abu." *Allah* translates

directly into English as God. It is not up to the reader to understand whether or not the use of *Allah* means that Aamir is any more religious than his father, but instead they should understand that the different uses are indicative of different perspectives from within the same faith. Just as the audience knows that Kamala is Muslim without her having had to say so explicitly, it knows that her family members are also Muslim. Aamir's faith is visually and textually communicated to the reader through his own person, while his father's faith is less readily apparent. Kamala's father choosing to use English instead of Arabic could very well be a result of his being an immigrant while Aamir is a first-generation American, his father more eager to blend in as an immigrant than Aamir would be as an American citizen at birth. Kamala falls somewhere between the two, eager to blend in with her peers, sometimes at the expense of her cultural heritage.

Kamala deals in contradictions when it comes to her identity. She does not understand if or how she can be both Muslim and American, demonstrated in this first issue by her inability to consume "American" foods. In the ways in which she is shown as expressing her identity early on in the series, specifically in the context of the first issue, it may be understood by some readers as a rejection of her Muslim and Pakistani identities. In reality, it is the beginning of an ongoing negotiation for Kamala of these identities and her American identity. While at first the series may come across as being orientalist, dismissive of "Eastern" traditions in favor of Western, American traditions and, especially, values, to take it to that level of abstraction ignores another significant aspect of Kamala Khan's identity. She is a teenager. As a teenager in the American school system, the only way for her to survive is to adapt and that adaption may come at a temporary cost of the rejection of her racial and religious identities. In his origin story, Superman never had to deal with adolescence, but Spider-Man provides an apt model. He, like

Kamala, is constantly renegotiating his identity as it is expressed through his personal identity as Peter Parker and superheroic identity as Spider-Man. Having not yet assumed the mantle of Ms. Marvel by the end of the first issue, Kamala Khan does not have the ability to distance herself in the way that Peter Parker would, and even after she does take on the title, she still deals with the process of defining herself, but she can then do it on her own terms given the distance between her alter ego and her own self. W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness is a framework through which these conflicting identities may be better understood.

DuBois, in "The Souls of Black Folk," wrote,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Although DuBois was specifically addressing the African-American community in the 1900s, his basic framework for the "double consciousness" can be applied to Kamala Khan in two ways: the first in addressing her racial identity and the second in addressing her superheroic identity. As a Pakistani-American, Kamala would be aware of not only the color of her skin, but of what the color of her skin implies, suggesting that her religious identity is abnormal in the same way that her skin is in what she perceives as the greater American consciousness. In this way she is, on one hand, Pakistani, and on the other, American.

Sneaking out by way of her bedroom window, Kamala asks, "Why am I the only one who gets **signed out of health class**? Why do I have to bring **pakor**as to school for lunch? Why am I

stuck with the **weird holidays**? Everybody else gets to be **normal**” (*Ms. Marvel* #1). Kamala’s sense of “twoness” here comes in between her ethnic and national identities. After arriving at the party, Kamala is tricked into consuming alcohol. Alcohol, like pork, is forbidden to Muslims. She spits out the drink before Bruno intercedes and lashes out at him when he asks her what she is doing there and if her parents know that she is at the party. A blue-green mist can be seen along a horizon of buildings as Kamala walks away. Kamala thinks to herself, “Who was I kidding? I can never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I’ll always be poor Kamala with the weird **food rules** and the **crazy family**.” Kamala does not believe that her ethnic and national identities, neither of which can be wholly removed from her religious identity, can be reconciled. Kamala then passes out, awakening to see three of her idols: Iron Man, Captain America, and Captain Marvel (see Appendix B).

Captain Marvel is at the forefront of the panel with Iron Man behind her to the left, from the reader’s perspective, and Captain America behind her to the right. Captain Marvel’s dialogue is an English transliteration of a Sufi poem, with the English translation being provided by Iron Man and Captain America. The English translation alludes to the blooming of flowers, a transformation that parallels Kamala’s in this moment. Even as Iron Man says, “The yellow mustard is blooming in every field...” yellow smoke billows between the heroes and Kamala. On the page that follows this panel, Kamala asks Captain Marvel, “You speak **Urdu**?” Captain Marvel responds, “We are **faith**. We speak all languages of beauty and hardship.” Iron Man continues, “You are seeing what you **need** to see. You stand at a **crossroads**.” Captain America finishes, “You thought that if you disobeyed your parents—your culture, your religion—your classmates would **accept** you.” The poem is credited to Amir Khusro, a Sufi poet from South Asia.

Sufism is the mystic branch of Islam. In the inclusion of a poem credited to a Sufi poet, Sufism can be understood as playing a role in *Ms. Marvel* and this is due, in no small part, to the fact that Kamala Khan is of Pakistani descent. Geographically, Islam's origins lie in the modern nation-state of Saudi Arabia. From Mecca to Medina, back again, and beyond, Islam originally spread by way of conquest, trade, and travel over several hundred years. Today, Indonesia is home to the largest population of Muslims in the world, although the greatest concentration remains spread throughout the Arab states between Morocco and Iraq. Pakistan, sandwiched between Iran, Afghanistan, and India, is not an Arab state, and while it is culturally similar to India, it is an Islamic state and has the second largest population of Muslims after Indonesia. As the religion spread and came into contact with preexisting populations it underwent processes of adaptation.

Just as there are different interpretations of the Islamic tradition, some of the better-known denominations being Sunni and Shi'a, there are different interpretations of Sufism. Sufism, as the mystic branch of Islam, encourages individuals to pursue spiritual relationships with God. While some would argue that Sufism is not truly Islamic, a significant part of the Islamic world takes pride in the Sufi poets that their countries produce. The poem that Captain Marvel recites would have been dated to the 9th century in what is known today as the modern state of India.¹ It is attributed to Khusro, although it would be impossible to verify this attribution.

Rather than being purely Urdu, the poem is in a proto-Hindi/Urdu language, with some words borrowed from Sanskrit.² This represents a shift in poetry from the use of the Persian language as a kind of "court," upper-class language to the more popularly used Hindi/Urdu. It

¹ Griffith Chaussée, in discussion with author, March 2016.

² Griffith Chaussée and Ashok Rajput, in discussion with author, March 2016.

employs Persian imagery, but speaks of plants native to northern South Asia. This shift would have been part of a process of popularizing Islamic works in South Asia. Even today, as evidenced by its presence in the *Ms. Marvel* text, this kind of poetry remains at the forefront of Islamic culture in India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and would be recognizable to someone like Kamala Khan, years and oceans removed from its source.

The first issue of *Ms. Marvel* balances explicit and implicit references to Islam. There are the more obvious textual and visual clues that place Islam in an American context, such as the use of the word *Allah* and the *hijab* in Jersey City. More subtly, there are references to the Islamic tradition that the average reader would not necessarily pick up on, but fulfill Brod's qualification of transmission of the religious tradition. G. Willow Wilson is an American Muslim convert, establishing the source, and the explicit and implicit clues, it can be argued, would appear to make the work itself Islamic in nature. As the series progresses, *Ms. Marvel* continues to present to its readers an American embodiment of Islam, of what it means to be an American Muslim, offsetting what initially can be read as a rejection of the faith by the series' main character.

