

# Debunking Marvel Comics' First Pakistani-American Born Muslim Female Superhero: Reading Religion, Race and Gender in *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan)

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, we have witnessed a comic book renaissance. The impact of this renaissance can be described as three-fold. First, we have seen comic books emerge as a compelling component of popular culture; second, as a “hybrid” form of texts and graphics, comic books have attained a new level of literary acceptance; and third, we have seen the advent of comic studies as an academic discipline in various higher education institutions. In addition, by drawing on myth and history, fantasy and reality, comic books have reproduced society’s values, ideals, prejudices, and aspirations, thereby producing various ideological contestations. It is within this context that Marvel Comics’ latest creation *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan), portraying a first-generation American Muslim female teenager, born of Pakistani immigrants as the legendary Ms. Marvel – an American superhero – offers a unique opportunity to unpack the socio-cultural and political nuances embedded in comic books. Hence, by drawing on *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) as a case study, this paper seeks to provide a critique of the intersections between religion, race and gender in contemporary comic books. To do this, we employ “social constructionism” as an interpretive and analytical theoretical approach to a selection of scenes from the *Ms. Marvel* corpus. Our hypothesis is that the intersections between religion, race and gender as “played” out in *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) serve to foreground a socially constructed reality of religious (Islamic) bigotry; immigrant socio-cultural and political assimilation

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predispositions; and gender and power disparities embedded in both Muslim immigrant worldviews (internal) and American social ideals (external).

**Keywords:** religion, race, gender, contemporary comics, popular culture, social constructionism

## Introduction

The past decade has witnessed what Corey Blake<sup>3</sup> and David Betancourt<sup>4</sup> have aptly categorised as the “comic book renaissance.” However, this renaissance has not been limited to its traditional locality within America and Europe. India, for example has its annual Comic Con<sup>5</sup> in Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Pune. Japan has seen its traditional Japanese design comics – i.e. *Manga*, gain popularity beyond its domestic borders to establish an international market.<sup>6</sup> Israel’s comic book industry gained much recognition when Asaf Hanuka won the prestigious Eisner Award in 2016 for his comic book entitled *The Realist*.<sup>7</sup> Africa has also witnessed a resurgence in locally produced comic books, with the birthing of new African superheroes.<sup>8</sup> The Nigerian-based Republic Comic published a series on “Hilda Avonomemi Moses,” a woman based in the remote village of Edo, who possesses the power to see spirits. Roye Okupe, a Nigerian-based author, created “Wale Williams,” a young man who possesses a cryptic nanosuit that gives him superhuman abilities and allows him to challenge extremist organisations within his city. Loyiso Mkhize, a South African-based author, created the superhero “Kwezi” who resides in modern-day Johannesburg Gold City, and is in search of his African heritage.

The impact of this global comic book renaissance can be articulated as three-fold. First, comic books have emerged as a compelling component of popular culture. Tom DiChristopher notes that in recent years we have

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<sup>3</sup> Corey Blake, “The Comic Book Renaissance,” *Fox News*, 2 March 2011, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/4564174/?#sp=show-clips>

<sup>4</sup> David Betancourt, “Are we living in a comic renaissance? The new publisher is betting that’s the case,” *The Washington Post*, 6 January 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2016/01/06/are-we-living-in-a-comics-renaissance-this-new-publisher-is-betting-thats-the-case/?utm\\_term=.a5b5479779ba](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2016/01/06/are-we-living-in-a-comics-renaissance-this-new-publisher-is-betting-thats-the-case/?utm_term=.a5b5479779ba)

<sup>5</sup> Comic Con = Comic-Based Convention.

<sup>6</sup> See Elisabetta Porcu, “Down-to-Earth Zen: Zen Buddhism in Japanese Manga and Movies,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 16 (2015): 37-50. Porcu’s thesis focuses on the incorporation of Zen Buddhist elements within a thriving local and global market of *manga* (Japanese comics) and *anime* (Japanese animation movies).

<sup>7</sup> Asaf Hanuka, *The Realist*. (Los Angeles: Archaia, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> The term “superhero” is employed in this paper to refer to both “male” and “female” – i.e. gender neutral.

seen comic book sales flourish in both print and digital mediums.<sup>9</sup> Sandra Nygaard contends that this “once secret subculture” has become mainstream, inspiring a number of profitable movies.<sup>10</sup> Nygaard further argues that what we are currently witnessing is a revival of the twentieth-century American popular culture, with the birth of home-grown superheroes such as “Superman.”<sup>11</sup> Brian Cogan and Tony Kelso additionally claim that comic books “have long been indicators of popular culture” and since its advent, have “reacted to history” and served as “keen observers and social commentators.”<sup>12</sup> Second, comic books have attained a new level of literary acceptance. After more than two decades since Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*<sup>13</sup> received the renowned literary Pulitzer Prize in 1992, we are now witnessing a renewed recognition of comic books and graphic novels in the literary space. In 2012, two graphic works were shortlisted for the Costa Literary Awards. The first was Joff Winterhart’s *Days of the Bagnold Summer*,<sup>14</sup> and the second was Mary Talbot’s *Dotter of Her Father’s Eyes*.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, John Lewis and Andrew Aydin’s graphic novel *March: Book Three*<sup>16</sup> received the National Book Award, thereby reaffirming the return of comic books and graphic novels to the literary space. Aaron Meskin further claims that while there are many arguments for and against comic books as literature, we need to see comic books as a “literary-hybrid”, i.e. an amalgam of “art” (aesthetics) and “text” (literary discourse), which “possess some of the kinds of values that great literary works possess”, i.e. “creative, original, well-structured and unified.”<sup>17</sup> A noteworthy example, which bares contextual relevance for this paper is *Persepolis*, a graphic autobiography by Marjane Satrapi, which portrays her life trajectory from early childhood to adulthood in Iran

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<sup>9</sup> Tom DiChristopher, “Comic Books Buck Trends as Print and Digital Flourish,” *CNBC*, 5 June 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/05/comic-books-buck-trend-as-print-and-digital-sales-flourish.html>

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Nygaard, “Comics’ Fantastic Influence on U.S.,” *Chicago Tribune*, 17 August 2003, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2003-08-17/news/0308170395\\_1\\_comic-book-frederic-wertham-american-splendor](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2003-08-17/news/0308170395_1_comic-book-frederic-wertham-american-splendor). Movies based on comic books such as “Dare Devil,” “Avengers,” “Spiderman,” and “Wonder Woman” feature within this category of “profitable” movies.

