IN-BETWEEN IDENTITIES AND CULTURES

MS. MARVEL AND THE REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN

Jennifer Jackson-Preece
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Jennifer Jackson-Preece and Manmit Bhambra

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Abstract

Can superheroes tell us something important about changing public attitudes towards young Muslim women? To answer this question, we compare how young people react to the portrayal of the superhero Ms. Marvel as a young Muslim woman in different locations in the Middle East and beyond. Our findings suggest that a superhero like Ms. Marvel can create a global discourse on gender and Islam that transcends specific cultural contexts.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

This project explores the in-betweenness of gender, Islam and culture as it is mediated through the Ms. Marvel graphic novel *No Normal*.[1] In this endeavour, we are inspired by Homi Bhabha's work on culture and identity:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.[2]

Our decision to explore identity constellations via a graphic novel is in keeping with the cultural turn in the social sciences.[3] Popular culture is now widely recognised as an important medium through which individual and collective identities are renegotiated.[4]

Ms. Marvel is a particularly relevant starting point for our investigation precisely because this series purposefully reimagines a well-known superhero from the Marvel comics pantheon as a second generation Pakistani American Muslim immigrant. The original Ms. Marvel launched in 1968 as the quintessential blonde-haired, blue-eyed all-American girl, a character otherwise known as Carol Danvers.[5] When Carol Danvers was promoted to Captain Marvel, the first female rendering of that character, Marvel Comics cast a very different persona for the new Ms. Marvel. As of 2013, Ms. Marvel became Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani-American girl living in New Jersey.[6] Kamala's parents are from Karachi and emigrated to the United States before their daughter was born. Kamala and her family are devout Muslims. Her brother is a Salafi Muslim, her best friend wears a hijab, several scenes take place in a mosque and the Qur'an is cited as a source of inspiration. Thus, the contrast between the Carol Danvers representation of Ms. Marvel and the Kamala Khan representation of Ms. Marvel is striking.

The Kamala Khan Ms. Marvel character is part of a larger effort to diversify popular culture. For more than 75 years, Marvel comics have been the home of superheroes Spider-Man, Iron-Man, Daredevil and Captain Marvel; all white men. In the last decade, global comic brands like Marvel and DC have begun to integrate and prominently feature both more women and more black, minority and ethnic characters in their plots.[7] Recasting Captain

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[1] G. Willow Wilson, *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2014).

[2] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

[3] Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Introduction', in Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon (eds), *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 5.

[4] See among others: Alanoud Alsharekh and Robert Springborg (eds), *Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States* (London: Saqi Books & SOAS, 2012); Jason Dittmer and Daniel Bos, *Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

[5] Tracy Brown, '"Captain Marvel": A Brief History of Carol Danvers', *Los Angeles Times*, 28 February 2019. Available at https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/herocomplex/la-et-mn-captain-marvel-history-20190228-story.html (accessed 15 September 2020).

[6] Miriam Kent, 'Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine', *Feminist Media Studies* 15/3 (2015), p. 523.

[7] See, for example, '15 Muslim Characters in Comics You Should Know', *CBR*, 3 February 2017. Available at

Marvel as Carol Danvers, a woman and the first Ms. Marvel, is part of this trend. Black superheroes such as Black Panther (Marvel) and Black Lightning (DC) now feature in blockbuster movies and television series. Muslim and Arab superheroes are also gaining prominence and it is not simply due to Ms. Marvel. For example, one of Marvel Comic's X-Men superheroes is Sooraya Qadir (Dust), an Afghan Muslim woman. Similarly, DC's Green Lantern superhero appears as Lebanese American Muslim Simon Baz.

