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Intercultural dialogue in manga: Building friendships, sharing spaces and values

ABSTRACT

Manga as a cultural art form delves into various sociocultural issues and narratives, and the representation of diverse cultural contexts in manga has increased over the years. The role of Japanese manga as a site for intercultural understanding and engagement is worth further investigation, and research in this area is still growing. This article explores intercultural dialogue through a case study of the Japanese manga Satoko and Nada Volume 1 *by Yupechika, which narrates the friendship between Satoko, a young Japanese woman, and Nada, her Saudi Muslim roommate. It adopts a literary approach to the analysis of the manga and employs textual analysis as the methodology. The manga is analysed through the lens of interculturalism and deep dialogue focusing on the themes of food, fashion and faith. Through the analysis, readers are exposed to the narrative of intercultural engagement as portrayed by the mangaka. Yupechika incorporates pre-existing prejudices in the engagement between the two culturally diverse characters. The narrative arc reveals the importance of empathy, space and value sharing in forging intercultural understanding. This reading into Yupechika's intercultural*

narrative is a microcosm of the type of dialogue needed in the world today to overcome the acute racism and xenophobia.

INTRODUCTION

Manga is a Japanese cultural medium popular among both children and adults in Japan. Noted for its unique visuals and aesthetics, manga depict a variety of stories and characters (Levi 2006; Berndt 2016). The genre has gained increasing popularity worldwide since the 1990s as translations are widely available across most of Asia, North and South America and Europe (Levi 2006; Nakazawa 2016). The origins and definition of manga has 'undergone important shifts within Japan since it first started to be used in relation to various forms of illustration' (Kacsuk 2018: 1).

Although manga is aesthetically and culturally ambiguous due to its connection to Japanese and Chinese cultures, the Japanese associated the word manga with pictorial essays (Berndt 2007). Over the years, the definition of manga has continued to be redefined by historians and scholars within Japan. Manga has evolved from being 'funny pictures', 'million art', 'satirical and comical picture' (Berndt 2007: 2–6), 'whimsical', and 'improvised' pictures (Hernandez-Perez 2019: 7), to 'magazine-based serialized graphic narratives' (Berndt 2013: 66). It is a dominant art form that has become deeply embedded in modern Japan (Napier 2001) and is now a staple element of youth culture in many countries (Kacsuk 2018).

The subject matter of manga comics is multifarious and ranges from science fiction, fantasy, sexuality, to sports, folktales and even economics. Manga consists of various sub-genres that can be categorized based on the gender and age of the target readers (Unser-Schutz 2019; Antononoka 2019). These gender-based comics are known as shonen manga (boys' comic) and shoujo manga (girls' comic) while young adult female comics are known as josei and young adult male comics are known as seinen (Antononoka 2019). These sub-genres of manga are primarily discernible based on 'their visuals as well as character settings and character relationship' (Antononoka 2019: 83). In general, the content and themes of shoujo manga tend to focus on interpersonal relationships such as love and friendship and characters' feelings, while shonen manga are more action-oriented, portraying characters like baseball players and sumo wrestlers (Prough 2010; Unser-Schutz 2015; Antononoka 2019; Ogi 2019).

Academic research on manga is growing due to its global popularity and the rich narratives and diverse sub-genres that reflect various social and cultural themes. According to Rankin-Brown and Brown, manga reflect societal values and serve to depict various social phenomena such as 'social order and hierarchy, sexism, racism, ageism and classism' (2012: 75). Albeit issues of race and racism are scrutinized in cultural research of manga (Antononoka 2016), for the purpose of this study, the intercultural engagement that occurs in a Japanese manga is emphasized.

This article focuses on interculturalism in a manga as a cultural text that has been translated into English. The manga selected for this study is *Satoko and Nada Volume 1* (2017) from *Satoko and Nada*, an ongoing manga series by Japanese mangaka (a manga artist) Yupechika. It is based on a premise of intercultural relationship and dialogue between two ladies of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. *Satoko and Nada Volume 1* (2017)

revolves around a friendship that develops between a young Japanese woman, Satoko, and her Saudi Muslim roommate, Nada, at a college in the United States. This manga is inspired by Yupechika's personal experience of encountering different cultures and nationalities as a student in the United States (Ikuta 2018). As noted by Drajat and Kurnia (2019), *Satoko and Nada* offers a counter-discourse to stereotypical views of Muslim women and reconstructs the image of Islam for Japanese readers. *Satoko and Nada* by Yupechika portrays dialogue and interactions between two characters of different cultural backgrounds. This article examines the way the mangaka uses shared values and spaces to depict intercultural acceptance and recognition between the two characters. In doing so, it aims to shed light on the role of the mangaka in creating a cultural text that portrays global cultural diversity and interculturalism.