<sup>11</sup> Nygaard, “Comics’ Fantastic Influence on the U.S.”

<sup>12</sup> Brian Cogan and Tony Kelso, *Encyclopedia of Politics, the Media and Popular Culture*. (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 225-7.

<sup>13</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Joff Winterhart, *Days of the Bagnold Summer*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Mary M Talbot, *Dotter of Her Father’s Eye*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, *March: Book Three*. (Marietta, Georgia: Top Shelf Productions, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Aaron Meskin, “Comics as Literature?” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 3 (2009): 220.

during and after the 1979 Islamic revolution.<sup>18</sup> Third, we have seen the advent of “comic studies” as an academic discipline in various higher education institutions.<sup>19</sup> For example, the University of Florida hosts an annual conference on comics and a peer-reviewed open access journal called *ImageText*,<sup>20</sup> dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of comics. The University of Oregon offers interdisciplinary courses on comic studies that focus on “an introduction to comic studies,” “art and gender,” “comparative comics,” and the “history of Manga.” Portland State University also offers an interdisciplinary comic studies programme that focuses on both theory and practice within their contemporary literature niche.

In addition to the above three developments, the past decade has also seen comic books emerge as a critical discourse space through its emulation of society’s values, ideals, prejudices and aspirations,<sup>21</sup> thereby providing social commentary and desirability for a variety of readers with varying ideological stances. Among the many social issues addressed are three notable reoccurring themes.

The first theme is *religion*. Religion has been a dominant feature in many comic books such as *Daredevil*,<sup>22</sup> created by Stan Lee, *Preacher*,<sup>23</sup> created by Garth Ennis, and *Watchmen*,<sup>24</sup> created by Alan Moore. However, historical events stemming from post 9/11, the Arab Spring, and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) have brought to the fore the rapid integration of Islam into the comic book industry. The introduction of Islam within the comic book space, as observed by Jehanzeb Dar, has been one based on “extremely stereotypical and insidious representations of Middle Easterners,” in which they are often portrayed as “villains” and “terrorists,” “bearded-men” with “turbans,” reciting “Quranic verses” and “inciting the name of Allah.”<sup>25</sup> As Sophia Arjana observes, “Muslims have provided a source of entertainment for Americans situated in stereotyping that is

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<sup>18</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> The rise of comic books produced within Africa creates new opportunities for comic studies within Africa.

<sup>20</sup> Anastasia Ulanowicz, ed. “ImageText Interdisciplinary Comic Studies.” <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/>

<sup>21</sup> The recent developments within the comic book industry must be understood against the background of a transitioning industry that responds to the broader socio-political and cultural advances, both domestically and globally. It is through these transitions and the strategic responses that the comic book industry is able to leverage the market.

<sup>22</sup> Stan Lee, *Daredevil*. (New York: Marvel Comics, 1964-2016).

<sup>23</sup> Garth Ennis, *Preacher*. (New York: Vertigo, DC Comics, 1995-2000).

<sup>24</sup> Alan Moore, *Watchmen*. (New York: DC Comics, 1986-1987).

<sup>25</sup> Jehanzeb Dar. “Holy Islamophobia, Batman! Demonization of Muslims and Arabs in Mainstream American Comic Books.” *Counterpoints*, no. 346 (2010): 99-110.

communicated in a violent and sensual imagery.”<sup>26</sup> One noteworthy example is Frank Miller’s *Holy Terror*, which was a popular but very negative graphic novel about Islam.<sup>27</sup> Despite these ideological representations, we have also seen attempts of a counter-representation. For example, Naif al-Mutawa’s comic book series called *The 99*<sup>28</sup> seeks to portray an alternate generation of young Muslim superheroes that battle extremism. Marvel Comics have also recently produced a few Muslim female superheroes such as “Sooraya Qadir” (*Dust*), an adolescent Sunni Muslim girl who possesses the power to turn herself into a sand-like substance; and “Dr. Faiza Hussain” (*Excalibur*), a Muslim female doctor based in London, who possesses the power to engage with the human body at a subatomic level.

The second theme is *race*. In an article entitled “Why comic books are more radical than you think?”<sup>29</sup> Natalie Haynes argues that comic books “continue to blaze a trail across pop culture, reflecting the societies they emerge from” and its “nuanced social complexity.” By drawing on an issue of *Batman* (*Batman: A Simple Case*<sup>30</sup>) opening with “the stark image of a black boy lying on the ground” after “he was shot dead by a white police officer.” Haynes argues that comic books are “fighting important fights” such as “America’s thorniest contemporary problems: institutional racism.”<sup>31</sup> Marc Singer in his article entitled “Black Skins and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race” further posits that “comic books, and particularly the dominant genre of superhero comic books, have proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race.”<sup>32</sup> Singer contends that the evolution of superheroes such as “Black Lightning” and “Black Panther” are “minority superheroes,” who are “marked purely for their race” and their trajectory of “exclusion.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, Joseph Darowski, in his book entitled *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*, claims that most of the heroic superheroes are “white male,” whereas the villains are “racially and ethnically

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<sup>26</sup> Sophia R Arjana, *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism and Popular Culture*. (New York: Lexington Books, 2018), xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Miller, *Holy Terror*. (Burbank: Legendary Comics, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Naif Al-Mutawa, *The 99*. (Kuwait: Teshkeel Comics, 2007-2014).