This effort by the comic industry to portray a more diverse range of superheroes has garnered considerable attention, both in the media and increasingly also in academia. The representation of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel is particularly important because it seemingly challenges the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype that has long been a feature of Orientalist narratives underpinning western hegemony.[8] Historically this stereotype was used to justify continued European rule over the 'Orient.'[9] In more recent decades, the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype has been used to validate the 'War on Terror', the backlash against multiculturalism and the rise of populism in the West.[10] In stark contrast to this stereotype, Ms. Marvel has been hailed as 'a real world emblem of protest against Islamophobia',[11] and 'a young, female Muslim superhero for our times'.[12]

The lives of Muslim women are both a source of interest and scrutiny in the new Ms. Marvel series. Sana Amanat, the creator of the Kamala Khan Ms. Marvel character, stated that 'the big idea behind Ms. Marvel was very much about finding your authentic self'.[13] When re-imagining Ms. Marvel as a Muslim teenager, Amanat drew on her own experiences as a child of Pakistani immigrants in the New Jersey suburbs: 'Kamala Khan's struggles to fit in, her relationship with her parents – they're related to a lot of the feelings I had in high school about being a minority in a country where the racial norm is being white.'[14] Through the introduction of Ms. Marvel, Amanat has been able to reflect on her own experiences of the intersecting identities of race, gender and religion,[15] as well as the wider challenges facing Muslim women and other minorities in Western societies. Feminist scholar Miriam Kent argues that Ms. Marvel has been groundbreaking as a comic in the way it represents the intersectional experience as it breaks with a 'history of framing

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https://www.cbr.com/muslim-comic-book-characters-you-should-know/ (accessed 24 November 2020).

[8] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[9] Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Review: "Orientalism" and Middle East Feminist Studies', *Feminist Studies* 27/1 (2001).

[10] Tania Saeed, *Islamophobia and Securitization: Religion, Ethnicity and the Female Voice* (London: Springer, 2018).

[11] Aja Romano, 'Muslim American Superhero Kamala Khan has Become a Real-World Protest Icon', *Vox*, 2 February 2017. Available at https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/2/2/14457384/kamala-khan-captain-america-protest-icon (accessed 15 September 2020).

[12] Coco Khan, 'All Hail Ms Marvel, a Young Female Muslim Superhero For Our Times', *The Guardian*, 17 May 2018. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/17/ms-marvel-female-muslim-superhero-kamala-khan (accessed 15 September 2020).

[13] Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, 'A New Kind of Superhero: Sana Amanat '04 Brings a Groundbreaking Muslim Crime Fighter to Marvel Comic Books', *Barnard Magazine*, Summer 2016. Available at https://barnard.edu/magazine/summer-2016/new-kind-superhero (accessed 15 September 2020).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

women within hegemonic ideologies'.[16] Amanat has created a character who can appeal to 'a wide audience – not just Muslims, or women, but anyone who championed the idea of diversity in comics and diversity in the media at large'.[17] Ms. Marvel also gives voice to the way that young people from diverse backgrounds experience their own belonging and acceptance and the way that culture, religion, family and acceptance, in both the public and private spheres, play out in everyday life.

Research demonstrates that female superheroes have been utilised to mirror challenges facing women in contemporary societies.[18] Anthropologist Mitra Emad's analysis of Wonder Woman's changing depiction conveys how comics can provide insight into issues facing women in different contexts but also how they can be used to provide a strong female heroine who faces and overcomes these issues. Emad finds that the changes in the means through which characters develop mirror transformations in the role of women in American society.[19] At the same time, visual media such as movies and comic books are capable of going beyond aspects such as language, space and time.[20]

Similarly, other scholars variously claim that the Kamala Khan Ms. Marvel series' 'non-conforming ideologies have set a new tone in superhero comics'[21] which 'challenges gendered-racialised stereotypes'[22] and is a 'means of uncovering and combating racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia'.[23] These interpretations are based on critical discourse analyses, both textual and visual, mostly focused on the first Kamala Khan Ms. Marvel graphic novel *No Normal*.[24]

Our study also begins with *No Norma*l.[25] Unlike previous studies, our focus is not on the content of the graphic novel per se, but rather its audience reception. It is the 'virtual Third Space between text and reader that emerges in the process of reception',[26] which interests us. We want to know whether, and to what extent, the graphic novel series Ms.