Returning to W.E.B. DuBois's double consciousness, it is at the end of the first issue and the beginning of the second that Kamala Khan begins to negotiate her dual identities. She has not yet assumed the title of Ms. Marvel willingly, and yet she is already faced with the contradictions between herself as Kamala Khan and Ms. Marvel. Her first transformation, although accidental, is a transformation into Carol Danvers's Ms. Marvel. Kamala shifts into what she thinks a superhero looks like and what she thinks a superhero looks like does not align with her own self-image. Instead, she gains another sense of "twoness" with her powers. Kamala Khan is not yet a hero, so it follows that she cannot yet assume the title of Ms. Marvel.

Kamala can be seen testing out her new powers at the beginning of the second issue, powers that include the ability to morph her appearance, having been visually transformed into Carol Danvers's Ms. Marvel, and to change size, shrinking down to the size of a cockroach. She then sees two of her classmates, stumbling across a bridge. When one falls, Kamala springs into action (see Appendix C and Appendix D). As we see her thoughts represented by text boxes, she thinks, "There's this ayah from the **Quran** that my dad always quotes when he sees something **bad** on TV. A fire or a flood or a bombing. 'Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind--...--and whoever **saves** one person, it is as if he has **saved all of humanity**'" (*Ms. Marvel* #2). This is the first explicit reference to the Qur'an in the series and Wilson does not provide an explanation for what the word *ayah* (plural, *ayat*) means, despite providing translations for other words within the text, but it is the Arabic word used to refer to verses of the Quran that originally is defined as a "sign." Kamala coming upon a crisis after having just gained her powers is a sign that she might use them in the service of others, even if in this instance it is to save just one person.

Reading further into the verse that Wilson has chosen to include from the Qur'an, it is taken from *Al-Ma'ida*, a *sura* (chapter), which is translated into English by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem as The Feast. The Qur'an first relates the story of Cain and Abel, who in Haleem's translation are only named as two brothers. The story is followed by a declaration, which includes 5:32-34,

On account of... [the death of one brother at the hands of the other], We decreed to the Children of Israel that if anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all of mankind. Our messengers

came to them with clear signs, but many of them continued to commit excesses in the land. Those who wage war against God and his Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or banishment from the land: a disgrace for them in this world, and then a terrible punishment in the Hereafter, unless they repent before you overpower them—in that case bear in mind that God is forgiving and merciful. (114)

The message that Kamala receives from her father, and paraphrases in the issue, is taken from this message originally given to the Israelites and employs a story that would be carried through to later generations of Jews, Christians, and, as is demonstrated here, Muslims: the story of Cain and Abel.

G. Willow Wilson, as a Muslim, may or may not have chosen this *ayah* with the full *sura* in mind, but, regardless of her intentions, the quote becomes even more important in the context of the full chapter. Even beginning with the title of the *sura*, *Al-Ma'ida*, it alludes back to the first moments of the *Ms. Marvel* series, where Kamala grapples with the Islamic restriction on forbidden meats. According to this *sura*, God loves those who do good. Just as much as God would love Kamala Khan for doing good, he would also love Clark Kent and Peter Parker, despite having different motivations and coming from different traditions. *Al-Ma'ida* refers to the People of the Book multiple times and treats them with respect. The part of the text that Wilson leaves out, however, is just as important as what she decided to include.

The text, through this translation, specifies that no one should kill another person “unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land...” (114). This could be taken to mean that violence against non-Muslims is warranted, but it could just as easily be interpreted as

not applying to People of the Book or to individuals willing to repent. The text does not necessarily condone senseless violence, although ultimately it is up to the reader to decide whether or not it does, but it does celebrate acts of goodness, like mercy, identifying God as “forgiving and merciful.” The way in which Kamala understands the quote, through the lens of her father, is one that highlights that mercy and the value of life. That she paraphrases the quote from her father puts forward a healthy, supportive father-daughter relationship that serves as a foil for negative stereotypes of Muslim men and their daughters. The *sura* continues to refer back to the Jewish and Christian traditions, in a way that parallels the ways in which the *Ms. Marvel* series refers back to the origin stories of Superman and Spider-Man. *Ms. Marvel* is, in that way, like the Islamic faith, building upon a tradition that was initiated by the creation of Superman and continued through the creation of Spider-Man, but made entirely different through Kamala Khan.

Wilson normalizes Kamala’s Muslim identity by including this paraphrased Qur’anic *ayah* and, given its context, establishes the Islamic tradition as valuing life, which contradicts stereotypes of Muslims propagated by extremist groups and held by some, but not all, Americans. It should not be sensational that a Muslim character values life, and Wilson does not act as if it is, but the inclusion of this interpretation of Islam presents to readers another way of seeing the tradition, the culture, and the people that partake in both. It puts Islam and Muslims in a positive light and does so in the form of comics, an American popular media.

Kamala continues, “When I was a little kid, that always made me feel better. Because no matter how bad things get... There are always people who rush in to **help**. And according to my dad... they are **blessed**” (*Ms. Marvel* #2). Kamala’s motivation for being a hero does not come from a sense of obligation or guilt, as we can see in both Superman and Spider-Man’s origin

stories, but instead from a sense of morality. Saving lives is the right thing to do, unconditionally, and Kamala Khan is not helping others only because she understands the act of doing so as the right thing to do, she is helping others because her religious upbringing has taught her that this is so and she refers back to the Islamic faith to rationalize her choice to use her powers despite any personal risk. Kamala is not delivered to Earth to be the savior of humanity nor is she trying to assuage guilt stemming from the loss of a loved one. Kamala Khan is being a hero because she understands this as what she should do when working within the parameters of her religion, Islam.

The third issue physically takes Kamala into a mosque, the Islamic Masjid of Jersey City. As Kamala prepares herself for the Saturday youth lecture given by Sheikh Abdullah, the reader can see her wearing a traditional blue dress and red scarf draped over her shoulders. The sheikh's lecture can be heard through background speech bubbles, as Kamala, now wearing her scarf over her head and shown to be also wearing pants under her dress, is seen seated next to Nakia and amongst other Muslim women, each on rugs behind a room divider. As Nakia and Kamala talk to one another, the sheikh interrupts, telling them both to not speak during the lecture.

When Kamala challenges him by saying that it is difficult concentrate on a speaker that she cannot see, Sheikh Abdullah responds, "The **partition** and the **side entrance** for women are there to preserve your **modesty** and **dignity**" (*Ms. Marvel* #2). Kamala refers back to Islamic history as she counters this assertion, saying, "But—didn't you tell us there was no partition at the **Prophet's** mosque in Medina? That men and women went through the **same door** and sat in the **same room**?" (*Ms. Marvel* #2). This dialogue directly confronts the Western stereotype of the submissive Muslim woman. Kamala is not told that she is wrong, nor is she told that she should not be challenging the sheikh, instead, he engages with her in a conversation that has been

going on in Islamic culture since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, in the first instance in which his name and title appears in the series. It is a conversation that still takes place today, in the United States, led by women like Asra Q. Nomani, who calls the gender segregation that happens in Mosques a “gender apartheid.”

Nomani and Ify Okoye, in response to President Barack Obama visiting a Mosque in February of 2016, wrote,

President Obama should be aware that on any given day a woman or girl worshipping in the mosque would be dispatched away from the *musallah* where he will stand to speak out against “Islamophobia,” to the “prayer room for females,” as one worshipper described it. In much the same way that he wants to mitigate Americans seeing Muslims as the “other,” we have to challenge the Muslim systems that segregate women as the “other.”