<sup>29</sup> Natalie Haynes, “Why comic books are more radical than you think.” *BBC Culture*, November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20151105-why-comic-books-are-more-radical-than-you-think>

<sup>30</sup> Brian Azzarello, *Batman*, #44, “A Simple Case.” (New York: DC Comics, 2015.)

<sup>31</sup> Natalie Haynes, “Why comic books are more radical than you think.”

<sup>32</sup> Marc Singer, “Black Skins and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race.” *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (2002): 107.

<sup>33</sup> Singer, “Black Skins and White Masks,” 107.

diverse.”<sup>34</sup> Darowski substantiates this by arguing that while the themes explored in the X-Men series condemn prejudice and discrimination, “the actual characters used often portray the heroism of white characters with the threat coming from minority characters.”<sup>35</sup>

The third theme is *gender*. In terms of gender representation in comic book characters, Amanda Shendruk argues that female characters appear less often than male characters in superhero comics.<sup>36</sup> Shendruk further contends that “the less-physical powers – such as ‘empathy,’ ‘intellect’ and ‘telepathy’ – tend to be represented among female characters,” whereas the “highly physical powers” are attributed to male superheroes.<sup>37</sup> In order to address this historic gender bias, Nathan Reese notes that there is a growing cohort of female writers and creators challenging the gender stereotypes by producing counter narratives through new comics such as *Wonder Woman*, *Bat Girl*, *Pretty Deadly*, and *She-Hulk*.<sup>38</sup> In addition to the repositioning of women in comic books, by drawing on DC Comic’s *Midnighter*,<sup>39</sup> Haynes states that comic books are taking a more positive position on sexuality with its positive take on the life of an active gay male.<sup>40</sup> Brian Mitchell Peters in an article entitled “Qu(e)rying Comic Book Culture and Representations of Sexuality in Wonder Woman,”<sup>41</sup> claims that “comic books mark a pertinent role in the formation of ideology and the young,” with its “crystallization of ideas both in surface and subtext.” Peters argues that “[m]any young people who will later identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or queer, zone in on comics because these magazines articulate a space for queer play.”<sup>42</sup>

It is within this context that we draw upon Marvel Comics’ latest creation, *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan), which offers an intersection of the three themes identified above. The portrayal of Kamala Khan – an American born Muslim female teenager of Pakistani descent – as the new Ms.

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<sup>34</sup> Joseph Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Darowski, “X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor,” 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> Amanda Shendruk, “Analysing the Gender Representation of 34, 476 Comic Book Characters.” *The Pudding*, 2017, <https://pudding.cool/2017/07/comics/>

<sup>37</sup> Shendruk, “Analysing the Gender Representation of 34, 476 Comic Book Characters.”

<sup>38</sup> Nathan Reese, “Wonder Women: How Female Characters and Creators are Battling to Make Comics Better”. *Complex*, 2015. <http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2015/02/race-and-gender-in-comic-books>

<sup>39</sup> Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch, *Midnighter*. (New York: DC Comics, 1998-2016).

<sup>40</sup> Haynes. “Why comic books are more radical than you think.”

<sup>41</sup> Brian Mitchell Peters, “Qu(e)rying Comic Book Culture and Representations of Sexuality in Wonder Woman.” *Comparative Literature and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2003): 1-9.

<sup>42</sup> Peters, “Qu(e)rying Comic Book Culture,” 3.

Marvel, sees the first Muslim female superhero to headline her own comic book series. This portrayal serves to further juxtapose the historically dominant white male narrative, with “Kamala Khan” as the symbolic embodiment of the historically underrepresented group (i.e. Muslim-Pakistani-immigrant-female). While the fictional characteristics and abilities of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel serves to challenge the stereotypical representations of “female embodiment” in comic books, there is, in addition, a deeper synthesis of interpersonal relations, social dynamics and socio-cultural relations that underpins the seven volumes dating 2014-2017. Hence, by drawing on *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) as a case study, this paper seeks to provide a critique of the intersections between *religion*, *race*, and *gender* in contemporary comic books. In order to achieve this, we employ “social constructionism” as an interpretive and analytical theoretical approach to a selection of scenes drawn across the seven volumes. In considering the current literature on *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan), this paper offers an important contribution to the historical contextualisation of the knowledge produced and symbolically embodied through historical representations of the individual and society.

## **Theoretical Approach: Social Constructionism**

Let us begin by briefly contextualising how “social constructionism” is applied in this paper. Kenneth Gergen articulates social constructionism as being primarily concerned with explaining the processes by which people “come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live.”<sup>43</sup> According to Gergen, social constructionism attempts to “vivify common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be directed to them.”<sup>44</sup> For Tom Andrews, social constructionism is primarily concerned with the “nature and construction of knowledge” and “how it emerges” and “comes to have significance for society” – i.e. how “individuals or groups of individuals define this reality.”<sup>45</sup> Another perspective articulated by Alexandra Galbin is that social constructionism is primarily concerned with the artifacts (knowledge/concepts) that are created through social interactions of a group, and a reality constructed

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<sup>43</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, “Social Constructionist Inquiry: Context and Implications.” In *The Social Construction of the Person*, ed. K.E. Davis, Springer Series in Social Psychology. (New York: Springer, 1985), 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Gergen, “Social Constructionist Inquiry: Context and Implications,” 4.