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[16] Kent, 'Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine', p. 523.

[17] Marie Lodi, 'Why Can't I Be You: Sana Amanat', *Rookie Magazine* 45, 5 April 2015. Available at https://www.rookiemag.com/2015/05/why-cant-i-be-you-sana-amanat/ (accessed 15 September 2020).

[18] Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

[19] Mitra C. Emad, 'Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39/6 (2006), pp. 954–84.

[20] Faye Ginsburg, 'Mediating Culture: Indigenous Media, Ethnographic Film, and the Production of Identity' in Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (eds), *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 256–91.

[21] Sarah Gibbons, '"I Don't Exactly Have Quiet, Pretty Powers": Flexibility and Alterity in Ms. Marvel', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8/5 (2017), p. 461.

[22] Dean Cooper-Cunningham, 'Drawing Fear of Difference: Race, Gender and National Identity in Ms. Marvel Comics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48/2 (2020), p. 165.

[23] Winona Landis, 'Ms. Marvel, Qahera, and Superheroism in the Muslim Diaspora', *Continuum* 33/2 (2019), p. 185.

[24] Willow Wilson, *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Carsten Schinko, 'From Myths and Symbols to Culture as Text: Hybridity, Literature and American Studies', in Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer (ed.), *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach* (Berlin: Springer, 2012), p. 187.

Marvel opens up hybrid spaces for negotiating values, meanings and priorities with and between young Muslim women and other young people. Young Muslim women are key participants here because it is their identities and experiences that the Kamala Khan character claims to represent and to normalise. At the same time, young Muslim women are also a part of the new, global and diverse readership that the comic industry's turn to diversity targets.

Intersecting Narratives of Identity

Our study is positioned within debates on identity politics and the social construction of identity. In so doing, we reject the view that identities derive from fixed categories.

> If identities are fixed there can be no room to accommodate changing power relations – or history itself – as they are constituted and reconstituted.[27]

Such essentialised views of identity ignore differences within groups and fail to appreciate the ways that intersections between identities may be sources of oppression or empowerment. Essentialising identity in this way is especially problematic when, as here, the focus is directed at women who belong to racial, ethnic or religious minorities.

> And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of colour as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of colour to a location that resists telling.[28]

To guard against these problems, we adopt an intersectional and narrative approach to identity. Intersectional theory argues that we cannot approach identities as single, fixed or discrete categories.[29] Instead, we should think of identities as multiple, intersecting and fluid. It is ontological narratives that make identity 'something that one becomes'.[30] Such stories are not only personal but also social. They tell us who we are, both as individuals and as members of various groups. Our stories, like our identities, are also multiple, intersecting and fluid.

> Given that individuals always belong to several groups and categories, the 'I positions' in their talk will of necessity be slippery, context-dependent and heterogeneous. Furthermore, stories are constructed in the cracks between multiple and at times contradictory collective voices, and identity/narrative is thus radically dialogical.[31]

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[27] Margaret Sommers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society* 23 (1994), p. 610.
[28] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43/6 (1991), p. 1242.
[29] Leslie McCall, 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30/3 (2005), pp. 1771–1800.
[30] Margaret Sommers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', p. 618.
[31] Rachelle Chadwick, 'Thinking Intersectionally With/Through Narrative Methodologies', *Agenda* 31/1 (2017), p. 8.

Since processes of identity contestation in late modernity are both globalised and local, we focus on four cities in three different yet historically connected geo-cultural contexts as field sites: London, Sharjah, Beirut and Singapore. Encounters across border regions of what Bhabha refers to as identities or identifications are more extensive in some places than in others. 'One major site of exchange is the metropolis, the crossroads of both trade and culture, where diverse origins meet and interact'[32] – London, Sharjah,[33] Beirut and Singapore are all metropolises which is why they were chosen as field sites. Significantly, they are also historic ports on the great sea routes connecting Europe and Asia. Each may claim to be an in-between or liminal space, but with different cultural and religious interstices which open up interesting scope for both hybridity and comparison.