Nomani, Okoye, and Kamala Khan are all, essentially, arguing for the same thing: democratic relationships between Muslims. Unlike Nomani and Okoye, Kamala Khan’s approach is local rather than national, much like her superheroics. On both the local and national levels, it is important for the American audiences of journalism, as represented by the works of Nomani and Okoye, and comics, as represented by *Ms. Marvel*, to understand that democratic processes occur within Mosques and have since their inception. Islam is multifaceted in nature, as are the Muslims that engage in the tradition.

The first instance of Kamala speaking in Urdu also occurs in the third issue, as she can be seen speaking to her mother on the phone. Urdu is one of a number of languages spoken in Pakistan. Kamala’s ethnic identity, as a Pakistani-American, is another way in which the creators of the series confront stereotypes. In the United States, “Muslim,” as an identifier, is often

conflated with the Arab ethno-national group. There are twenty-two Arab states in the world, not including states with Muslim majority populations such as Iran, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Globally, Arab states do not even host the largest numbers of Muslims per individual state, but instead the largest geographic concentrations of them collectively.

Kamala Khan frequently struggles with reconciling her ethnic identity, as someone of Pakistani descent, and her national identity, as an American citizen. Even after she has saved a life, she is still internally conflicted over the way in which her superpowers manifest, namely through shapeshifting. Earlier in the third issue, as she is testing out her powers, she accidentally morphs into her mother, despite having aimed for the “All-American” Taylor Swift. Her accidental transformation has deeper implications: Kamala cannot see herself as being American, but she can see herself as being Pakistani, through her mother. Having heard that a crime was being committed at the Circle Q, the convenience store in which she was introduced in the first issue, she thinks to herself, “Oh my God. Somebody’s trying to **stick up** the Circle Q!” (*Ms. Marvel* #3). Out loud, she asks herself what to do and thinks, “But—everybody’s expecting **Ms. Marvel**. Ms. Marvel from the **news**. With the hair and the spandex and the **Avengers swag**. Not a sixteen-year-old brown girl with a 9 PM **curfew**” (*Ms. Marvel* #3).

The transition from the third issue to the fourth is marked by Kamala, as Carol Danvers’s Ms. Marvel, being accidentally shot in the Circle Q. Bruno goes to call 911, but is interrupted by Kamala who, having shifted back into her usual appearance, says to Bruno, “I have to **hide**. The police—they **can’t** know it’s me. My parents will **freak**, the NSA will **wiretap our mosque** or something, and then they’ll sell me to **science!**” (*Ms. Marvel* #4). This conversation is the beginning of Kamala’s assertion of her own “secret identity” and her reasons for doing so are connected to her family, her religion, and her own personhood. As previously demonstrated in

their restrictions on their teenaged daughter's social life, the Khans are conservative parents.

Even the idea that they might find out about her powers is cause enough for Kamala to hide them, as she fears that they would not allow her to use them, despite her best intentions.

Furthermore, she is concerned about the consequences of her having superpowers might have in relation to her mosque and, implicitly, for the greater Islamic community. Kamala feels the need to assimilate so that she can "pass" as an American citizen, even though she is one. For her to verbalize concern over whether or not the National Security Administration (NSA) will use her powers as an excuse to wiretap her mosque "or something" is only an extreme when understood in relation to her powers.

President George W. Bush authorized wiretapping after the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11th, 2001. His administration argued that such means were legal under the permissions of Article II of the US Constitution, that which grants the President the title and powers of the commander-in-chief of the US Armed Forces, and a resolution passed by Congress, which authorized the use of "all necessary and appropriate military force" against al Qaeda (Godoy). The passing of the USA Patriot Act followed this initial authorization and it allowed for "investigators to use the tools that were already available to investigate organized crime and drug trafficking" (US Department of Justice). Like the earlier authorization, the Patriot Act would allow for wiretapping as a means of investigating terrorists, although the language provided in the summary of the act by the Department of Justice does not differentiate between domestic and international terrorists. A definition of domestic terrorism would be added later. Up until then, terrorism could be understood as an un-American crime, one committed by non-citizens, such that any American citizen associated by race, religion, or otherwise with groups that individual terrorists may have represented would become marginalized and have suffered the

consequences of terrorist actions committed against the US, potentially even becoming the subjects of surveillance, of wiretapping. Kamala's fear, here, is a substantiated fear because of her racial and religious identities, despite the fact that she is an American citizen.

After the incident at the Circle Q, Kamala returns home and begins to work on her costume, asking her mother about where her "burkini" is, a conservative bathing suit worn by Muslim women. Kamala's mother questions her motives for asking for a swimsuit that she has sworn to never wear, to which Kamala responds, "Obviously I'm gonna go **party** with my ten atheist boyfriends" (*Ms. Marvel* #4). Spider-Man is known for using humor throughout the works that he is featured in, as it is a part of his personality in the way that Brod describes it: it asserts a feature of his character that might not be readily apparent to the reader. Kamala's use of humor here is very Muslim: she teases her mother about polygamy and atheism simultaneously.

In some understandings of the Islamic tradition, a man is allowed up to four wives, but on the condition that he be able to treat each of them equally, which some Islamic scholars have interpreted as being impossible enough to justify the limitation of one wife to one husband. Atheism, on the other hand, is in direct contradiction to Islamic belief: where Atheists believe there is no God, Muslims believe that there is one God, and that their God is the same God as that of the Christians and the Jews. Kamala thinks, "Ammi and Abu taught me to always think about the **greater good**. To defend people who can't defend themselves, even if it means putting yourself at **risk**. I **wish** they could see that that's exactly what I'm trying to do" (*Ms. Marvel* #4).

The first time that Kamala identifies herself as Ms. Marvel occurs at the convenience store. Kamala thinks to herself, "Maybe what I said to those cops [that responded to the incident at the Circle Q] wasn't a joke. Maybe the name belongs to whoever has the courage to fight. And so I tell them..." and she says, out loud, "You can call me **Ms. Marvel**" (*Ms. Marvel* #4).

Although she does claim the name here, she does not take full ownership of it until later on in the series.

The fifth issue transitions away from addressing and establishing Kamala Khan as a character in favor of her assumption of the role of Ms. Marvel. Unlike Superman, who originated his own title and the role of the superhero, and Spider-Man, who, like Superman, originated his own title and expanded on the role of the modern superhero, Ms. Marvel was an established character in Marvel canon. As previously noted, Kamala was created with the intention of fulfilling this role, and in doing so serves as a means of not only broadening potential audiences for Marvel Comics, but also as a means of broadening perceptions of Muslims in the United States, especially Muslim-American citizens.

Generation Why

Issue #6 opens with Kamala Khan fighting robots in the streets of Jersey City. While doing so, she receives a phone call from her brother, Aamir, telling her that their father wants her to speak to Sheikh Abdullah after a food drive being hosted at their mosque. Kamala protests, but the next page takes her out of uniform and into the *hijab*, dress, and pants outfit that she was last seen wearing in the third issue. Having recently displayed abnormal behavior around her parents, they ask the sheikh to speak to her to better understand why she has recently deviated from her normal behavior. Kamala says to him, “Sometimes—people get into bigger trouble than they know how to get out of. So I help. Not very well, which is why I end up breaking curfew” (*Ms. Marvel* #6). Sheikh Abdullah proceeds to offer her advice, telling her that she may need a teacher.