<sup>45</sup> Tom Andrews. “What is Social Constructionism?” *The Grounded Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2012): 39.

through a process of cultural consensus.<sup>46</sup> This is underpinned by Gergen's thesis that "the terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people."<sup>47</sup> In the context of this paper, we employ Vivien Burr's theorising of social constructionism. Burr states that while there is no "single" definition of social constructionism, there are four key assumptions that underpin any social constructionist approach.<sup>48</sup>

The first key assumption is that social constructionism takes a "critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves."<sup>49</sup> Within this assumption, Burr theorises that a social constructionist approach should be critical of the position that "conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world."<sup>50</sup> This implies that the categories, which we use to interact and understand the world we live in as human beings, might not necessarily reflect the real divisions of society. The second key assumption is that "the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific."<sup>51</sup> For Burr, this implies that ways of understanding the world are not only specific to particular cultures and historical periods, they are also "products of that culture and history, dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time."<sup>52</sup> The third key assumption is that knowledge of the world is constructed by people and between people through daily interactions, where in the "course of social life these versions of knowledge become fabricated." For Burr, this implies that what is regarded as "truth," varies historically and cross-culturally.<sup>53</sup> Finally, the fourth key assumption is that "knowledge and social action go together," with each construction inviting different patterns of social action. For Burr, "constructions of the world are therefore also bound up with power relations," as "they have implications for what is permissible for different people to do, and how they may legitimately treat others."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Alexandra Galbin, "An Introduction to Social Constructionism," *Social Research Reports* 26 (2014): 83.

<sup>47</sup> Gergen, "Social Constructionist Inquiry: Context and Implications," 5.

<sup>48</sup> Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism*. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 2.

<sup>49</sup> Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 5.



Hence, Burr's basic theorising of social constructionism is that our knowledge is not a direct perception of reality; instead, we construct our own versions of reality as a culture and society within specific historical contexts.<sup>55</sup> This "constructed" knowledge is derived from looking at the world through certain perspectives and interests. By applying Burr's key assumptions in this paper, we foreground three inferences for a social constructionist approach. First, since the social constructionist approach analyses categories of difference as fluid, dynamic and dependent upon cultural and historical contexts, the existing inequalities that are perpetuated in society and emulated in comic books must be challenged. Second, by focusing on the processes through which inequalities and power relations produce religious, racial, and gender difference, a social constructionist approach must analyse the internal and external constructions of minorities and the marginalised as "subaltern" (an inferior subject). Third, a social constructionist approach must analyse the categorical underpinning of inequalities in society produced through unequal systems of knowledge and power that are also emulated in comic books.

It is against this theoretical background that we now turn to a critique of the intersections between religion, race, and gender in contemporary comic books, by drawing on *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) as a case study.

## **Case Study – Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)**

Marvel Comic's latest creation, *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan), sparked one of the most critical debates in the comic book industry, i.e. one of "representation." The adoption of a sixteen-year-old Pakistani-American Muslim female teenager as the legendary Ms. Marvel – a character previously played by a local American white blonde female, Carol Danvers, who now goes by the alias of Captain Marvel – has raised critical questions of religious, racial, and gender representation in terms of content and the assumed audience in the comic book industry. Miriam Kent argues that "due to mainstream comics' history of framing women within hegemonic ideologies, Kamala Khan represents a break from tradition."<sup>56</sup> Kent further contends that the adoption of Kamala Khan in the mainstream comic superhero genre, sees a breakthrough for the representation of Muslim women in the West, more specifically those of

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<sup>55</sup> Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Miriam Kent, "Unveiling Marvels: *Ms. Marvel* and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine." *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 3 (2015): 523.

colour.<sup>57</sup> Kent attributes this conscientious movement towards redressing issues of inclusion and intersectionality to the creative innovation of writer G. Willow Wilson (an American Muslim) and editor Sana Amanat (a Pakistani-American). In an interview on *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, Amanat noted that while *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) draws much from her own personal contestations of growing up as a Pakistani-American Muslim female teenager, the spawning of “Kamala Khan” as *Ms. Marvel* draws largely from a global sub-conscious desire for representation – i.e. in terms of Muslim women, marginalised females and those underrepresented.<sup>58</sup> Despite the many praises for women writing, reading, and the embodiment of a subaltern voice in *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan), Shenila Khoja-Moolji and Alyssa Niccolini raise an important critique in their article entitled “Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Femininities in *Ms. Marvel*.”<sup>59</sup> Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini argue that while *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) aims to produce a “disruption” to Islamophobia and xenophobia, in order to produce such disruption, it relies upon and reproduces stereotypical conceptualisations of Muslim masculinities defined by conservative Muslim men.<sup>60</sup> Hence, this sees a “complex and unstable” entanglement of religion (Islam), race (identity), and gender in *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan).<sup>61</sup>

In order to engage these issues further, in the following sub-sections, we provide an analysis of the social constructions of religion, race, and gender by drawing on selective scenes across the several volumes. While we categorically label each social construction as either religion, race, or gender, the scenes we draw upon for our analysis demonstrate an intersection of these constructs.

## Social Construction 1: Religion (Islam)

The premiere of *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) sets the thematic context for the comic book series. It portrays Kamala Khan gazing at a piece of bacon (which is taboo according to Islamic law) in a Jersey City deli saying, “I

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<sup>57</sup> Kent, “Unveiling Marvels: *Ms. Marvel* and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine,” 523.

<sup>58</sup> Sana Amanat, “Interview”. *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWxWwewXJbU>

<sup>59</sup> Shenila Khoja-Moolji and Alyssa Niccolini, “Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Femininities in *Ms. Marvel*.” *Girlhood Studies* 8, no. 3 (2015): 24.

