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Muslim Young Adult Graphic Novels : Destabilizing Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze common trends in the Muslim Young Adult graphic novels *Huda F Are You?* by Huda Fahmy and the *Ms. Marvel* comics by G. Willow Wilson. The main characters, Huda and Kamala, respectively, struggle to define their own identities beyond being Muslim as well as figuring out who they are, who they want to be, and how they wish to represent themselves. The common themes found within these novels include this question of identity as well as exploring family bonds, navigating romantic interests, and building strong groups of friends. These characters are trying to find a way to incorporate their cultural and religious backgrounds with their American identity without compromising either their faith or quality of life. Examining these trends through the Muslim main characters featured in these graphic novels is worthwhile because it shows how these conventional Young Adult themes can be viewed with religious and cultural lenses, as well as how they can be represented visually in the comic form.

Keywords: Islam, Muslim identity, Graphic Novels, Comics, Young Adult Literature, Huda Fahmy, *Ms. Marvel*, superheroes, Sana Amanat, G. Willow Wilson

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Muslim Young Adult Graphic Novels: Destabilizing Perceptions

by

Sidra Habal

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1. Introduction

When I was growing up, there were no Muslim characters in the books I read for school or for my own enjoyment. Any texts that my family had that pertained to Muslim holidays or culture had to be purchased at specialty shops or from the Mosque, and these books were not American – they had been written and published in other countries. The first Muslim Young Adult novel I ever read was *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah, which was written and published in Australia. While it was fun to read about a Muslim main character, I craved something that reflected my legitimate place as an American and left me feeling like there was a space on my bookshelf that needed to be filled.

I first learned about the *Ms. Marvel* comics while reading an issue of *Teen Vogue* in 2014. As someone who enjoyed watching the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, the possibility of the addition of a Muslim character in the series excited me. (Marvel recently announced that a live action *Ms. Marvel* series is coming to the Disney+ streaming platform on June 8th!). I began to read the comics as they came out and found myself genuinely enjoying them, both for the interesting storylines and for the representation. Kamala and her family are Muslim, but her religion does not cause the main conflicts in the story. Islam is a part of her story without dominating the narrative, which felt more relatable to me because even though my life does not involve fighting villains, it is also not dominated by practicing Islam. Being a Muslim is what guides my actions through life but does not define the rest of my hobbies and interests.

Reading about a Muslim character is not just exciting or beneficial to Muslim people. In the article *Off the Shelves: Looking for Answers to Big Questions: Religion in Current Young Adult Literature*, author Mark Letcher says:

Contemporary young adult literature can also provide excellent opportunities for readers to discover religions and traditions that may differ from their own. Currently, it may be difficult to find a religion that is more misinterpreted and misunderstood than Islam ... Adolescent literature with richly drawn, realistic Muslim characters can counter these perspectives of the Islam faith and reveal to readers the beauty of other cultures. (Letcher 92)

Not only does Muslim Young Adult fiction expose young readers to religions and cultures outside their own, but it also helps them empathize with characters who they may not relate to, which can lead to them doing the same in real life. In the article “Picture This: Using Graphic Novels to Explore Social Justice Issues with Young Adults” authors Kasey L. Garrison and Karen Gavigan state the explicit benefit of diverse narratives within Young Adult graphic novels. They quote Peter Carlson, who argues, “inclusivity can be more pronounced in comics. Words are conceptual, and images are more sensational. When used together, a reader can more readily employ empathy” (qtd. in Garrison 11). They go on to recognize further strengths to pairing a textual narrative with pictures, saying, “The combination of words and images in graphic novels can communicate information and emotions that words alone often cannot” (Garrison/Gavigan 11). The way that any character, place, or object is depicted in a graphic novel is important to the text and in opening readers’ minds to different ways of representing culture or religion.

Huda F Are You? by Huda Fahmy and the *Ms. Marvel* comics by G. Willow Wilson are graphic novels whose main characters deal with issues beyond the stereotypical outcast-ness of being a Muslim in a non-Muslim majority country with significant elements of the population who are outright xenophobic, but they also combat a long history of Islamic characters in representations by non-Muslims. These novels grapple with the question of identity, a recurring

theme in Young Adult texts, as well as with issues of familial, romantic, and platonic relationships. By analyzing various storylines and comparing these novels, this paper aims to show the value in the consumption of stories like this for both Muslim and non-Muslim readers.