MANGA AND INTERCULTURALISM

Although a traditional art form, over the years 'manga has been shaped by and reflects the historical, social, and cultural influences of its time' (Rankin-Brown and Brown 2012: 76). In manga, we see an example of the artist's ability to incorporate external influences such as 'modern Western cultural ideals to produce a product that is uniquely Japanese' (Rankin-Brown and Brown 2012: 76). However, the Japanese society maintains their in-groups loyalty as 'people associate almost exclusively with those with whom they either grow up, with whom they go to school or with whom they work' and 'there is not much spontaneous intermingling among those of differing socioeconomic status or from different neighbourhoods, let alone with foreigners' (Rankin-Brown and Brown 2012: 84–85).

In such a society, manga can be considered a vehicle for intercultural dialogue and understanding as the readers in Japan and across the world are learning about each other through the narratives. As noted by Kacsuk, manga is a 'possible channel for forging affective ties among young people in various countries around the world in relation to Japanese culture and, as a possible extension, to Japan' (2018: 2). Various studies have explored manga as a cultural text that is instrumental in cross-cultural and intercultural exchanges amongst readers (Ro 2019; Ogi 2019; Prough 2010). Berndt and Kummerling-Meibaur examined manga from the perspective of culture and found manga to be 'a site where different cultures meet or intermingle' (2013: 1).

Over the years, the works of many Japanese mangaka have featured subject matters that focus on intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. Among such works include Hikaru Nakamura's *Saint Young Men* (2006) which touches on Christianity and Buddhism by featuring the characters of Buddha and Jesus dialoguing with each other whilst renting a flat together in Tachikawa, Tokyo. Another manga that features interculturalism based on Japanese and Malaysian Muslim culture is 'Boku to Otouto no Halal Gohan' or 'Halal Food with Me and My Little Brother' by Misuji Yamamoto which deals with a multicultural family navigating their cultural differences in daily life. A further example of a Japanese mangaka who crosses national and cultural borders can be seen in the works by Manaru Tenkawa. This mangaka has created works such as *Hana* to represent Arab Muslim culture in manga for Japanese, Arab and readers around the globe. These works have helped familiarize Japanese manga readers with cultures, religions and nationalities from around the world.

INTERCULTURALISM AND DEEP DIALOGUE

Interculturalism is defined by shared values that are developed through the interaction between communities or by universal values that are commonly accepted by the said communities (Lähdesmäki et al. 2020: 11). The key to achieving interculturalism or shared values between communities is through intercultural dialogue (Cantle 2001). It refers to the 'meaningful interaction between communities from different backgrounds' to 'promote trust and understanding and to break down myths and stereotypes' (Cantle 2013: 10). However, a 'shared space' for people or communities to interact in is an important societal prerequisite for intercultural dialogue (Lähdesmäki et al. 2020: 12). Only when there are these common spaces where people can come together to mingle, interact and coexist, can intercultural dialogue occur. In addition to having a shared space, effective intercultural dialogue also requires that the participants share common values and attributes. Sharing common values such as 'open mindedness, empathy, cognitive flexibility and the ability to adapt to and accept new cultural contexts' facilitate healthy intercultural communication and relationships (Barrett 2013: 26).

Interculturalism is 'essentially dialogic and involves recognising and negotiating' commonalities and differences (Holmes 2014: 2). By identifying and accepting the similarities and, more importantly, differences that exist between them, people and communities can learn to '(re)negotiate and (re)construct their positions and identities within and across groups […] and work towards solutions to seemingly intractable divergences and unrelenting postures in situations of conflict' (Holmes 2014: 2). As noted by Barrett, intercultural dialogue enables people and communities to develop an understanding of different cultural beliefs and practices, 'interpersonal trust, tolerance, and mutual respect' as well as reduce prejudice and stereotypes (2013: 26). These can only occur when participants engage in meaningful deep dialogue with an open mind and mutual respect and understanding.

Consequently, intercultural recognition demands greater acknowledgement of one's identity 'not despite of [one's] otherness but on the basis of it' (Schaap 2003: 5) and accepts that any form of misrecognition can cause conflict in intercultural relations. The element of reciprocity is necessary to sustain a harmonious multicultural environment. According to Taylor, '[p]erhaps we don't need to ask whether it's something that others can demand from us as a right. We might simply ask whether this is the way we ought to approach others' (1994: 72). By providing others with the kind of respect and acknowledgement we hope to receive we can begin to minimize any xenophobic attitude that exists in society. In this way, intercultural recognition does not become a demand the Other imposes on us, but rather a courteous goodwill we show the Other as a member of a multicultural society.