<sup>60</sup> Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, “Comics as Public Pedagogy,” 26.

<sup>61</sup> Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, “Comics as Public Pedagogy,” 26.

just want to smell it, delicious, delicious infidel meat.”<sup>62</sup> The counter response from her close friend, Bruno Carrelli, who works as a cashier in the deli, captures the continuing challenge of “principles” that will confront Kamala Khan throughout the series to “either eat the bacon or stick to your principles.”<sup>63</sup> While the writer, G. Willow Wilson, begins with a simple issue of Islamic dietary practices as a point of contestation, the second page introduces the reader to the controversial issue of the headscarf (*hijab*) and misconceptions in society. The reader is introduced to Zoe Zimmer, a tall, blonde, attractive French teenager who is a classmate of Kamala Khan. She confronts Nakia Bahadir, a Muslim Turkish immigrant and close friend of Kamala Khan, on wearing her headscarf. Zoe comments, “Your headscarf is so pretty, Kiki [Nakia]. I love that color. But I mean nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody’s going to like honour kill you? I’m just concerned.”<sup>64</sup> Zoe’s comments and satire on the use of the headscarf by Muslim women reveals a level of ignorance. However, if we deconstruct this scene, then we understand the social construction of this intended ignorance more meaningfully. First, the statement is made by an individual of French origin, which leads the reader to position the satire within the broader socio-cultural and political discourse of the Muslim veil in France and broader Europe. Second, Zoe’s articulation of “father” and “honour killing” is linked to Euro-centric sentiments that the veil is a symbol of “patriarchal” oppression. Third, to counter this current position of thought, Nakia’s response, “actually my dad wants me to take it off,”<sup>65</sup> provides a rebuttal to the patriarchal construct, by (re)positioning the wearing of the veil by Muslim women as one of choice and a symbol of modesty and self-preservation of religious identity. Nakia’s rebuttal echoes the sentiments of many Muslim women captured by Hanna Ingber in her article “Muslim Women on the Veil” in the *New York Times*: “[I]t reminds me of who I am, my veil never stopped me from doing anything, it makes me feel confident, having the choice made me feel empowered.”<sup>66</sup> By drawing on the issue of the “veil,” Wilson is able to expose her readers to the socio-cultural challenges confronting Muslim women in society, and simultaneously offer the two positions “for” and “against” the veil.

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<sup>62</sup> Willow G. Wilson, Adrian Alphona and Ian Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal.” New York, NY: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., a Subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment, LLC, (2014), 1.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 1.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 2.

<sup>65</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 2.

<sup>66</sup> Hanna Ingber, “Muslim Women on the Veil,” *New York Times* (2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/28/world/muslim-women-on-the-veil.html>

However, Wilson does not yield with her critique of the challenges confronting Muslim women in contemporary society. In Volume 1, Issue 3, “The Side Entrance,” Wilson shifts to an internalisation of the challenges confronting Muslim women, by foregrounding the issue of gender segregation in mosques. Wilson sets the scene with Kamala Khan attending a Saturday Youth Lecture delivered by Sheikh Abdullah at the Islamic Masjid of Jersey City.<sup>67</sup> The graphic artist portrays an image of young boys sitting around Sheikh Abdullah, listening to the lecture, while a group of young girls sit behind a non-fixed partition wall listening to the lecture. The non-fixed partition wall creates a “segregated” section, allowing Kamala Khan and Nakia to have a private conversation. Sheikh Abdullah chastises the conversing girls, “Sisters! No talking during the lecture, please.”<sup>68</sup> Kamala Khan responds to Sheikh Abdullah, “S-sorry, Sheikh Abdullah, but it is really hard to concentrate when we can’t be seen.” This opens the space for a discourse on “gender segregation in mosques.”<sup>69</sup> A dismayed Sheikh Abdullah responds to Kamala Khan, “Sister Kamala! How glad I am that you’ve joined us today. The partition and side entrance for women are there to preserve your modesty and dignity.”<sup>70</sup> Kamala Khan responds, “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?”<sup>71</sup> Sheikh Abdullah responds, “Yes, but those were blessed times, free from today’s scandal and temptation.”<sup>72</sup> Through this scene, Wilson is able to immerse the reader into the dispute of gender segregated spaces in mosques. By counter-positioning Kamala Khan with Sheikh Abdullah, Wilson is able to create a “reflective space” between the traditional male dominant views espoused by Sheikh Abdullah and the more liberal position taken by Muslim feminist movements. The social construction of this scene is further enhanced by visually depicting Kamala Khan’s brother, Aamir Khan, as stunned by his sister questioning Sheikh Abdullah on the segregation of women in mosques, and the deep silence and meditation of the young girls surrounding Kamala Khan and Nakia during the lecture. In this instance, Kamala Khan represents the emerging subaltern voice that is breaking with tradition. A reader familiar with the American social context, would be able to draw a parallel between Kamala Khan’s

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<sup>67</sup> Willow G. Wilson, Adrian Alphona and Ian Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #003, “Side Entrance”. New York, NY: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., a Subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment, LLC, 2014, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #003, “Side Entrance,” 6.

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #003, “Side Entrance,” 6.

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #003, “Side Entrance,” 7.