2. Questioning Identity – *Huda F Are You?*

Huda F Are You? (2021) by Huda Fahmy is a young adult graphic novel that explores an adolescent woman's journey to self-acceptance, as she figures out what her identity is in the face of religious discrimination. Huda, the main character who is based on Fahmy herself, goes through the teenage crisis of trying to establish who she is and who she wants to be while navigating the rough political climate of being a visibly Muslim woman in America. The story follows Huda starting at a new school after her family moves to Dearborn, Michigan. She begins her journey by searching for friends but finds that she does not know how to connect with others. Huda continually fakes interests to try to get closer to other people with no luck. She eventually genuinely befriends a few people who make up part of the cast of characters for the story. Her mother signs Huda and her sisters up for halaqa (religious lessons) at their Mosque, which she does not enjoy, but learns to accept as part of her routine. She thinks the worst has come to pass when she tells a boy in her class that she likes him but gets rejected. This is nearly forgotten when an older Muslim student at her school is suspected of having a bomb on the premises that turns out to have been a clock. Even so, all the Muslim students at the school are brought into the school psychologist to be questioned. Additionally, one of Huda's teachers has been mistreating her and the other Muslim students, giving them lower grades and disrespectful assignments. Huda tells her mother what has been going on, but when she arranges for them to have a meeting with the principal, Huda throws her mom under the bus so that the treatment in class does not worsen, making things at home rough for Huda. She feels incredibly guilty and makes things

right with her mom by learning to stand up for herself, hatching a plot with her friends to expose the teacher and forcing her into an early retirement.

When asked about her motivation for writing this graphic novel, Fahmy expresses the desire to fill the call for more adolescent literature with realistic Muslim characters: “I guess I just had all this pent-up frustration about how people were getting it wrong; I just wanted a space to express myself freely and tell my story while giving a place for people like me to finally relate to a book. In the beginning, I just wanted a space for people just like me, and slowly that started to become a much bigger thing!” (Yao). Fahmy’s simplistic cartoonish art style, humor, and charming main character create a work that many readers will be able to relate to as the fictional Huda goes through the teenage crisis of self-discovery, all while navigating the tumultuous political climate that is America for Muslim people.

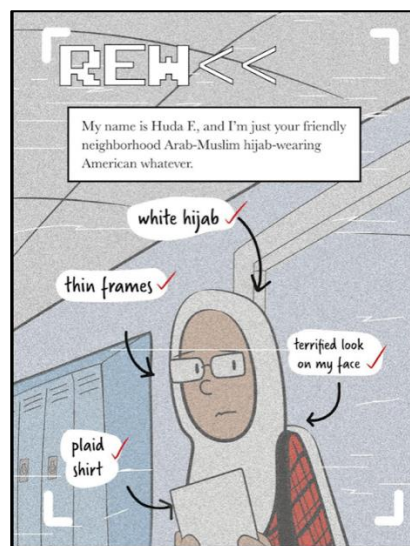


Figure 1.1

Fahmy approaches the concept of identity from several angles. In the beginning of the narrative, Huda reveals that she has no idea who she really is, calling herself “your friendly neighborhood Arab-Muslim hijab-wearing American whatever” (Figure 1.1). The use of

hyphenation here in her introduction to readers illustrates how confused her character is. She does not know what to call herself or how to introduce herself to readers. The addition of “whatever” at the end of her statement can be misconstrued as apathy but shows a deeper lack of clarity that Huda wishes to pass off to her peers as nonchalance. The “friendly neighborhood” part is a reference to Spiderman comics, following the tradition of comic heroes having a title to refer to themselves by. This panel is framed like a VHS tape from the 90’s, with the slight blur to the picture and rewind symbol in the top left. Readers are seeing Huda from a lower angle, where she is seen from mid-torso up, and a doorway, lockers, and ceiling tiles are present in the background, making it clear that this is a high school story. There are arrows pointing to the figure, giving readers visual cues on where they should be looking and what part of Huda’s physicality is important to pay attention to throughout the narrative.

Huda is starting a new school, in a new town where she has no friends, and she is no longer the only hijabi in her classes. Her parents had moved their family of seven to Dearborn with the hopes of fitting into the community and having an easier time in a place that is densely populated with Muslims. Since she is now one hijab-wearing Muslim of many, she can no longer let that determine her identity because, as Fahmy says in an interview for NPR, “she’s been letting other people really use her hijab to define her. And so she kind of internalized that, as well” (Fahmy/Simon). Thus begins her search for what makes her unique beyond the outward expression of her religious beliefs.