Kamala responds, “A **teacher**? Wait—you’re not going to tell me to be a good girl, focus on my studies, and do *istaghfar** or something?” (*Ms. Marvel* #6). The asterisk after “*istaghfar*”

leads the reader to another box, defining it as repentance, the act of asking for forgiveness. Kamala uses it as if it was another English word: she does not understand it as being out the ordinary to combine elements of English and Arabic or Urdu, nor should the audience. The sheikh replies,

If I told you that, you'd **ignore** me. I know how **headstrong** you are. So instead, I will tell you to do what you are doing with as much **honor** and **skill** as you can...
If you insist on pursuing this thing you will not tell me about, do it with the qualities befitting an upright young woman: Courage, strength, honesty, compassion and **self-respect**. (*Ms. Marvel* #6)

This is Kamala Khan's "with great power comes great responsibility" moment. Peter Parker receives this advice from his Uncle Ben, eventually leading him to take on the role of Spider-Man; Kamala Khan receives it from Sheikh Abdullah, the youth minister of her community mosque, and it serves to reaffirm her decision to help others and to do so by fighting crime. If Spider-Man is an American cultural icon then Kamala has the potential to become one, her connections to the Spider-Man and Superman narratives are most evident in these kinds of parallels, those in which the audience comes to understand the reasoning behind her wanting to do good. Her religious identity should not preclude her from having an American identity. Superman may be read as implicitly Jewish and Spider-Man as implicitly Christian, and yet neither of those attachments has stopped them from becoming household names.

The sixth issue comes to a close with Kamala having found a mentor in the form of Wolverine. Their team-up continues into the seventh issue. In these issues Kamala's religious identity takes a backseat to her personality. It is a reminder that, before anything else, Kamala is a teenager, one that writes fan fiction, fangirls over superheroes, and only occasionally dons a

costume to fight oversized alligators in the sewers of New Jersey. After they take down the “megagator,” Wolverine and Ms. Marvel work their way out of the sewers. Wolverine asks Kamala what it is like to have taken on Carol Danvers’s name, and Kamala replies, “I’ve looked up to Carol my whole life... Then I got my powers, and I became Ms. Marvel—**literally**. I guess that’s who I thought a hero had to be... It took me a while to figure out that Ms. Marvel could be **me**. That I didn’t have to pretend to be someone else in order to wear the **lightning bolt**” (*Ms. Marvel* #7).

Wolverine counters Kamala’s assertion that she can be herself while also being Ms. Marvel by reminding her that she wears a mask. Kamala tells him that she has a very overprotective family, one that does not know that she moonlights as a superhero, making a mask necessary. Aside from the mask, Kamala does not regularly change her appearance, despite being capable of doing so, consistently presenting herself as she is: a brown, teenaged girl. Leon Moosavi, a sociologist focusing on race and religion at the University of Liverpool, wrote an article for Al Jazeera English titled “Why Can’t Spider-Man convert to Islam?” in which he discusses Kamala as a shapeshifter. Moosavi writes,

Her ability to "shapeshift" brings to mind the common Islamophobic accusation that Muslims routinely practice *taqqiya* where they deliberately conceal their true beliefs for the sake of sinister plots. Shapeshifting is cunning and manipulative, just as orientalist [sic] imagined Arabs to be and just as far-right Islamophobes like to imagine all Muslims are today. As Jews were once represented in the past as selfishly infiltrating society, Muslims today are also likely to be considered as stealthily introducing Sharia [sic] into society. And what better way to justify this

than by claiming Muslims, as shapeshifters, alternate their persona to dupe unsuspecting liberals.

Moosavi wrote and published his critique in November of 2013, several months before the publication of the first issue of *Ms. Marvel*. As is demonstrated in the analysis of this text previously conducted and as will be reaffirmed later on, Kamala Khan never deliberately practices *taqqiya*.

Kamala does not use her abilities to commit crimes, “for the sake of sinister plots,” nor does she use them to indoctrinate the audience into Islam or to promote the spread of Islamic law, *sharia*. It could be argued that through her character, and specifically through her powers, that her creators deliberately subvert the stereotypes that Moosavi highlights. If Jews were once represented as “selfishly infiltrating society,” then it could be just as easily argued that Superman could have propagated many of the same stereotypes, such that it is also important to discuss here the gendered disparity between these characters. Kamala Khan’s gender is by no means an accident.

Superman’s alter ego, Clark Kent, is understood by Brod to be a representation of American perception of Jewish masculinity, or lack thereof. Superman’s creators saw themselves as Clark Kents, but aspired to be Supermen, and in doing so embedded into the comics the theme of gendered nationalism. The less than masculine Clark Kent then becomes representative of the less than American Jewish immigrant, while the hyper masculine Superman is the ultra-American. Moosavi does not address this in his article, but suggests instead that the ways in which Jews were once understood in Western society is analogous to the ways in which Muslims are currently understood. If Superman, as a male superhero, could pass into American culture

without being accused of forcefully injecting Judaism into it, this accusation against the *Ms. Marvel* series that Moosavi levels is without proper context and, to a degree, sexist.

Kamala Khan, as a female character, should not be held to a different set of standards than male characters in the canon of comics. Moosavi's article specifically addresses Spider-Man. He writes, "I, therefore, won't be making bold claims that [Marvel is going to help end Islamophobia] until Spiderman converts to Islam!" This ignores the fact that Spider-Man wears a full-face mask; if Kamala Khan, a character who only covers her eyes in order to protect her family and friends, can be accused of *taqqiya*, then it would only be fair to accuse a Muslim Spider-Man of the same, although this does not mean that his conversion would be a better solution to Islamophobia than the presentation of a Muslim character. In reality, there is no singular way to "end" Islamophobia, but Kamala Khan's creation and the continued publication of the *Ms. Marvel* series is, undoubtedly, a step in the right direction.

To further elaborate on Kamala's gender, and gendered nationalism, it is as important as her racial and religious identities. As a Muslim, Pakistani, South Asian girl, who does not wear a headscarf, Kamala is much less threatening than a male character of that same description who would, in place of a headscarf, possibly have a beard. She does not necessarily meet the expectations of what it is that a "terrorist" looks like. Even studies on terrorism have focused on men, "due to the longstanding belief that women have assumed passive, inherently less interesting roles in extremist groups," according to Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor's "Female Terrorism: A Review." That women are assumed to be passive, when put in the context of Islamic culture, is an Orientalist viewpoint that the creative team of *Ms. Marvel* continuously subverts: Kamala is not passive, is not any less interesting than other characters in the text, and, in a further subversion of stereotypes, fights for the greater good.