A Focus Group Methodology

Informed by post-colonial and feminist perspectives,[34] we use focus groups to open up spaces for dialogue with and between young Muslim women (who comprise half the participants in each location) and other young people. We worked closely with local researchers to minimise the potential disempowering effects of our own subject positions (identities) and to help better understand the ambiguities of meaning surrounding stereotypes of Muslim women present in each context.[35]

Recruitment was carried out via the snowballing technique, building upon the personal and professional networks of local researchers. In this way, we were able to organise 6 focus groups involving between 30 and 55 young people in each location (55 in London; 45 in Sharjah; 30 in Beirut; 52 in Singapore so 182 project participants in total). Individual focus groups were kept reasonably small, circa 5–10 participants and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. This configuration enabled conversation to unfold organically within each focus group.

All focus groups used a semi-structured format.[36] This format included both the reading of pre-selected passages from *No Normal* as well as an opportunity for free reading. We invited reflections on specific prompts linked to the storyline and then opened up to spontaneous interventions and exchanges with and between participants based on their personal readings. This format proved highly successful in creating space for a free flow of personal exchanges on the everyday experiences and perceptions of young Muslim women in each location. All focus groups were recorded following informed consent from the participants and then professionally transcribed in an anonymised form for subsequent analysis. The transcriptions yielded over 150,000 words of textual data.

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[32] Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), p. 73.

[33] Sharjah is a less diverse space than London, Beirut and Singapore. To overcome this potential limitation, our focus group participants were drawn from the student body of the American University of Sharjah, which explicitly defines itself as 'having a multicultural campus environment'. Available at https://www.aus.edu/about/aus-at-a-glance (accessed 26 May 2021).

[34] Sharon A. Bong, 'An Asian Postcolonial and Feminist Methodology: Ethics as a Recognition of Limits' in Ursula King and Tina Beattie (eds), *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2005).

[35] We would like to thank Dr Dima Issa, University of Balamand, and Maryam Abdelsamie and Iman Al Ali, American University of Sharjah, for their invaluable contributions to the project.

[36] Pranee Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice* (London: Sage, 2011).

Qualitative Data Analysis

We analysed the transcribed focus group text following the two-cycle coding procedure for qualitative researchers outlined by Saldana.[37] In the first cycle, we took a grounded theory approach to the data, familiarising ourselves with the conversations which took place at each site and generating initial descriptive codes. In the second cycle, the initial codes were reviewed with a particular focus on comparisons (a) between participants in the same focus group; (b) between focus groups at the same location; and (c) between the four field sites. This detailed comparison enabled a list of both themes that were present in all field sites as well as site specific subthemes to be identified. Here, the interpretation of the data was also influenced by our review of relevant academic literature on popular culture and our reading of post-colonial and feminist theories of identities.

In-Between Identities and Cultures

The data analysis revealed two overarching themes which run through the full data set: (1) identity intersections and (2) identity misrepresentations. Each theme was readily apparent in each location, but with distinct subthemes that reflected local meanings and identifications. Both themes could be interpreted as a desire to be respected for difference but also to fit in to prevailing social and cultural expectations.

Identity Intersections

The theme of identity intersections is direct reader engagement with the theme of the Ms. Marvel graphic novel *No Normal*.[38] Kamala Khan was purposefully presented as a Muslim Pakistani-American, and the child of immigrants in New Jersey. Consequently, the content of the novel is intended to showcase Kamala Khan's diversity, including her multiple intersecting identities, but within a standard American superhero storyline.