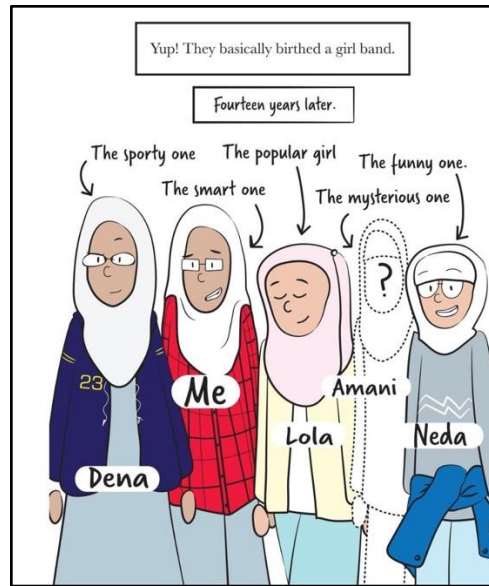


Figure 1.2

Appearances play a prominent role in this narrative, and the way that Huda describes each of her sisters offers an interesting take on identity. She does not delve deeply into the personalities of each sister, choosing instead to keep their characterizations simple and brief, yet making their character designs distinct to help readers differentiate between them. In Figure 1.2, each of the sisters are defined by a single adjective. The outfits they are drawn in here are how they appear throughout the rest of the narrative, excluding Huda, whose change in style becomes part of the story. Huda, labeled as “the smart one,” looks unsure of herself here, with her shoulders bunched up and her face in a sort of grimace. While she may be considered the brain of her family, it seems as though she is uncertain if this is a fitting label or not. Describing each of these characters using a single adjective is both relatable and reductive, indicative of a desire for simplicity that is unattainable. An important detail to note in this panel is that each of her female siblings is depicted as wearing a hijab. Having this be a part of her identity does not help Huda on her journey of self-discovery because, as her sister Neda points out, “You know that wearing hijab is not a personality trait, right?” (Fahmy 46). In typical high school fashion, this

just causes further panic for Huda, because, as Fahmy says in her NPR interview, “she realized...that she couldn't just let this cloth - even though it is very important to her life and is very important to her beliefs, it is not the only thing about her that makes her who she is” (Simon) and she must dig deeper into herself to figure out what kind of labels are appropriate to her.

A turning point for Huda is the realization she comes to after being rejected by a classmate who she confesses her romantic feelings to. She is explaining to her friend, Nabz, how angry she is with herself, though she cannot figure out exactly why, to which her friend responds: “It’s because you feel guilty. You’re conflicted about breaking ‘the rules’ ‘cuz you realized you actually care about ‘the rules.’ And two: you hate that it took giving agency to SOME GUY who isn’t even Muslim to figure out that you care about being Muslim” (Fahmy 121). This event, while embarrassing and unfortunate, was a steppingstone for Huda on her journey of self-discovery. She is beginning to look introspectively, figuring out that she is more than her religion, but that Islam is still important to her.

By the end of the novel, Huda has not exactly figured out who she wants to be. She has ruled out a few options of who she definitely is not, but has come to accept that her path towards identity has just begun. On making mistakes, her friend says that “They'll make you stronger and bring you one step closer to figuring out who you wanna be” (Fahmy 183). So, even though Huda has not decided on a specific identity by the end, it shows readers that it is alright to not know and to try a lot of different things along the way. The fact that she is Muslim, and that being a hijabi will always be a part of her identity, will subject her to microaggressions and other issues, but at the same time she realizes that these clothing choices and experiences does not have to constitute her entire identity.

With this graphic novel, Fahmy smashes the hijab-as-identity stereotype by having Huda explore who she is as a person outside of and alongside her religion. While wearing a hijab is a clear indicator that a woman is of the Muslim faith, it does not have to be her entire identity. Huda's journey is about more than just what she wears, though that is a part of it as well. How she outwardly expresses herself has less to do with who she is and more with how she wants to be seen. It is clear that she cares more about being comfortable than fashionable, and never contemplates taking off her hijab, even in the face of discrimination. The narrative is more about going through different experiences to begin the journey to self-acceptance, even when Huda feels like she does not know how to describe herself as a person.

3. Marvel-ing at a Mainstream Muslim Superhero, *Ms. Marvel*

The *Ms. Marvel* comics, which had their debut in February 2014, follow 16-year-old Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American teen who struggles to balance her family life, school, friends, and newfound superpowers. The character Kamala Khan was co-created by Marvel editors Sana Amanat and Stephen Wacker, author G. Willow Wilson, and artists Adrian Alphona and Jamie McKelvie. Kamala Khan and her family live in Jersey City, New Jersey. Besides being Pakistani and Muslim, Kamala is a huge superhero fan as well as an avid gamer. During this initial comic run, which was released from 2014 to 2018, readers join Kamala on her genesis from an out-of-place teen to a bona-fide Avenger.

Kamala, a first generation American to Pakistani immigrant parents, has powers that first appear when Jersey City is exposed to a Terrigen mist that unlocked the super-genetics of descendants of Inhumans. She immediately begins using her powers for good, trying to help the people of her community, making costly mistakes along the way. Her family, friends, and local religious leader are often the voice of reason, aiding Kamala and her alter-ego both when she

needs help. She also finds herself caught up in the drama and politics of the New York Marvel superheroes, forced to make decisions that affect civilians and go against her idols. Her origin story and superhero problems are like those of other Marvel characters, often drawing comparisons to a figure like Spider-Man. However, due to her identity *under* the mask, Kamala is not the common or “normal” choice to be the lead for her own series of comics. In his essay “Ms. Marvel Is an Immigrant” author Hussein Rashid defines a normal American character as “the ‘all-American’ ideal of the white male, often read as Christian, and at least middle class” going on to explain “[t]his conception of what it means to be American is enshrined in the founding documents of the United States, which privilege race, class, and gender explicitly and establish norms around religious belonging” (Rashid 47). Kamala, being a young, Muslim, Pakistani girl immediately places her outside of the norm. Having different customs than many of her classmates made her feel different long before she was gifted her powers. In the words of Amanat, she is as much a misfit behind the mask as she is with one on.