<sup>71</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #003, “Side Entrance,” 7.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #003, “Side Entrance,” 7.

questioning of Sheikh Abdullah and the 2010 protest led by Fatima Thompson and twenty other women, who prayed directly behind the men instead of in a segregated space for women at the Islamic Center of Washington, DC.<sup>73</sup>

In all three scenarios, we find the use of religion as a social construction of “us” and “other”/“them.” It might be more apt at this point to turn to Jan Platvoet’s operational definition of religion as the fulfillment of social order, social cohesion, and stability in society.<sup>74</sup> According to Platvoet, religion is a “social institution” consisting of four common elements: (a) representations; (b) social relations (or social organisations); (c) attitudes and emotions; and (d) behaviour.<sup>75</sup> Platvoet further distinguishes this as “visible manifestations” through “actual behaviour,” “specific places” or “buildings,” and “dress” or “insignia;” and “invisible manifestations” that are mental constructions such as “representations, relationships (or networks), statuses, attitudes, norms, expectations, interests, and emotions.”<sup>76</sup> This definition is important to the study of religion in popular culture, since it not only embodies the structure of religion but also its impact on those who participate in it.

## **Social Construction 2: Race (Identity)**

Let us now turn to the issue of race. One of the positive attributes of *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) is how Wilson manages to construct an “inclusive” narrative around racial diversity. Wilson brings to the fore, characters that are of Pakistani, French, Turkish, Italian, and American origin, thereby (re)affirming the racial diversity and multi-culturalism of the American society. Noah Berlatsky emphasises the importance of *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) within the broader race discourse in comic books by drawing on the following two points. First, Berlatsky argues that by positioning a dark-skinned Kamala Khan as the superhero, it makes the racial subtext of “difference and stigma” more focused; and, second, the stigma against Kamala Khan as *Ms. Marvel*, becomes a metaphor for the

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<sup>73</sup> Julia Marsh, “Protestors Break prayer Rules at Leading Mosque.” *Women’s E-News* (2010), <https://womensenews.org/2010/02/protesters-break-prayer-rules-at-leading-mosque/>

<sup>74</sup> Jan Platvoet, “Method and Theory in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the North American Association for the Study of Religion* 2, no. 2 (1990): 187.

<sup>75</sup> Jan Platvoet, “Method and Theory in the Study of Religion,” 187.

<sup>76</sup> Jan Platvoet, “Method and Theory in the Study of Religion,” 188.

stigma experiences against women of colour.<sup>77</sup> In addition to Berlatsky's deductions, what makes *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) unique is that in a society, where being an immigrant is classified as a "problem," the comic series foregrounds the inner tensions of an immigrant family trying to preserve their identity and worldviews, while simultaneously attempting to integrate within American society. In so doing, Wilson is able to construct a subaltern voice through three notable scenarios.

The first scenario sees the contestation of immigrant identity and values in an American society. After Kamala Khan sneaks out to a party that she was forbidden to attend, she is caught by her parents sneaking back into her room. Kamala Khan's father (Yusuf Khan) responds: "I'm disappointed in you *beta* [daughter]. Very disappointed. You disobeyed me and worse, you put yourself at risk."<sup>78</sup> The idea of "risk" must be understood within the broader social construct of Muslim girls being forbidden to be alone with boys. This particular view was articulated earlier in the narrative, when Yusuf Khan refused to allow Kamala Khan to attend the party on the basis that boys would be present.<sup>79</sup> This is further emphasized in the lecture given by Sheikh Abdullah in the Islamic Masjid of Jersey City, "So remember, dear young brothers and sisters, as the Prophet tells us, when an unmarried man and woman are alone together, the third is Shaytan."<sup>80</sup> Kamala Khan's response to her father illustrates the inner contentions that she is confronted with: "I'm sorry I disobeyed you, Abu [father]. There's just – There's just a lot of stuff going on in my life right now, and I can't talk about it. Not yet. Not until I've figured it out on my own."<sup>81</sup> This response yields the following reply from Kamala Khan's mother (Muneeba "Disha" Khan), "That's what you have to say? You are figuring it out? Have I raised my daughter to hide things from her parents?"<sup>82</sup> Muneeba Khan then comments to Yusuf Khan, "This is your fault. You're the one who brought us to this country. See how the children have turned out? See? One sneaks out to parties with boys and the other dresses like a penniless mullah [Muslim scholar]."<sup>83</sup> This scenario provides an internal perspective into the issue of family values and the notion of a contested dominant "male" voice. While Muneeba Khan asserts her discontent with Kamala

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<sup>77</sup> Noah Berlatsky, "Ms. Marvel is a Progressive Superhero, but Latest Story Arc is a Step Back on Race," *The Guardian Weekly* (2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/05/ms-marvel-q-willow-wilson-muslim-race-comics>

<sup>78</sup> Willow G. Wilson, Adrian Alphona and Ian Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #002, "All Mankind," New York, NY: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., a Subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment, LLC, 2014, 4.

<sup>79</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #001, "No Normal," 5.

<sup>80</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #003, "Side Entrance," 6.

<sup>81</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #002, "All Mankind," 14.

<sup>82</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #002, "All Mankind," 14.

<sup>83</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #002, "All Mankind," 15.

Khan's association with boys, it is the father's "disappointment" that is given priority. In addition, Muneeba Khan herself reaffirms the position of the male voice by threatening Kamala Khan to involve Sheikh Abdullah, "...If I wake up and find you have snuck out again, the next step will involve Sheikh Abdullah."<sup>84</sup> Muneeba Khan's further assertion, "you brought us to this country,"<sup>85</sup> implies a state of socialisation in American society that is compromising their family values.