The title *No Normal* has a double entendre. Firstly, the character Kamala Khan repeatedly expresses the desire to be normal by which she means like the average American teenager (everyone else) and not the 'good' Muslim Pakistani girl her parents would like her to be. Much of the graphic novel depicts Kamala Khan's struggle to make sense of these two different worlds and her place within and between them. Secondly, Kamala Khan dreams about becoming a superhero with special abilities. Kamala's dream comes true when she is enveloped in the Terrigen Mist and acquires a shape-shifting super power. This ability is clearly not normal and further sets Kamala Khan apart from her peers. Thus, *No Normal* explores Kamala Khan's struggle to make sense of her various intersecting exceptionalisms; as a Muslim, as a woman of colour, as a migrant and as a superhero.

The showcasing of these intersections (the Pakistani immigrant Muslim women in America and the shape-shifting superhero) evidence the critical content of the series. In making a young Pakistani-American Muslim girl a superhero, Marvel Comics is challenging anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim stereotypes in America post 9/11 which characterise

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[37] Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).
[38] Willow Wilson, *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*.

immigrants and Muslims as threats to American security and national identity;[39] Kamala Khan as Ms Marvel is not a villain who attacks Americans. Instead, she is a superhero who uses her superpowers to save Americans from various threats.

The participants at our focus groups responded to the intersectional portrayal of Kamala Khan's everyday reality in the graphic novel with stories of their own identity intersections. In sharing these personal narratives, the focus group participants reflected on what was and was not normal for them. Across all four locations, to be normal was to be like everyone else in a particular moment or context. Everyone else was variously defined as friends, classmates, family, ethnic/religious community or national community. In contrast, not being normal was negatively standing out as 'different' in some respect, for example because the participants' values or choices were not shared or respected by those around them.

Some intersectionalities, specifically gender and generation, were present across all locations and embodied common experiences of growing up. For example, choices associated with female clothing, particularly the (not) wearing of the headscarf (hijab/shyla/tudong) featured prominently in all our focus group conversations. Such stories often focused on differential or discriminatory treatment or expectations (e.g. by parents, teachers or others in authority) as compared with previous or subsequent age cohorts (e.g. older or younger siblings) or with male peers (e.g. brothers or other male family members).

Other identity intersections, such as between religion, race, or nationality, varied between locations. Such differences reveal how the lived realities of young Muslim women are shaped by local identity narratives. They highlight local dynamics of identity contestation. At the same time, these differences also show the effects of globalisation are ever present even though they may take different forms in different places.

In London, not being normal was defined by the intersection of Islam, ethnicity and race. Local demographics (i.e. the extent to which specific neighbourhoods or cities were associated with particular identity groups) were much talked about.

> I'm alright around my area, I'm okay going there late because I know it's quite Muslim populated. It's okay if I go late home because I feel safe. (London)

Not being normal was also framed in terms of Islamophobia and the fear of Islamic inspired terrorism. For example, speaking in the months following the London Bridge and Borough Market Attack in 2017, one of our London participants said:

> After that incident I felt like I started to notice like the looks on the tube and stuff like that. And my parents would call and tell me to be extra careful. And I will just be like, things can happen. (London)

In Sharjah, not being normal was defined by the intersection between Emirati culture, Western culture and Islam:

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[39] Dean Cooper-Cunningham, 'Drawing Fear of Difference: Race, Gender and National Identity in Ms. Marvel Comics'.

> We are oppressed by culture, not by religion, I feel we - because our religion is very much empowering, but that is – there's a very thin line between that in the eyes of the Western world, I don't think they are able to draw the line between what is...culturally oppressive or religiously oppressive, they just put it under the umbrella of religion, and I feel more culturally oppressed here than I do religiously oppressed and it's a true thing. (Sharjah)

These differences were often presented in the context of a bigger tension variously framed in terms of tradition versus modernisation and globalisation.