This notion of Kamala not being like “everyone else” helps to set a new standard for what can be considered normal and:

Simply by choosing a Pakistani American Muslim superhero, the creators of the comic tacitly resist *some* conventional Muslim stereotypes, rejecting the notion that ‘All Muslims are terrorists’ or that Muslims cannot fit into ‘mainstream’ American society or represent its values. Khan’s adventures in teen romance, computer games, and conflict with her teachers make her a ‘normal’ American teen, regardless of her race or religion. No doubt, this portrayal supplies a potential role model for girls in similar circumstances, while also providing white America with a vision of a Muslim heroine who is ‘just like

us' thus combating invidious stereotypes of the 'dangerous' and/or inexplicable 'Other'.

(Dagbovie-Mullins/Berlatsky 73)

The way that these comics portray Islam, and Kamala's connection to it was done tactfully.

While being Muslim is part of her identity, it does not necessarily dominate her character.

Instead, signs and reminders of her faith are realistically distributed throughout the narrative. For the most part, her religious and superhero identities are kept separate, but it is a quote from the Quran that encourages her to do the right thing in the first issue. In this way, Islamic teachings become the basis for her moral compass. Examples like this, coupled with the way she dresses and acts throughout the series, always guided by her faith, shows Islam as a positive and integral part of her identity.

This kind of representation of faith is closer to many American Muslim's real life, and thus becomes more relatable, than many other Muslim characters that can be found in the media. Kamala was created in part because editor Amanat "saw no examples of herself either as a female or as a Muslim when she was growing up. She's already changed that. After a few years at Marvel Entertainment, she was speaking with her boss about her experiences growing up when she had the idea to create a positive Muslim role model for women" (Blankfeld). Author G. Willow Wilson was brought on board to help bring Kamala to life, of which she says, "So it was the first time I'd really been asked to invent a superhero from scratch, and Sana [Amanat] and I both kind of modeled it on...Spider-Man...the average kid who is kind of geeky, who's living a very ordinary life in a lot of ways, who unexpectedly gets super powers...so it was really about celebrating and reinventing a very archetypal story within superhero comics" (Amin 23).

Kamala's story is both familiar and relatable, appealing to fans of the classic superhero origin story (though thankfully without the tragic death of her family) but different because of her other

qualities. While Marvel Comics has been known for challenging societal norms and embracing diversity in its stories, there was never a story about someone like Ms. Marvel. Amanat notes, "We took a big risk because it was very controversial at the time, but it sparked a dialogue about identity and the importance of having actual authentic representation of individuals" (Blankfeld). Kamala serves to fill a specific need for readers to see themselves on the page through her questions of identity that most readers will recognize. Her story displays this from the beginning, when she gets her powers and must make choices about who she will be, both as civilian and superhero.

When she is first exposed to the mist, Kamala has a hallucination where she sees Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America floating before her. They speak to her, quoting Sufi poet Amir Khusro. They have a conversation about who she wants to be and what she wants to look like, at the end of which she finds herself wrapped in a cocoon. Once she emerged from the cocoon looking like Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel, Kamala found herself with the power to polymorph. She can rapidly grow or shrink her body/limbs at will, as well as shapeshift. She can make herself go flat, become stretchy, and change her outward appearance to reflect any image. This comes along with a healing factor, which allows her to not become seriously injured after a battle as long as she has enough food to refuel her energy. Her best friend, boy genius Bruno Carrelli, discovers that she is able to increase or decrease her mass by going through time, borrowing cells from her past or future selves. Rashid tries to explain the connection between her powers and her complicated identity, writing, "As a polymorph, an individual who has the ability to change her physical characteristics, clothing becomes only one layer of meaning for her. Her very body represents her conception of being 'American'" (Rashid 47). Every time Kamala chooses to don her costume, she is making a statement about who she really is. Her ability to

shapeshift, literally shrinking or growing to fit into different places, is a powerful metaphor for how people with multifaceted identities have to change themselves to fit into spaces that were not built to accommodate them. Baldanzi asserts that “Khan reeks down, connects, and channels potentially restrictive identity checkboxes into active, polymorph powers” (Baldanzi 90). Her powers allow her to transcend the need to be fit into an unfit space since she can carve out a new place for herself in society. Instead of using her shapeshifting ability to change how she looks, she uses it to fight crime and help people, showing that she is comfortable in her own skin and in her abilities as the hero of Jersey City.

3.1 Kamala – No Normal



Figure 2.1

Of course, Kamala has to grow into this level of comfort over time. Upon discovering that she has polymorph powers, she uses them to drastically change her appearance. She transforms herself to look like Carol Danvers’ version of Ms. Marvel, the identity she assumed before becoming Captain Marvel. This desire to look like Carol, who as Ms. Marvel had long, flowing blonde hair, a tight and revealing black bodysuit, thigh-high boots, and a bright red sash, is deeply rooted in the belief that she does not fit in at school and that she needs to change how she looks in order to fill the role of “hero.” Kamala literally stepped into Carol’s shoes because that was her example for what a hero was – and what they should look like.