In the second scenario, Wilson shifts the discourse by foregrounding the issue of racial assimilation and integration through a relationship between Kamala Khan's brother, Aamir Khan and a Black American Christian girl, Tyesha Marie Hillman. Aamir takes Tyesha home to meet his parents and notifies them of his intentions to marry Tyesha. The response by Muneeba Khan illustrates the critical position of "racial purity" for immigrant communities: "We never met this girl before! Who is she! Who are her people? What is her situation?"<sup>86</sup> This is further exasperated by her follow through comment, "Why didn't he tell me he wanted to get married? I could have gotten an excellent *rishta* [marriage proposal] with a Karachi girl...."<sup>87</sup> However, it is the response of Aamir Khan that places this scenario into a clear social construct of race, "And one of the reasons I respect you is because you would never reject a rishta with a smart beautiful, honorable woman because of some outdated idea that a good bride looks like a circa-1989 Bollywood commercial for Fair and Lovely."<sup>88</sup> This solicits the following response from Muneeba Khan: "We're not prejudice Aamir, you know – It's just that – you're my only son, Jaanu. We're so far away from our families...When I think of your wedding, I think of something familiar with people like us. The right family, the right background."<sup>89</sup> It is within this context that we can apply Howard Taylor's definition of race as a social construction, which grows out of a process of human interaction in which division of people occurs along the lines of physical attributes (i.e.

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<sup>84</sup> Willow, G. Wilson, Adrian Alphona and Ian Herring. *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #004, "Past Curfew." New York, NY: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., a Subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment, LLC, 2014, 13.

<sup>85</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring. *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #002, "All Mankind," 15.

<sup>86</sup> Willow G. Wilson, Nico Leon, Ian Herring and Joe Caramagna. *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 5, #004, "Army of One." New York, NY: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., a Subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment, LLC, 2016, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Wilson, Leon, Herring and Caramagna, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 5, #004, "Army of One," 5.

<sup>88</sup> Wilson, Leon, Herring and Caramagna, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 5, #004, "Army of One," 6.

<sup>89</sup> Wilson, Leon, Herring and Caramagna, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 5, #004, "Army of One," 6.

skin colour, hair colour and texture, bone structure, etc.).<sup>90</sup> Social construction thus entails people learning through “socialization and interaction processes, to attribute certain characteristics to people who are classified into a racial category.”<sup>91</sup> This can be further enhanced with the thesis of Henry and Tator, that race is “a category used to classify humankind according to common ancestry and reliant on differentiation by physical characteristics.”<sup>92</sup> For Henry and Tator, “common ancestry” is the core identifier for immigrant communities. However, through this social construct, Wilson is also able to capture the changing racial and ethnic composition of the American population, as new American identities are forged through marriage assimilation of immigrant communities across the racial divide.

The third scenario reverts back to the issue of Kamala Khan's contestations with her own identity as an American-Pakistani. In order to find her identity, she makes a pilgrimage to Pakistan to visit her extended family: “This is it, this is where I'm gonna find the missing pieces of my life. They weren't in Jersey City....”<sup>93</sup> However, when she is in Pakistan, she finds that she is treated like the “other,” “The American is here,”<sup>94</sup> “Naani adjusted the spices in the food to white people levels so I could handle it.”<sup>95</sup> It is within this context that Wilson constructs the notion of “otherness” more aptly – i.e. being in Pakistan, but too American in contrast with being in America, but too Pakistani. However, the contextualisation of Kamala Khan as “Ms. Marvel” in Pakistan sees a shift in visual representation. It is within this context that we see the true identity of Ms. Marvel, as Kamala Khan now wears the traditional *shalwar kameez* (traditional wear for Pakistani women), headscarf and sandals while fighting for justice, in comparison to her traditional western costume.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Howard F Taylor, “Defining Race” in *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape*, eds. E. Higginbotham and ML. Andersen. (Belmont, CA: Thompson Higher Education, 2006), 47.

<sup>91</sup> Howard F Taylor, “Defining Race,” 49-50. This is further substantiated by Achille Mbembe's recent publication, where he argues that the black person is in effect the “ghost of modernity,” i.e. black as race is the “product” of a historical process. See Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 129.

<sup>92</sup> F. Henry and C. Tator, *The color of democracy: Racism in Canadian society*. Third ed. (Toronto: Nelson, 2006), 4.

<sup>93</sup> Willow G. Wilson, Mirka Andolfo and Ian Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 7, #012, “The Road to War.” New York, NY: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., a Subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment, LLC, 2016, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Wilson, Andolfo and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 7, #012, “The Road to War,” 5.

<sup>95</sup> Wilson, Andolfo and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 7, #012, “The Road to War,” 6.

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, Andolfo and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 7, #012, “The Road to War,” 14.



### **Social Construction 3: Gender**

In social constructions one and two, we have alluded to the intersections of both religion and race with gender. However, in this third social construction, we want to focus more specifically on how gender representation is constructed internally – i.e. within an intra-gender space. Hence, we turn to Candace West and Don Zimmerman's definition that "gender" is "not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort" assigned to men and women.<sup>97</sup> Sally Haslanger builds upon this by arguing that as a social construct, "the ideas associated with gender are merely 'constructions', e.g. fictions about biological essences and genetic determination used to reinforce belief in the rightness and inevitability of the classification."<sup>98</sup> To substantiate this position, we focus on the metamorphosis and transfiguration of Kamala Khan into Ms. Marvel.

In the premier issue of *Ms. Marvel*, the transfiguration of Kamala Khan into a superhero occurs with her being surrounded by a mist that was produced by a Terrigen bomb, which exploded 12 hours earlier.<sup>99</sup> This renders her temporarily unconscious. When she awakes, she is confronted by Captain Marvel (previous alias Ms. Marvel), Iron Man, and Captain America. Captain Marvel initiates the conversation with the following quote in Urdu: "The yellow mustard is blooming in every field; the yellow mustard is blooming...mango buds click open, other flowers too; the koyal twitters from branch to branch and the maiden tries on her adornments."<sup>100</sup> In a state of mental disarray, Kamala Khan poses a rhetorical question to Captain Marvel: "You speak Urdu, then I am totes hallucinating. I must be ultra-drunk."<sup>101</sup> By employing an Urdu quote, Wilson immediately begins to challenge the dominant narrative of comic book superheroes being exclusively Western. This is further justified by the response of Captain Marvel, "We are faith. We speak all languages of beauty and hardship." The two key terms "faith" and "all languages" serve to highlight that fighting for justice is not exclusive to a certain faith or language. The conversation is driven further with Iron Man, "You are seeing what you need to see. You stand at a crossroads."<sup>102</sup> This implies a type of philosophical impasse,

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<sup>97</sup> Candace West and Don H Zimmerman, "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 129.