> Because we have been so much open to the world now that has been a huge factor into that [difference between generations], and we just become better rebels at the things that we want and the things that we need. And for the longest time you know, my mum wouldn't know that I would not wear my shyla [black headscarf] outside of home or whatever...And I told her that you know, I've come to a point where I don't need to hide this from you anymore. ... I just want you to know that this is what's happening. (Sharjah)

In Beirut, not being normal was defined by the intersection of local cultures and religions. Here, the challenges recounted by young women were more or less the same irrespective of whether or not the participant was Muslim or Christian.

> Religion is so closely tied to the culture no matter what religion you are, you're always going to find this kind of discussions with parents and not being allowed that kind of idea. (Beirut)

Variations in experience were thus mostly attributed to cultural differences arising from locale (i.e. urban and rural settings).

> And it's also dependent on the environment. So if you have people coming from Beirut even if they're you know, they're both Christian and Muslim, you have this opportunity to go further and not get married because you know it's more open-minded over there. Whereas like even Christian communities in the north, they're very closed off and they still think that a girl should get married. (Beirut)

In Singapore, not being normal was defined by the intersection between religion, race and national culture. Participants repeated the official multicultural narrative that Singaporeans of all racial and religious backgrounds lived normal lives due to the racial harmony maintained in Singapore since independence.

> We have greater exposure to people of various race as we grow up. So like we are not as brought into [exposed to] racism or that [type of racial] conflict. Whereas compared to like a Western society they can grow up like into [discrimination]... it's a bit of closed environment I would guess. I don't have any personal experience so I can't speak to that, what their experiences are. But I would imagine that they could grow up without seeing a Muslim person in their whole lives. So it's like we are being taught and it's our cultural upbringing not to say something against another religion or against their faith or something like that. Because it's not in our culture to do so. (Singapore)

Such stories were often conflated with economic development and modernisation narratives. They also tended to contrast Singapore with its surrounding states, Malaysia and Indonesia. These storylines were often about the deliberately mixed demographics in public housing complexes, hybrid cultural practices like 'Singlish' and Hawker street food centres and friendships that intersect racial and religious communities.

Prejudices against Muslim Malays were frequently denied but nevertheless featured in the Singaporean focus groups. Some participants, both Malay and not Malay, recounted stories about Chinese privilege or disesteem for Malays and others.

> In Singapore, because we are in a Chinese society where Chinese is a majority, some people tend to abuse this thing like it's not Chinese privilege, so like they can easily crack jokes about young Muslim women. Especially the hijabs, you know, like they try and make a fool of it. (Singapore)

Such stories were often framed as rare exceptions or 'justified' by shared cultural practices, such as sense of humour.

> Although we live quite well with each other, we do make jokes about each other but nobody takes offence to it. (Singapore)

Identity Misrepresentations

Whereas the previous theme was based on a telling of stories about the everyday intersectional realities of participants in response to scenes from the Ms. Marvel graphic novel, this theme emerged as a telling of stories about comics and their portrayal of diversity. The main focus of discussion here was the Ms. Marvel graphic novel *No Normal*. But the discussion also referenced a wide variety of other Marvel characters (Black Panther, Iron Man, Captain America, Spider Man, the Incredible Hulk, etc.) and also the Marvel cinematic universe (movies). DC comics were also commonly discussed (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Catwoman, Black Lightning, etc.). The conversation also extended to regional comic forms, most notably the local comic superhero Emara in Sharjah and East Asian manga comics in Singapore.

There was much conversation on why it was important for popular culture including the comic industry to better represent diversity.

> I think we need a lot more different backgrounds in the media and in popular culture and things like that. I think you need to have more diversity on things. (London)

> Like the kids have something to look up to rather than just, usually it's just White kids who have like more superheroes to take on. (Singapore)

> This push towards like diversity, incorporating other cultures, other religions not just focus on one. So that was a good part of it.... (Beirut)

At the same time, participants also expressed concerns about the potential harm that poor, inaccurate or misleading representations of non-Western identities could cause.