The eighth issue begins with Kamala thinking, “I spent the weekend battling the Inventor’s giant sewer alligators. Why are kids like me always being drafted into wars we didn’t start?” (*Ms. Marvel* #8). This line would be just as appropriate in the original run of Spider-Man as it is here. In the context of Spider-Man, it could have referred to the Vietnam War, into which young men were drafted. For Kamala, it almost definitely refers to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, although it could also be a reference to the greater, ideological, “War on Terror.” Although neither of these more recent wars involved a draft, public support for both the war in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan decreased the longer the US was involved in each war, according to Gallup. Both wars became ones that Americans were no longer willing to fight, although the “War on Terror” continues to be waged. This “war” is not always a ground war nor is it a declared war in the sense that the US traditionally declares war. Instead, it is a war that is, most often, fought with words and young people are caught in the crossfire, especially when their identities are not “purely” American. Kamala deals with this through the lens of her alien heritage.

At the end of issue seven the reader is introduced to the first formally Inhuman character, the Queen of the Inhumans, Medusa. Later on in the texts, Kamala will find out that she is an Inhuman, part of a genetic line of human beings whose DNA was modified by an alien race and gain powers when they come into contact with the kind of mist that triggered Kamala’s initial transformation. Medusa sends Kamala a companion: Lockjaw. Lockjaw is a giant, teleporting dog that resembles a pug, with a tuning fork on his head. In the eighth issue, he appears before Kamala, in her uniform as Ms. Marvel, in the streets of Jersey City, wearing a sign around his neck that reads, “Hello my name is Lockjaw I like hugs.” She brings him home and asks her parents, and Aamir by extension, if she can keep him. There is another reminder here that her

family is Muslim: their discomfort with the idea of having a dog in the house. Within the context of Islamic culture, pets are seen as interfering in the ability of the family or individuals to maintain the degree of cleanliness necessary to conducting prayer in the home. Muslims undergo ritual washing before prayer in order to pray in as pure of a state as possible. This explains Aamir's response, "You can't have dogs in the house, sis. They're not *pak*" (*Ms. Marvel* #8). The text defines *pak* as pure, and it is taken from the Urdu and Persian languages native to Pakistan, not from Arabic.

Even as Aamir is bringing Islamic tradition into the discussion, Kamala's father says, "**Everything** is bigger in America... even the **canines**..." and her mother says, "Uff... What will the neighbors think?!" (*Ms. Marvel* #8). Willow inserts further social commentary through Kamala's parents' statements. On the one hand, Kamala's father's statement reflects on the macro-culture of the greater United States, and on the other hand, her mother's statement reflects on the micro-culture of their neighborhood, one in which there are ostensibly a fair number of Muslim households, given the distribution of Muslims in New Jersey and tendency of immigrants from the same ethno-national group to choose to live near one another when possible.

Lockjaw is enlisted in Kamala's efforts against the Inventor. They teleport together to what appears to be a factory site "somewhere outside Bayonne." Kamala says, "Gross. Abu would say this is exactly the sort of place that evil jinn would hang out" (*Ms. Marvel* #8). In the Islamic tradition, there is God, then there are Angels, and then there are Jinn. Jinn, or genies as they are known in the West, can occupy both Earth and Heaven in the Islamic tradition, while humans are confined to Earth and Angels are confined to Heaven. Jinn appear throughout a variety of Islamic narratives, from religious texts to oral storytelling. After this reference, the

book moves away from addressing Kamala's Islamic identity and primarily addresses her identity as a Millennial.

Kamala Khan is meant to be representative of Millennials. The overarching theme of her origin story, particularly focusing in on the Inventor's arc, is that Millennials *are* people. Like Spider-Man, whose status as a teenager was meant to lend value to the teenage experience, Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel was created with the intention of reiterating that idea through a narrative that would actively encompass minority groups. That being said, Kamala Khan is not meant to be representative of all first generation Americans, ethnic-minority Americans, women, or Muslims, but authorial intent and audience perception are two wholly different things.

As the first series of *Ms. Marvel* was being published in 2015, around 1% of the American population was Muslim, according to the Pew Research Center. The 3.3 American Muslims of all ages, measured by Pew are not evenly distributed across the country, meaning that in some places, such as Kamala Khan's home state of New Jersey, Muslims are overrepresented while in others they may not have a measurable presence. Despite author G. Willow Wilson's best intentions, Kamala Khan is the model for a modern American Muslim for many traditional comics readers because they may not have any other exposure to Muslims in the United States, and for nontraditional comics readers, Kamala Khan's religious identity may have been what brought them into the fold.

Even as Kamala is adjusting to her newfound powers she is faced with ongoing disappearances of other teenagers from Jersey City. When she and Lockjaw come across a robot in the factory site, she opens it up to reveal a teenager being used as the machine's power source. Kamala takes the teen to the nearest hospital and then returns to school. Her class starts discussing an article written about the Millennial Generation. Nakia, Kamala's friend, says,

“Well... I found the article **insulting**. The writer said teenagers are just **parasites** addicted to their smart phones, who don’t give back to society... But that doesn’t sound like anybody I know...” and then their teacher asks Kamala for her opinion and, building on Nakia’s comment, she says, “Well... giving up on the next generation is like giving up on the **future**, right?” (*Ms. Marvel* #8). The issue is brought to a close as another one of the Inventor’s robots attacks Kamala’s high school.

Kamala is injured during the fight and Medusa arrives at the scene, having been summoned by Lockjaw, and takes Kamala to New Attilan, the home of the Inhumans. After being woken up, Kamala asks where she is, to which Medusa replies, “You are **home**” (*Ms. Marvel* #9). When Kamala questions her, confused, Medusa continues, “... your home—your **origin**—is **here**, among your people... Long ago, one of your human ancestors was genetically altered by the **Kree**—an alien race. That genetic legacy has been passed down through the generations—to **you**. You’re **Inhuman**.” Unlike the Islamic facets of her identity, such as being able to identify Sufi poetry or talking about Jinn, her genetics are discussed in depth in this particular sequence within the text. In making Kamala a descendent of the Inhuman lineage, the creative team introduces an identity even more alien than her being Muslim.

Kamala thinks to herself, “This is all so **weird**. I thought I was finally starting to figure things out. It seems like anytime you want to **learn** something, you have to **unlearn** something else. I thought I was a **mutant**—now it turns out I’m part **alien**. I’m a Pak-American, part-alien, morphogenic [referring to her shapeshifting powers] nerd” (*Ms. Marvel* #9). She then says, outloud, “I am **alone** in the universe.” Even before she gained her powers, Kamala knew she was different and understood her difference by way of her identifiers. It is not the addition of Muslim that makes her feel alone in the world, but the addition of alien, of Inhuman, that does. Her

feeling of “singularity” in this moment is not something unique to someone who has just found out that they have alien DNA, it could just as easily be felt by someone who identifies with a minority religion, is a member of an ethnic minority group, or is a teenager. Kamala, as it happens, is all of those things.

When Vinatos, another Inhuman whose appearance is much more alien than Kamala’s, replies, “**Unique** is not the same as alone...” there is a message of acceptance communicated (*Ms. Marvel* #9). This narrative validates difference and, going one step further, celebrates it. Kamala Khan is not a hero because she fits within a preconceived notion of what it means to be a hero; she is a hero because she chooses to be one in spite of understanding that she should not be one. Taken to an even more abstract level, Kamala Khan is not an American because she fits within a preconceived notion of what it means to be an American, nor is she one because she chooses to be, she is an American because she rejects the notion that she, being a sum of her parts, does not add up to what is traditionally considered to be American. Unlike Superman, whose creators crafted a narrative that aspired to be American, or Spider-Man, whose creators expanded upon Superman’s narrative and reinforced what it meant to be American, Kamala Khan breaks from the comics tradition and redefines what it means to be American, deconstructing the American Creed and putting forward a new model on which national identity can be understood in a pluralistic society like the United States: regardless of her age, gender, ethnic or religious identity.