David Higgins sums up this relationship succinctly, writing, “Although the two have had a complicated relationship (it’s always a tricky thing meeting one’s idols) Kamala is a massive Captain Marvel fan (who writes her own very popular Avengers fan fiction on a website called freakingcool.com). She admires Captain Marvel so much that she assumed the mantle of Ms. Marvel. This idolatry does not last long, and neither does the outfit. Upon realizing that dressing in a “politically incorrect” outfit made her feel more exposed than confident, Kamala opts to fashion herself a costume based on the design of a burkini, with a scarf and bangle that emulate the Pakistani culture of her family. The outfit is modest and functional, with the red sleeves and leggings and the blue no-sleeve dress on top, emblazoned with a yellow lightning bolt – Captain Marvel’s colors. This outfit is truer to who she is while still paying homage to her personal inspiration. In their essay “The Transformational Resistance of Ms. Marvel in America” authors Peter E. Carlson and Antero Garcia write about this incident from Issue 1, saying “This first bodily transformation is a subconscious action of social conformity, representing, as G. Willow Wilson reports, ‘the pressure young women feel to live up to unrealistic media images,’ a pressure ‘more intense still for those of minority backgrounds’ (qtd. in Hennon)” (Carlson/Garcia 140). Instead of using her polymorph powers to change her physical features, she uses them to “embiggen” her limbs, stretch into different shapes, or shrink down to a smaller size depending on what the mission requires, signaling her refusal to conform or “shrink” to occupy a space that was not meant for her.

The fact that Kamala keeps her identity as Ms. Marvel a secret adds another layer to the idea of identity in the comics. On top of her intersectionality as a woman, a Pakistani-American, a practicing Muslim, a gamer, a superhero fan, and an overall nerd, she has a secret identity on top of it all. Unlike Tony Stark/Iron Man or Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, she shields her

identity from her community, wishing to only be known as Ms. Marvel. She wears a domino mask, which obscures her features but does not fully cover her face. Rather than a full-coverage mask like the one Spider-Man wears, hers leaves enough of her face visible that it is obvious that she is a person of South Asian descent. She becomes a symbol in her community and a beacon of hope for Jersey City, the city (mostly) thrilled to have a hero among them when trouble comes around.



Figure 2.2

Despite being a literal superhero, Kamala is no stranger to the feeling of displacement when spending time with people who do not understand what it is like to be the child of immigrants. Though her parents and brother were born in Pakistan, Kamala was born in America. Since she grew up in Jersey City, she does not have the same cultural connection to her Pakistani roots as many others in her family do. Her understanding of Islam comes from Sheikh Abdullah's lectures at her local mosque, the Islamic Center of Jersey City, which seems to be a culturally mixed community, since her friend Nakia, who is described as Turkish, also attends lectures and prayer there.

Kamala often butts heads with her parents over their traditional ideals. She also often feels out of place in social settings because of how she dresses. For school and friends, Kamala often dresses in "regular" clothes, meaning more Western things like jeans and t-shirts. For the

mosque, Eid, and her brother's wedding, to name a few, she is wearing shalwar kameez, like she is when visiting family in Karachi, as seen in Figure 2.2. Landis asserts that:

Kamala's 'Americanization' and her resistance to cultural and religious traditions may appeal and resonate broadly to many comic book readers, but especially to the second-generation sons and daughters of brown immigrants who see something of themselves in Kamala and who may at times feel disconnected or 'freakish' in their own right. The isolation that comes from the development of superpowered abilities is not equivalent but certainly akin to the same alienation faced by those who are racially and ethnically marginalized by the dominant US society. Both are forms of marginalization that are lived and embodied by individuals on a daily basis. (Landis 189)

This cultural confusion is one that many young people feel, and it makes Kamala's story that much more relatable. So, not only are her clothes a reflection of this displacement phenomena, but so are her powers. She never feels quite as home as when she is with the Inhumans or the Avengers because she is just a Jersey City superhero. In her civilian life, "Khan...cannot be Pakistani in the same way her parents are, but she is also too ethnic to be considered American" (Dagbovie-Mullins 67), and this dichotomy can be incredibly hard for a young adult to navigate. This forms a parallel between her civilian and superhero identities by showing how she does not quite fit into the typical mold either way.

While Kamala is irrefutably Muslim in the comics, the story is not *about* her being Muslim, it's about her being a superhero who just happens to be Muslim. Higgins remarks, "Kamala's character isn't overdetermined by any single aspect of her identity; she is, instead, the meaningful intersection of all the specific aspects of her social life, from her gender, ethnicity, and religious experience to the quirky character of her very strange local neighborhood in New

Jersey” (Higgins 5-6). To emphasize, she is equal parts Muslim, Pakistani, American, nerd, superhero, New Jerseyan, and teenager – all things that shape her character and make her who she is. Each part is as important and as represented as another and this intersectionality helps to make her a well-rounded and believable character.