> I feel that it could be perhaps a form of harmful advocacy...Like in the interactions with the other people, I find those interactions with people that appear to be white or like non...different backgrounds [in *No Normal*], quite negative interactions. (Sharjah)

> It's as if [in the Ms. Marvel series] they're trying this idea of show don't tell but they're overshowing it. I feel like so you can have an aspect or two and we can get that she's Muslim. And you only have the name or you have the hijab. You already have all of that. And it's like they're just trying to prove that she is a Muslim like overprove it by adding so many of these aspects. Then just not the essentials that are just normal, [but] the superficial ideas that other cultures see. (Beirut)

Views on Ms. Marvel were divided across all locations. In every focus group, participants questioned whether or not Ms. Marvel was a realistic representation of young Muslim women. Here, conversation centred upon the extent to which Kamala Khan was a character with limited cultural appeal. Some focus group participants found Ms. Marvel generally relatable precisely because of the intersectional diversity portrayed in the graphic novel.

> I think we could relate to that. It's like we've got two balancing identities being British and being Muslim. And she portrays that. It might not be perfect but she's portraying her experience. And a lot of girls can relate. (London)

However, other focus group participants could not relate to Ms. Marvel because they regarded her as a one-dimensional character.

> She keeps referring to herself as a Muslim girl, she's a Muslim girl, okay, we get it, you don't have to say that in the entire comic, you know.... (Sharjah)

Additionally, some focus group participants read Ms. Marvel as mostly repeating American stereotypes about Muslims.

> I thought it would give a modern – not a modern, a good image, positive image about Muslims and Arab women, especially in the West. But after I saw a bit of it, I think it's just going do the opposite, totally. It was a disappointment. (Beirut)

> It isn't an accurate reflection [of Muslim women]. I would say it's a biased reflection, very subjective, very orientalist, very colonialist. (Sharjah)

Across all of our locations there were discussions about the motivations behind the introduction of a Muslim female character by Marvel comics. Young Muslim women were somewhat suspicious of why Marvel had chosen Kamala Khan as the new Ms. Marvel. It was suggested that the comic industry's turn to diversity was fundamentally profit driven.

> I'm going to be like, oh they're trying too hard to get sales or whatever. (Sharjah)

Some participants recognised such financial motives as 'good business'.

> I think that Ms. Marvel and Black Panther, they at least show that, you know, commercially diversity and representation is profitable. (Singapore)

Other participants regarded such moves as 'economic exploitation' and 'cultural appropriation'.

> It feels like, are they just taking advantage of us? Or are they just taking money out of us. (London)

Significantly, inconsistencies emerged between how participants portray conflicts in their own lives as a result of religious, cultural and generational differences yet reject similar portrayals in the Ms. Marvel Kamala Khan graphic novel as 'dangerous stereotyping.'

> I don't know it's just making it seem that we're not normal. I don't know. I don't know if I like how she's portrayed. It just seems as [if] every young Muslim wants to go to a party but they're not allowed. I don't like that. So why are you [Marvel Comics] trying to say that? (London)

This suggests an important dynamic between self and other social actor representations. While it is acceptable for the self to 'tell' stories where agency is constrained by culture or religion, it is unacceptable for those who are not members of the identity group in question to do so.

> And I mean, the whole allow or not now thing, this is something that we actually suffer from or like this is not just a simple thing that happens in the Muslim community, this is a huge thing that affects every single woman's life. And the fact that they're just discussing it and putting it in a magazine and just talking about it like it's nothing, this is actually quite disrespectful. (Sharjah)

Such power dynamics are not merely presumed or implicit within the data set. Rather, they are overtly discussed by participants at all locations, with specific reference to (variously) 'stereotyping', 'orientalism', 'Islamophobia', 'Americanisation' and 'globalisation'.