Kamala then leaves New Attilan, only to come home to her parents, who are, understandably, rattled after the attack on Kamala’s school. Her mother yells, “You could have been **killed!** You’re never setting foot in that school again—it’s too **dangerous!** We’re sending you to Islamic school! No—we’re sending you to your grandparents in **Karachi!**” (*Ms. Marvel*

#9). She continues, “We came here so our children would be **safe**—safe from the chaos and corruption and bombings back home. Only after we arrived did we discover school shootings, date rape drugs and gangs. And now **giant robots!**” In this particular moment, New Jersey does not seem to be any safer than Pakistan, and Karachi seems like a viable alternative to Jersey City as far as Mrs. Khan is concerned. To have abandoned a place that she still considers home, only to be faced with similar, if not worse, conditions in the United States damages the myth of America as a safe haven, the Myth of the Chosen Nation. Kamala is not as quick to give up on her home and, rather than fixate on the trauma that she has experienced, launches into action, and does so in a new uniform courtesy of her new Inhuman friends.

Kamala tracks down the residence of the disappearing teenagers, finding them in a house at the end of the ninth issue. Between the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth issue, the audience comes to find out that the teenagers are volunteers. As one says, “We’re here by **choice**... We **want** to be here, Ms., umm, **Marvel**. We signed up. We’re doing this for the greater good” (*Ms. Marvel* #9-10). The teenagers are convinced that they are burdens to society, that their lives would be better spent as batteries in order to make sure that other generations have a future. Kamala’s response follows, “We’re not the ones who messed up the economy or the planet. Maybe they do think of us as **parasites**, but they’re not the ones who are gonna have to live with this **mess**—“ (*Ms. Marvel* #10). This is not a religious message, but it is a moral one. It communicates value even in the face of a national narrative that devalues human lives. Millennials could just as easily be replaced with Muslims here, whether or not Wilson intends for that to be the understanding reached.

When the Inventor says to Kamala, “This is what heroism comes down to, Ms. Marvel. In the end, you’re all alone...” Kamala responds, “Y-you’re wrong. A hero is just somebody who

tries to do the **right** thing even when it's **hard**. There are **more** of us than you think" (*Ms. Marvel #10*). Going beyond the Millennial narrative, this statement stands in stark contrast to the perception of Islam in not just the United States, but the Western world. Kamala is explicitly saying that Millennials have worth, being one herself and acting as a hero, but also that there are good people in the world who are good because that is what they should be and, like Kamala, some of those people are Muslim. Implicitly, her response says to the audience that there are good Muslims in the world, Muslim heroes like herself, that do the right thing even when it is hard. It says that there are more of them than one might think, more good Muslims than bad. Prejudice, whether it is generational or religious, is taken to task in this series.

The Inventor escapes, but Kamala quickly follows in pursuit. When she does come into the Inventor's lair, the audience sees him saying,

The young are seen as a political burden, a public **nuisance**. They are not worth educating or protecting. They are called parasites, leeches, brats, spawn—If you used these words to describe any minority but children, it would understandably be considered hate speech. We are simply taking this loathing to its **logical** conclusion. (*Ms. Marvel #10*)

Wilson's statement could not be clearer; it explicitly reiterates the narrative of inclusion by highlighting exclusion by way of hate speech. She pushes us to ask, how is this kind of language made to seem appropriate when used in relation to teenagers? How would this sound if it were applied to other minority groups? Are there any conditions under which hate speech is justifiable? The answer to the last question being: no. Replace teenagers with immigrants or Muslims and the connections between Kamala being a teenager, first-generation American, or

Muslim may be brought to an abstract level that further denounces the use of hate speech against minority groups.

Kamala's fight with the Inventor continues into the eleventh issue, the last of the *Generation Why* collection. She defeats him with the help of the teenagers that he had previously recruited to his cause, having inspired them to take action. As Nakia, having been captured by the Inventor and now freed, is taken to the hospital, Kamala thinks to herself, "And that's when it hits me. This isn't just a costume anymore. This is a **parallel** life" (*Ms. Marvel #11*). Kamala is aware of her "twoness," her hyphenated identities: Muslim-American and Pakistani-American, at this point; she understands the divide between Kamala and Ms. Marvel, and accepts it so that she can continue to do good for others while keeping those close to her safe.

As the issue, and the arc, comes to a close, Kamala thinks to herself, "Nobody has the right to give up on a whole generation before it's even had a chance to prove itself, we're all in this together, and we gotta remember that" (*Ms. Marvel #11*). This is the moral of the story, but it is not the only moral message that is communicated over the course of *No Normal* and *Generation Why*. Just as often as the reader is explicitly told about the value of teenagers, especially Millennials, they are also implicitly told about the value of other minority groups and while the focus is on those identities that Kamala applies to herself, Kamala effectively becomes an avatar for minority identities beyond her own.

Crushed

In the beginning of issue twelve, Nakia, alone with Kamala, is shown for the first time without her headscarf. The absence of the *hijab* is just as important as its appearance earlier on in the series; Nakia wears it in public, but not in the privacy of her friend's home and in the company of another woman. Just a few pages later, Nakia is once again seen wearing her *hijab*.

Apart from this notable incidence involving the headscarf, the twelfth issue is very much a one-off, not intended to forward any greater narrative.

Set in New Attilan, the thirteenth issue has Kamala reflecting on the defeat of the Inventor. She reflects on her experience with the Inhumans using context established in her experiences as an individual of Pakistani descent. Kamala thinks to herself, “Lemme tell you—I thought **Pakistani** family stuff was big and complicated. But **Inhuman** family stuff? Big and complicated, plus superpowers and intergalactic travel” (*Ms. Marvel* #13). When Kamala returns to her family home, she is told that there are going to be visitors, “Bushra Aunty and Irfan Uncle,” along with their son, Kamran. Despite being identified as “Aunty” and “Uncle,” the visitors are not actually related to Kamala, but are named as such as a sign of respect based in cultural tradition.

As Kamala is introduced to Kamran a number of non-English words enter into the sequence. A *shalwar* is mentioned, a kind of dress, as is *halaqa*, a kind of religious gathering. In addition to words such as these, names are brought up that directly relate back to Pakistani culture, particularly the consumption of Indian Bollywood cinema. When Kamran mentions Amitabh Bachchan there is an asterisk that leads the reader to an editorial note, which reads, “Greatest Bollywood actor who ever lived. –Fobbed-out Sana” (*Ms. Marvel* #13). This connects the narrative back to Pakistan and Kamala’s cultural heritage in two ways: the endogenic use of the actor’s name in the text and the exogenic explanation provided by the editor, who is also of Pakistani-descent and refers to herself, through her note, as being associated with the “FOB” identifier, where “FOB” stands for “fresh off the boat.” It is a phrase commonly used to refer to first generation Americans whose association with other cultures set them apart from mainstream American culture.