3.2 Aamir – Rejection of Norms



Figure 2.3

Kamala’s older brother, Aamir, plays a specific role in the comics, representing a devout Muslim who does not become “radicalized” even when antagonized. Landis describes him as “a devout practitioner of his faith who encourages his sister to attend Mosque and the youth lectures held by Sheik Abdullah more frequently, out of concern for her spiritual well-being. In nearly every panel in which his character is represented, the reader comes to recognize his more traditional garb: a cap, full beard, and long robes” (Landis 191). In Issue 14, Aamir is dressed in a Western style suit with a warm overcoat, on his way to a job interview. He does not get the job, and the only other time we see him in clothes that differ from his usual modest look is when he wears an African boubou for his wedding to an African American convert named Tyesha (which was a way for the creators to subvert the stereotypical idea of racism within South Asian communities).

Aside from his outward appearance, Aamir injects little prayers and religious anecdotes into his normal speech patterns. He is unconcerned about how others perceive him, preoccupied with his spiritual well-being and following his ideals of a pious life.



Figure 2.4

In Volume 4, Aamir is kidnapped by Kamran, another Inhuman who Kamala had a crush on until she found out that he aligned himself with other Inhumans who want to dominate the human race with their powers, rather than protecting it. Kamran hopes to expose Aamir to the Terrigen mist that unlocked both his and Kamala's powers, then recruit him to his cause. However, upon waking up with some kind of forcefield powers (the result of an allergic reaction to something that was not Terrigen mist) Aamir makes it clear that not only will he never support Kamran's cause, but also that he has no interest in being a superhero. Kamran cannot believe that Aamir can be happy living the way he was, saying "How could you possibly have been happy the way you were?! You're a—you're—" to which Aamir responds that he is not ashamed to be a "religious freak" or an "MSA nerd" (Figure 2.3). Later, after he is saved from Kamran by Ms. Marvel and brought to the school for shelter, Kamala tries to convince him that he might like having powers. He once again asserts that he is happy the way he is and that he has no interest in "Avengers gossip" (Figure 2.4). Aamir is confident in his identity as a religious scholar, so

comfortable in his own skin that it makes other people uncomfortable. This panel shows Aamir and Kamala in conversation, where his body language reveals how annoyed he is. Eyes closed and mouth open, he is caught mid-lecture, arm raised as he makes his point. Kamala’s expression appears to be one of disbelief, an outward display of her not being able to understand why anyone would not want to be a superhero. The darker colors and dull tones in this panel emphasize the seriousness of the conversation, though the comment about not reading “Avengers gossip” and his exaggerated reaction can be seen as humorous. Though he does not look particularly happy in this panel, he is clearly impassioned about proving to his sister – and everyone else – that he is just fine with the way he is.



Figure 2.5

In Volume 10, Aamir’s story comes to a satisfying conclusion when he gets the job of Imam after Sheikh Abdullah suffers from a mild heart attack. As can be seen in Figure 2.5, Aamir looks incredibly happy about this development. His life has come together – he has his own little family with his wife and infant son, and now his dream job. Everyone is ecstatic for him because he can now mesh his religious identity with his professional life, enmeshing them to

create a version of himself that is fulfilling physically and spiritually. He did not let being racially profiled or his station as an outcast or misfit make him bitter. He stayed consistent with his identity, and this patience paid off in the end.

3.3 Sheikh Abdullah – Shattering Norms



Figure 2.6



Figure 2.7

The relationship between Kamala and Sheikh Abdullah changes throughout the comics. In the first volume, she is reluctant to go to the mosque for lectures and is sent by her father to speak with the Sheikh as a punishment for sneaking out. Instead of pushing her to admit her guilt or yelling at her, Sheikh Abdullah tells Kamala to be careful, to continue to do good for others, and encourages her to find a mentor/guide to help her. As Landis points out,

The dialogue between Kamala and Sheikh Abdullah serves to ‘correct’ certain misconceptions about Islam, particularly those related to the severity of its teachings and its attitude toward young women ... He encourages Kamala’s role as a superhero and does so through his position as a religious leader and in a decidedly Islamic context, which the reader cannot overlook because both he and Kamala are depicted in traditional dress (headscarf, cap, and salwar kameez) and seated on the floor of the mosque. (190)

Such a scene is important to Kamala’s character development, and it being framed in a religious setting reinforces how vital her Islamic identity is to the story’s social significance. It signals to

readers that this is a safe place of learning for her, not a place to be dreaded or avoided. Sheikh Abdullah fills the role as a kind community leader, whose wisdom and generosity pops up time and again throughout the comics.