> So, I'm not sure if that is them trying to speak out for the Muslim teenagers in New Jersey or ...trying to tell Muslim women you don't have to be like a Muslim woman. (Singapore)

Focus group participants were thus quick to reject any evidence of continued Western cultural hegemony in the Ms. Marvel graphic novel.

> When reading this you don't see being proud of your culture or, you just see the negative or you see through a White gaze more than you do to just like what is reality I guess. (Beirut)

Conclusion

Our comparative analysis of audience responses to the Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel character offers a new perspective on the experiences of young Muslim women in the Middle East and elsewhere. Much of the literature on gender relations in the Middle East gives analytical primacy to the concept of patriarchy.[40] Our project participants in Sharjah and Beirut shared many stories which demonstrate the continued saliency of patriarchal social structures as a common challenge confronting young Muslim women in the region. However, the dilemmas that these young women recounted were not about patriarchy per se but rather the competing and often contradictory pull of traditional and modern values and lifestyles. Here, our findings echo Nira Yuval-Davis' claims that in concrete situations women's oppression is intermeshed in and articulated by other forms of social oppression and social divisions.[41]

The comic depicts Kamala's own intersectional identities of being Muslim, Pakistani, American, a woman, a daughter and a friend. The push and pull of different identities and the demands, constraints and opportunities this creates was a common conversation across our sites; the Ms. Marvel comic provides an opportunity for opening and normalising these conversations. In this respect, the hard choices faced by young Muslim women in Sharjah and Beirut had much in common with those faced by young Muslim women in London and Singapore. Across all of our project locations, intersectionalities of gender, religion, race, culture, nationality and generation shaped experiences of growing up. Crenshaw argues that:

> Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.[42]

We see, through the portrayal of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel and our participants, the importance of recognising the unique ways that young women balance, maintain and negotiate not only their multiple identities, but the demands and expectations that come with these, at home, from men, other women and from the majority culture and wider society; both the private and public spheres.

It is, of course, precisely such dilemmas that the *No Normal* Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel graphic novel portrays. And yet, despite this apparent authenticity, audience reaction to the comic's representation of young Muslim women was deeply ambivalent. That ambiv-

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[40] Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2/3 (1988), pp. 274–90; Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, 'The True Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Policy* 135 (2003), pp. 62–70.

[41] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2008), p. 7.

[42] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', p. 1299.

alence arguably mirrors the liminal space currently occupied by young Muslim women in all four project locations. The globalisation of hegemonic Western assumptions, not just about Islam but also about race, individual autonomy and gender equality, complicate the lives of young Muslim women in London, Sharjah, Beirut and Singapore. In each location, the young Muslim women we spoke to endeavoured to make life choices for themselves in-between a shifting terrain of traditional/modern and local/global norms. What was considered an authentic choice, and corresponding challenge, varied across locations. There are clearly important differences in the lived realities and misrepresentations of young Muslim women in London, Sharjah, Beirut and Singapore. Such differences are evidenced in our focus group discussions. Nevertheless, our findings

> challenge simplistic constructions of 'authentic regional' versus 'Western'… [and are an important reminder of the] intricate and shifting ways we are all positioned politically, institutionally, and personally [in global power constellations].[43]

Popular culture, specifically the graphic novel *No Normal*, proved a highly effective means of eliciting participant stories about everyday life in London, Sharjah, Beirut and Singapore. Future research could further probe the saliency of local versus global norms in the Middle East by comparing Marvel and DC superheroes to those of grassroots comic characters such as Emara in the United Arab Emirates. Content analysis, audience response and artist interviews could all yield interesting findings. Similarly, a comparative ethnographic study of the 'comic convention', could offer new insights into the cultural dynamics of globalisation within the region (for example, via a focus on established venues such as the Middle East Film and Comic Con in Dubai and more recent venues such as Comic Con Arabia in Riyadh).

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[43]   Nadje Al-Ali, 'Feminist Dilemmas: How to Talk About Gender-based Violence in Relation to the Middle East?', *Feminist Review* 122/1 (2019), p. 28.

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