After getting permission from her father to go shopping for Bollywood films in the company of Kamran and her brother, serving as a chaperone, Kamala, Aamir, and Kamran are shown walking amongst an ethnically diverse group, some of whom are wearing visible indicators of the Islamic faith, which would be representative of Jersey City's ethnic makeup. Kamala and Kamran walk ahead of Aamir, Kamala saying, "I'm so glad you actually like *Sholay* [a film]. Most of my second-gen Pakistani friends just hate-watch it," to which Kamran replies, "No, it's totally awesome. Sometimes I feel like it's the least we can do—like, we're not back in the motherland, we're here speaking English and making our parents miserable—At least we can watch their movies. And love them. And not laugh, except in a nice way" (*Ms. Marvel* #13). Kamran appears to be perfect, he understands what Kamala has gone through as the child of Pakistani parents and as a teenager in the United States.

As they are all walking together a girl, who appears to have electricity shooting out from the top of her head, attacks. The girl, who identifies herself as Kaboom, says, "Here's how it's gonna be people—This is the beginning of a **new age**—an age when we stop living by rules made by lesser minds for lesser beings" (*Ms. Marvel* #13). Kaboom immediately situates herself as being better than those around her because, as the audience eventually finds out, she is Inhuman, like Kamala. After Kamala learns this, she says, "There's always that one group of people who think they have special permission to **terrorize anybody** who disagrees with them. And then everybody else who **looks like them suffers**" (*Ms. Marvel* #13). The Inhumans then become an allegory for Muslims, both good and bad.

That Wilson uses the word "terrorize" to describe Kaboom's motivations and actions is not an accident, she is paralleling the real world response to terrorist attacks that are associated with the Islamic faith. For Kamala, the reality of being of Pakistani descent, of looking as if she

is Muslim regardless of whether or not she is one would mean that she would be grouped with terrorist activities solely on the base of her appearance. Islamophobia, a fear of things associated with Islam as a result of these kinds of terrorist attacks and general lack of knowledge, is allegorized through alien identities, providing distance without wholly removing the text from a real world context. *Ms. Marvel* is not going to end Islamophobia, but it will bring it into discussion through the use of allegory.

Ms. Marvel knocks Kaboom out and as she leaves the scene she thinks to herself, “Just when I was starting to get comfortable with the idea of being Inhuman... I find out that even aliens have their fanatical extremists” (*Ms. Marvel* #13). She may not explicitly say that this narrative is about Muslims or Islamic extremists or Islamists, or any of the number of words that are used to describe terrorist groups and activities associated with the Islamic faith, but it is clear, through critical reading and by way of Kamala’s identities and character, that the Inhumans are being used to represent Muslims as a religious minority group in the United States. As the issue comes to a close, we find out that Kamran, like Kamala, is an Inhuman, demonstrating his powers to her at the end of the thirteenth issue.

In the fourteenth issue, Kamala thinks to herself, “For a second, I’m not even sure what I’m **seeing**. All this time, I thought I was **alone**... that I was the only nerdy Pakistani-American-slash-Inhuman in the entire **universe**. And then, suddenly... I **wasn’t**” (*Ms. Marvel* #14). Just as often as the narrative asserts that not all minority group members are the same, it reiterates the differences that they are made to feel through Kamala’s character. Not long afterwards, Kamala finds out that she and Kamran are, in fact, very different. He asks her, “What if Kaboom was right? Why should we hide what we are and play by the rules of a society that wasn’t built for us?” (*Ms. Marvel* #14). Replace the “we” as it meant to represent Inhumans with a “we” meant

to represent immigrants and the message becomes apparent, why should immigrants “hide what they are and play by the rules of a society that wasn’t built for” them? Why undergo assimilation in order to belong and, rather than assimilate, why not assert dominance over a standing majority group? When Kamala begins to resist Kamran he knocks her out and she wakes up in an apparently high tech cell.

Kamala maintains that Kamran’s point of view is wrong and in dissenting she is not condoning assimilation, but condemning the idea of Inhuman supremacy. In addition to disavowing terrorism, the narrative disavows racism. Noah Berlatsky, writing for *The Guardian*, addressed the inclusion of Kamran as a villain in this arc in his article, “Ms Marvel is a progressive superhero, but latest story arc is a step back on race.” Berlatsky writes,

Kamran is first presented as an exciting prospect for Kamala in part because of their shared cultural identity; he loves Bollywood like her, and they talk about their obligation to their families and their heritage. But then that turns out to all be a lie; the really good man in Kamala’s life is her dorky, trustworthy white friend Bruno. Feminism becomes a way to reject the patriarchal norms of non-western men.... Of course, minority communities can be patriarchal and hateful, just as majority communities can. The problem is that superhero narratives so often seem able only to show hatred in the context of the minority, while being unable to think about majority power and injustice.

What Berlatsky does not write about is the way in which Kamala’s character contrasts to Kamran’s character.

Kamran is problematic, as a Pakistani male, but he would be just as problematic if he were a Caucasian male. To cast him as Pakistani suggests that there are good and bad people and

that their racial or ethnic identity does not play into whether they are good or bad. Kamala is Pakistani, and she is good. Kamran is Pakistani, and he is bad. Berlatsky's point is valid, but it is not the only interpretation that may be made from a critical reading of the text. Berlatsky continues to write, "Kamala, at least so far in the book, never faces racial profiling, though surveillance of Muslims in the US is pervasive and aggressive. The status quo does not threaten her, as an Inhuman or as a Muslim. Instead, Kamala... fights to keep things the same." Kamala never addresses profiling or surveillance head on, but they are both included by way of allegory. The status quo does threaten Kamala, as she regularly internalizes what she thinks she should be rather than accept what she is in the beginning of the series; even if the reader does not ever see anyone else pressure her to think this way. Kamala, as is clearly demonstrated in the *Crushed* arc, fights to change misperceptions of the Inhuman community for the better.

Last Days

In the beginning of the sixteenth issue, Kamala is shown out and about in Jersey City, when she sees a crowd running from what appears to be a city center. She thinks to herself, "Terrorists? Aliens? More aliens?" (*Ms. Marvel #16*). When Kamala returns to her home, her father says, "*Ya Allah*—Not another attack—" and she tells both of her parents to head to her school, where a shelter is being set up, while she jumps into action. Standing on a rooftop, overlooking Jersey City, Kamala meets her hero: Captain Marvel, who says, "Nice uniform. Still not sure how I feel about the **name**" (*Ms. Marvel #16*).

As the two begin talking in the seventeenth issue, Kamala finds out that the world is ending. As part of a greater narrative in the Marvel multiverse, the universes are collapsing in on themselves. As Carol Danvers is speaking, Kamala relates what she is saying back to one of Sheikh Abdullah's lectures. Kamala thinks, "We all face the end alone, he said. And we alone

have to account for our time on Earth. The good and the bad. ‘What will be in the book of your life?’ He used to ask, ‘How will you be remembered?’” (*Ms. Marvel* #17). As was previously seen during Ms. Marvel’s team-up with Wolverine, Ms. Marvel is never wholly removed from Kamala’s Khan’s Muslim identity. Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel and Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel team up and begin to patrol Jersey City together.