By Volume 9, Kamala voluntarily seeks out guidance from Sheikh Abdullah. As seen in Figure 2.6, she rushes into the mosque to find him after experiencing an emotional crisis at the hands of her family friend Kareem and her best friend Bruno. He matches her frantic tone, responding in jest by saying that they would have to call the “haram police” to which she responds in horror. In the next panel (Figure 2.7) he cracks a smile and assures her that he is kidding before offering to talk through the problem with her. The humor is evident in these panels, showing how their relationship has developed enough for him to be comfortable teasing her for being dramatic. This also humanizes the Sheikh, making him less of a religious figure symbol and more of a person who is part of the community as much as Ms. Marvel herself is. He does not admonish her for sinning or berate her. The bright colors and his exaggerated facial expressions that morph to be gentler set the tone for the conversation, showing the way that he is accepting of her problems and plans to guide her the best way he knows how. His patience and understanding are a clear way that the creators tried to subvert readers expectations based on stereotypes. In addition, this interaction shows how Kamala’s faith is getting stronger during her superhero journey, actively seeking out religious counsel rather than running from it.

3.4 Fan Favorite

Upon the comic’s release, *Ms. Marvel* became an instant fan favorite and was well-received critically. As Landis notes, “The first collected volume Ms Marvel, Vol. 1: No Normal won the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Story in 2015, demonstrating that Ms Marvel has left a noticeable impact on the comic and graphic novel community, in spite, or perhaps because, of

her racial, ethnic and religious differences. Notably, Ms Marvel productively uses and reimagines narrative and visual comic book tropes and characters to craft a specifically South Asian/American diasporic text” (Landis 187). Amanat, herself a Muslim woman of color from New Jersey, has found that Kamala’s multifaceted identity is what draws the audience to her so fervently. In the “Superheroes of Tomorrow” panel for the Wall Street Journal, Amanat tells interviewer Christopher John Farley about the impact Ms. Marvel had even before the first comic was released. She said, “when the Ms. Marvel announcement came out, we had this piece of art... and one other piece of art. And we had the most amount of fan art that we had ever seen for a character that no one knew anything about, like we didn't even have one single issue out yet.” Comic fans were desperate for a character like Kamala, a typical misfit, Peter Parker type character who is also a person of color *and* a religious minority. Amanat and Wilson clearly left their marks on the character, bringing her to life in a way that was unique to their experiences, but at the same time is incredibly endearing. Landis writes, “Ms Marvel is noteworthy for not only being a female-created comic in a male-dominated industry, but also for demonstrating how authors and editors often embed something of themselves in their work...Significantly, as a Muslim South Asian/American, Amanat has created a character who, although obviously not exactly like her, does provide something of a heroic counterpart – one which other young Muslim women would also undoubtedly admire” (Landis 188). Having creators who understand the Muslim experience for young women in America and who understand the mechanics necessary for a good superhero comic were the ingredients for the success of this series.

Like any piece of media, this representation is not without its complexities. Giving her a teleporting dog, Lockjaw, as a companion was an interesting choice since many Muslims believe that dogs are not permitted to be kept as pets – their saliva is considered unclean by multiple

denominations. Since Kamala does not really keep him (he mostly just shows up in times of need) then using him for his teleporting abilities can be separated from her Muslim identity. Another anomaly is the existence of characters like Thor and Loki, who are Norse Gods of myth and legend. The creators were able to integrate a Muslim superhero into the Marvel universe without it seeming blasphemous or inappropriate, allowing her to worship her god while acknowledging the existence of these mythological gods as well.

A notable absence in the comics is any mention of the September 11th attacks or hatred against Muslims, especially for people of South Asian descent. While there is the desire for Kamala to fit in with her peers, the closest she gets to being racially profiled is getting patted down by the TSA in the airport after being patted down for having the last name of “Khan.” To make this story about Kamala becoming Ms. Marvel, some things likely did not fit into the narrative.

For a commercial Marvel comic in 2014, it was enough to just have the main character – and the hero of the story – identify as Muslim for the text to break stereotypes. Landis writes, “In Ms. Marvel readers also see the ways that American superhero ideology, often in the form of consumption, knowledge, and fandom, intersects with Islam as part of Kamala’s hybridizing of both her daily and superheroic identities” (190). While as a superhero it is not immediately obvious that she is a Muslim, her character, especially as a civilian practices Islam in a way that is not at all subtle. And while she is not incorporating her faith into her heroic exploits in an obvious way, it can be seen in her outfit as well as in her inner monologue. Faith is what spurred her on to become a hero and what kept her moving forward when things became too difficult to bear. Landis continues, “Ms. Marvel does claim (if sometimes quietly) its Muslim background and framework in a manner that prompts identification, but also critique and political

engagement” (Landis 191). Kamala and her family all demonstrate their own brand of worship, and the creators incorporated religious themes in a way that allows it to be part of the story without overpowering it. While being Muslim is an important aspect of Kamala’s life, it only makes up part of her complicated multifaceted identity.

4. Conclusion

In both *Huda F Are You?* and *Ms. Marvel*, the main characters strive to figure out who they are whilst navigating high school, familial issues, tumultuous friendships, romantic crushes, and hits to the community. While these texts grapple with similar themes, their approaches are different, as well as their art styles and specific subgenres. Even still, the common themes between these novels are notable and important to recognize.