<sup>98</sup> Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Social Construction" in *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach*. Eds. Larry May Jill B Delston. (New York, Routledge, 2016), 299.

<sup>99</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, "No Normal," 16.

<sup>100</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, "No Normal," 16.

<sup>101</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, "No Normal," 16.

<sup>102</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, "No Normal," 16.

where Kamala Khan needs to make a decisive decision on her future. Captain America then contextualises the encounter, “You thought that if you disobeyed your parents – your culture, your religion – your classmates would accept you. What happened instead?”<sup>103</sup> This poses a moral question to Kamala Khan: Is she being true to herself or creating a façade of herself? She reflects on her current position by noting the following, “Zoe thought that because I snuck out, it was okay for her to make fun of my family. Like Kamala’s finally seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior brown people and their rules to the curb.”<sup>104</sup> Ernesto Priego argues that the visual representation of Kamala Khan with the three superheroes seems to be more Christian than Muslim, with its portrayal of Captain Marvel, “making an apparition, to make an announcement in the form of a poem by Amir Khusro.”<sup>105</sup> Priego further contends that the imaging used by the graphic artists bares a close resemblance to the “Transfiguration” painting by Raphael; hence, it is embedded with “messianic undertones.”<sup>106</sup>

In attempting to further unravel the identity crisis of Kamala Khan, Captain Marvel poses a question to her, “Who do you want to be?”<sup>107</sup> She responds, “I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. I want to be you. Except, I would wear the classic, politically incorrect costume and kick butt in giant wedge heels.”<sup>108</sup> This type of response sees Kamala Khan immediately transfigure into a white young girl, blond hair, long boots and gloves, and a grey mask around her eyes. In essence, Wilson reconstitutes Kamala Khan as the ideal all-American girl. She transcends her religious, cultural, and racial profile to assume the body of a white blonde female teenager. Through this transfiguration, she attains the power of “shapeshifting” – becoming larger or smaller – and the “healing factor” – ability to heal herself.

A closer analysis of this transfiguration brings to the fore the intra-gender discourse – a type of idealisation of the same gender, but one socially constructed as superior. Wilson brings this to the fore with the transfiguration of an “inferior brown” female teenager into a “superior white” female teenager. Through this social construct, Wilson is able to problematise the identity challenges confronting young immigrant females

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<sup>103</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 16.

<sup>104</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 16.

<sup>105</sup> Ernesto Priego. *Ms. Marvel: Metamorphosis and Transfiguration of the ‘Minority’ Superhero*. (London: City, University of London Institutional Repository, 2016), 4.

<sup>106</sup> Priego, *Ms. Marvel: Metamorphosis*, 4.

<sup>107</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 17.

<sup>108</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 17.

and their desire to fit into the American society at the cost of losing their own identity, religion, and culture. However, while Wilson attempts to provide a legitimate voice for the immigrant Muslim female teenager in American society, she falls prey to constructing this new superhero, Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan) under the shadow of Captain Marvel. It is within this context that the gender construct cannot ignore the “power” discourse embedded within the race discourse.

## Conclusion

The recent comic book renaissance has opened new spaces for academic engagement with emulations of society. Its focus on issues of religion, race, and gender offers a mirror into the various hegemonic and ideological contestations in society. The aim of this paper was to explore the intersections of religion, race, and gender in contemporary comics by drawing on *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) as a case study. One of the significant achievements of G. Willow Wilson and Sana Amanat’s *Ms. Marvel*, was that, in addition to a narrative that sought to transform the comic book industry, it also created a space in each issue to capture the “voice” of its readers. Comments such as “It’s a huge step in diversity and solidarity,” “I’m Mormon, not Muslim, but I love seeing positive portrayals of any religion,” and “She will probably still be something of a religious minority, but that’s okay. She will be helping to break down layers and years of hate and prejudice between cultures,” affirm the readership’s association with Kamala Khan.<sup>109</sup> In order to analyse the intersections between religion, race, and gender in *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan), we opted for “social constructionism” as the theory underpinning our analysis. The rationale for such theory was that it provides a space to critique the production and contextualisation of knowledge within the comic book space. While there are many definitions of “social constructionism,” we opted for Vivien Burr and her four-key assumptions that underpin the social constructionist approach. We then drew on selective scenes from *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) and applied these assumptions under three social constructs, *vis-à-vis* religion, race, and gender. Although we categorically labelled each construct individually, our analysis demonstrates an intersection of these constructs. In addition to providing a fresh perspective to the superhero genre, *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) also provides a “voice” for the subaltern. Our conclusion is that the intersections between religion, race, and gender as “played” out in *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) serves to foreground a socially constructed reality of religious (Islamic) prejudice; immigrant socio-cultural and political

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<sup>109</sup> Wilson, Alphona and Herring, *Ms. Marvel*, Vol. 1, #001, “No Normal,” 25.

assimilation predispositions; and gender and power disparities embedded in both Muslim immigrant worldviews (internal) and American social ideals (external). There is much potential for further research on *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan); hence, we hope that this paper stimulates further research in *Ms. Marvel* as well as within the broader comic book space.

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