Over the course of issues seventeen and eighteen, Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel successfully rescue Kamala’s brother, Aamir, from the Inhuman terrorists, Kaboom and Kamran. At the end of the eighteenth issue, Captain Marvel gives Ms. Marvel a pendant that has their star and lightning bolt symbols combined. The narrative comes full circle here, with the approval of the former Ms. Marvel, Kamala can finally take full ownership of the name. The last issue of the first series, issue nineteen, sees her do so as she admits to her mother that she is and has been Ms. Marvel for the last several months. Kamala’s mother says to her, “If the worst thing you do is sneak out to help suffering people—then I thank God for having raised a righteous child” (*Ms. Marvel* #19). By the end of the issue, Kamala has come to terms with the coming “end of the world,” but the last text shown to the audience reads, “The end... of the beginning” (*Ms. Marvel* #19).

Good is Not a Thing You Are

Quoted by Lisa De Bode in her article, “Ms. Marvel returns as Muslim teen,” Fatemeh Fakhraie, founder of Muslimah Media Watch, said in November of 2013 that Kamala Khan “normalizes this idea of the American experience as Muslim... A lot of us are bumping up against that the idea that a lot of America is white, while that isn't what America is, we're not all white and Christian.” Even before the series went into publication in February of 2014, Kamala’s racial and religious identities were brought into discussion. What De Bode does not write is that

Kamala Khan is not just important for Muslims, but for any minority group, which Fakhraie suggests when she says that not every American is white and Christian. Even the racial identifier of “white” becomes problematic when one takes into consideration the inclusion of Americans of Middle Eastern and North African descent in this group. Many Muslims in the United States then are included in the white racial category, regardless of their religious identities: Christian, Muslim, or otherwise. Kamala being South Asian, being “brown,” adds nuance to not just what it means to be American, but also what it means to be Muslim-American.

Alan Duke quotes Sana Amanat in his article, “Marvel's newest superhero is a Muslim-American teen, as having said,

This story isn't about what it means to be a Muslim, Pakistani or American...

Those are just cultural touchstones that reflect the ever changing world we live in today. This is ultimately a tale about what it means to be young, lost amidst the expectations bestowed upon you, and what happens when you get to choose.

Even as Marvel was marketing Kamala as someone who would challenge “the very core of her conservative values” by venerating Captain Marvel, her creators were communicating a very different narrative to the media (Duke). They deemphasized Kamala being a Muslim in favor of other characteristics, such as her being a teenager or being a Millennial. By deemphasizing her religious identity, they allowed the narrative to address an audience that wanted to see itself reflected in the media it consumed and was open-minded enough to do so through a Muslim superhero such that, as often as they might try to say that it is unimportant for Kamala to be Muslim, her Muslim identity is why the series has received generally positive reception and commercial success.

Anthony McGlynn, in his article, “Why Kamala Khan Is The Most Important Superhero In The World,” wrote,

You see, what G. Willow Wilson, Ms. Marvel’s [*sic*] lead writer, has cultivated with our new favorite Muslim heroine isn’t just another superhero, nor is she just another teenage role model; she’s an analysis of why we love superheroes, and why we buy comics in the first place.

Kamala Khan aspires to be something greater than she is, but comes to find out that she is enough because of who she already is. As McGlynn notes, Kamala Khan has resonated with readers because she is just like anyone else who picks up a comic book, and her idealism is not used to degrade her, but to allow her to represent herself and the identities that she associates with herself in as positive a light as she finds in her own hero.

Kamala Khan has even been brought out of the pages of her books and onto buses in San Francisco, with her image used to combat Islamophobic bus ads run by the extremist anti-Islamic group the Freedom Defense Initiative in February of 2015 (Letamendi). By December of the same year, fanart would show Ms. Marvel punching Donald Trump in the face, in a tribute to a cover in which Captain America once punched Hitler (Baker-Whitelaw). Within the comics industry, the series has received a number of nominations and awards. *Ms. Marvel* has won the Dwayne McDuffie Award For Diversity In Comics, the prize for best series at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, and the Hugo for Best Graphic Story, in addition to five Eisner nominations and two Harvey nominations (Shiach). Kamala Khan continues to make an impact, more than two years after the first issue was released, as a member of the All-New, All-Different Avengers and in a second series, *Ms. Marvel* (2015-). Marvel has put Ms. Marvel on the frontline of their effort towards greater diversity in comics and the success of this character allows for the

success of other characters like her, those who represent America as it is today, not as it was when Superman or Spider-Man were created.

“Good is not a thing you are. It’s a thing you do.”

Ms. Marvel #5

Good is a Thing You Do

Superman implicitly represented a Jewish narrative and aspired to become American. He was created at a time when Jews were coming to America and wanted to assimilate into American culture and did so, at least in part, through superhero comics. Spider-Man implicitly represented a Judeo-Christian narrative and reaffirmed what it meant to be American. His creators were expanding on the tradition that Superman pioneered; responding to an audience affected by war and civil strife, and needed to feel American. Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, represents an explicitly Islamic narrative and, in doing so, redefines what it means to be American. Just as the American Creed expanded over time, so too have the ways in which American superhero narratives expanded to incorporate individuals of different genders, races, and religions, although there is still a ways to go before religious freedom is fully realized in the United States and American popular media.

Kamala Khan “embiggens” the notion of what it means to be an American in the same way she “embiggens” her own body, expanding in times of stress and change and returning to a kind of status quo, although fundamentally changed. To say that Kamala Khan is the same person at the beginning of *Ms. Marvel* as she is at the end would not acknowledge the ways in which the character grows over time as she becomes more and more accustomed to both her

powers and the ways in which she uses them. Kamala being explicitly Muslim only sets her apart from her predecessors in her motivations for helping people; at the end of the day, she is still helping people, she is still doing good.

In the future, scholars should address topics like gender, race, and religion throughout the increasing number of diverse superhero titles. Superhero comics were created by immigrants and adopted by American culture, not unlike Superman. As they continued to develop over time, resulting in characters like Spider-Man, Americans who wanted to affirm their nationality made them. Today, creative teams that are more diverse than ever are making comics and the characters reflect not only those teams, but are reflections of America as a whole. American popular culture is closer than ever to representing America as the multicultural place that it has become. There are heroes for almost any kind of person that might be or become an American and the success of titles like *Ms. Marvel* signals to the publishing companies that characters like Kamala are a worthwhile investment.

After the series debut in 2014, Marvel and DC comics both began producing more female-led titles, as well as racial and ethnic minority-led titles. Amongst those minority led titles are series like DC's *Doctor Fate*, whose main character is an Egyptian-American med student with a mixed Christian-Muslim background, which debuted in 2015. *Ms. Marvel* took every available opportunity to break ground and use the medium of superhero comics to positively represent the Islamic tradition, Islamic culture, and a variety of Muslims. Kamala is not the first Muslim superhero, nor will she be the last, but in her role as the first to lead her own title in American media she has broken ground for those that will follow. In being able to do so, there is a debt owed to series like *The 99*, modeled on the American tradition of superhero comics and produced for a Middle Eastern audience, and characters like Marvel's Dust, M, and

Faiza Hussain. There has yet to be a perfect representation of what it means to be Muslim in comics, but every new series and every new character adds nuance to that meaning. *Ms. Marvel* is not the end, but the beginning of popular American media incorporating minority identities as leading figures, and, as they continue to do so, the American Dream that Kamala has *redefined* will continue to expand and change, for the better.

Appendix A



Captain Marvel (2012-2013) #17

Appendix B



Ms. Marvel #1

Appendix C



Appendix D



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