Huda and Kamala each have a complicated relationship with their mothers. They struggle to understand the choices that the women make and what they think is best for the family. In each novel, the fact that the parents are immigrants plays a part in the disconnect between mother and daughter. Ultimately, they come to an understanding and are able to lean on each other to stand up for what is right. The fathers play less of a significant role in each of these stories, serving as more of a guiding hand who is not as involved. (This is less true for Kamala, though this may be because her comic run spans several volumes, while Huda’s is limited to one.) Kamala’s father is more like an inspirational voice, while her mother is the first person who she tells about her secret identity (even though Muneeba had figured it out long before). Parents are an important presence (or absence) in the lives of any teenager, and these novels are no exception.

Siblings also provide a certain type of support to the main characters. Huda looks to her older sister for guidance and faces judgement from her younger sister. The tough love and constant companionship of her sisters helps Huda work through the internal and external struggles she

faces at a new school. Kamala's relationship with her older brother is typical of siblings where they love each other and would protect one another from harm, but tease and insult each other when given the opportunity. He represents the calm to Kamala's storm and often serves to guide her in his own way.

Throughout each of these narratives, Huda and Kamala build themselves a core group of friends. Having this strong, diverse group of people to support them gets these girls through their hard times, helps them see when they are wrong, and are there for them when they need it the most. Huda's friends provide her with the social circle she needs outside of school as well as a support system within school for combating Islamophobia and boredom alike. Kamala's friends literally go into battle for her when she gets overwhelmed as well as providing a normal outlet for her beyond her superhero antics. Developing these friendships and chronicling how they evolve over the course of the narrative give the texts a way to connect to readers who feel like they want to fit in and belong the same way the main characters do.

Huda and Kamala also both struggle with reconciling the attraction they feel for a person of the opposite gender and their religion. Their parents, elders, and religious leaders have drilled into them for years that they should stay away from boys until it is time to get married. However, this is not practical advice for teenagers in America, especially those attending mixed public schools. The way that these girls navigate their feelings while maintaining friendships and trying to uphold their religious morals is part of their journey to self-discovery and shows readers that making a mistake is not the end of the world.

When contextualizing the Muslim identity of these characters, their physicality plays a huge role. Ultimately, both Huda and Kamala choose how they want to dress, either as schoolgirl or superhero, leaving themselves vulnerable to unfavorable interpretation by others. In doing

this, they are signifying a deeper connection with their spirituality as well as an understanding that by going against the norm, they are opening themselves up to being seen as different. In either case, the girls come to see this as a link to their family's immigrant cultures, not to mention their decidedly Muslim identities.

Another way that these texts are connected is in the way that the main characters feel a reluctance to join their religious communities in the beginning of their narratives. Huda does not want to spend her time in halaqa, seeing it as an extension of school while at the same time casting her as an outsider in the community. By saying that the other girls know more than her and are already familiar with each other shows how isolated she feels inside what is supposed to be a communal religious space. Kamala shows the same kind of reluctance to joining Sheikh Abdullah's youth lectures, complaining that it can be hard to focus when she is so separated from the men's side of the mosque. This shows an awareness for the types of boundaries that women are forced to overcome when seeking to learn more about their religion. Having these characters, who display to readers as being strong of faith, feel ostracized and othered within what could be assumed as a safe space shows an awareness of these nuances by the authors. By showing these imperfections and internal issues, they are also showing that like any young people looking to be accepted into a group, they can be made to feel inferior or discouraged in places that are often painted by community members as being all-accepting and harmonious.

One of the major differences between Kamala's story and Huda's story is that Kamala is a superhero, while Huda is not. This distinction means that despite all their similarities, the texts deal with each of these common themes in different ways. Huda experiences everything literally – nothing is metaphorical. When her and her friends and family deal with discrimination or Islamophobia, there is no metaphorical buffer or monstrous representation of the problems.

Kamala's story, however, contains several metaphorical representations of real-world issues that present themselves as supervillains or magical problems. While both characters move through their worlds in ways that are brave and exploratory, the issues themselves are dissimilar because of the different subgenres of graphic novels – a superhero comic vs. a semi-autobiographical graphic novel.

Presenting these narratives as graphic novels/comics means that readers consume them in a different way than if they were traditional novels. The use of colors, facial expressions, and some panels not having words at all relay messages in a visual way, guiding readers through the story with those visual cues. Graphic novels appeal to a wider audience because it is an incredibly digestible form of media. It is especially popular with young adults who may not enjoy or be capable of reading longer works of literature. Sometimes, comics are just fun to read.

Reading books about characters who went through things that I had, or could have, went through made me realize that my experiences are not as isolated as I had thought growing up. Looking at these texts through a more academic lens forced me to weigh the merits of stories like these becoming more mainstream as well as possible downsides. Not only that, but I was able to see the duality of stories like Huda's or Kamala's, where they are allowed to be teenagers who encounter problems that are familiar to Young Adult audiences but that are also unique to the situations of those who fit into their religious and ethnic identities as well. Is this kind of representation enough? For someone like me who very rarely finds a character who they can see themselves in, it's certainly a start.

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