The genuine recognition of the other requires a few important steps. Taking up Schaap's definition of ethnocentrism as 'unreflectively judging the other in terms of our own vocabulary of worth', recognition, therefore, includes first, the acceptance that the other is 'equal [in] worth' to us and second that the other has a value which consequently may inform us of the 'inadequacy in our own conception of the good' (2003: 8). In other words, we can learn a different way of life from the other. Such an 'undistorted' (Schaap 2003) view of the other is one of the prerequisites of what Swidler calls 'a mentality of deep-dialogue' in which one enters the other's perspective and '[return] mutually transformed' (2003: 8). Deep dialogue requires the empathetic acceptance

of the other's position and point of view which consequently will transform one's perception of the world. Deep dialogue also requires the suspension of preconceived ideas about the other. It is akin to the notion of 'compassionate communication' (Newberg and Waldman 2012: 147) which focuses on the acts of listening and speaking that nurture mutual respect and trust.

METHODOLOGY

The article adopts a literary approach to the analysis of *Satoko and Nada Volume 1* and employs critical textual analysis as the methodology. This is a manga series created by the Japanese mangaka, Yupechika, who produced the story and artwork. Marie Nishimori, the Japanese-Dutch Muslim journalist and author was the script advisor and supervisor of the manga. The manga was published by Seven Seas Entertainment in Japan in 2017. The English trans-lation (translated by Jenny McKeon) was published in 2018 for international readers. According to Katakura (2020), the editor of Seikaisha (Japanese publisher of *Satoko and Nada*), Yupechika has also created other manga such as 'Marin's Space Travel' (2020) in *Monthly Afternoon* magazine, and 'Natsuko and Ophy's Daily Life' in *English Conversation Time Trial* magazine.

As a manga, *Satoko and Nada* adheres to the traditional manga style of right-to-left layout. It is presented in the four-cell or yonkoma comic strip format which consists of four equal-sized vertical panels ordered from top to bottom, and each yonkoma has a title that is written in large caps. The layout is based on different episodes or scenes (pages 4–115) in the life of the two characters, Satoko and Nada. Each scene tells a story that revolves around a particular topic presented in the first-person point of view. The scenes can be further categorized based on their titles or headings. The first category of scenes is based on the setting or location of the story, and they are appropriately titled as: 'Movie Theatre', 'Coffee Shop', 'Church', 'Mosque' and 'Mecca' (Yupechika 2017: 47–95). The second categorization of the scenes or stories revolves around specific subject matters that Satoko, the Japanese character, observes about her new Saudi friend and roommate, Nada. These subject matters can be further categorized into religious themes titled 'Veils', 'Ramadan', 'Prayer', 'Mashallah' and 'Pilgrimage' (Yupechika 2017: 7–94). Titles with value-based themes are 'Choice', 'Pride', 'Building Trust', 'Perspectives' and 'Getting Along' (Yupechika 2017: 16–84). Japanese cultural-based themes are found in the titles such as 'Onigiri', 'Ramune', 'Sushi Party' and 'Sensei' (Yupechika 2017: 38–114).

While the study acknowledges the significance of the visual aspects in the manga, the scope of the current article focuses primarily on textual narrative which includes the narrative voice and dialogue. For the analysis, each scene/heading was collated and coded according to the themes of fashion, food and faith as these were the areas where Satoko and Nada's cultural exchanges are most amplified. The interactions between Satoko and Nada will be analysed based on the concepts of interculturalism and deep dialogue described in the theoretical framework to ascertain the extent to which Yupechika portrays intercultural engagement and shows recognition of intercultural competency in the character development of her narrative.

Connecting in culinary spaces: Sharing food and culture

The view of food as material culture and its role as a point of interface between different cultures (Farquhar 2006) is an important dimension in the reading of

Satoko and Nada's intercultural relationship. Food is found to be the subject of various interactions between the characters in this manga. As flatmates, the kitchen and dining table become the shared spaces where Satoko and Nada's interactions often occur as they both express interest and curiosity in the other's cuisine and culinary traditions. During the interactions in these shared culinary spaces, the element of reciprocity is seen as these two friends share their meals and even prepare meals for each other. These culinary spaces echo the 'spaces of intercultural communication' discussed by Rico Lie which emphasizes 'the interaction (coexistence, negotiation and transformation) between the cultural elements/forms' (2002: 5). The element of reciprocity is necessary to sustain a harmonious multicultural environment. As their cultures are rather different in terms of culinary and dietary styles in addition to other aspects, the cultural differences between the two are at times amplified in the shared kitchen and dining spaces. However, instead of allowing these differences to drive a barrier between them, Satoko and Nada are seen making use of their different food cultures as a way of learning about each other and their cultures. The process of culinary exchange and deep dialogue whilst eating and cooking Japanese and Arab foods facilitates productive intercultural exchange (Flowers and Swan 2012) between the two friends.

In the episode titled 'She Cuts It Close', Satoko is shown moaning the difficulty of obtaining thinly sliced meat in American stores to make her shabu, a Japanese hot pot dish: 'It's hard to get sliced meat in America. All they sell is giant steaks!' (Yupechika 2017: 26). She then resorts to slicing the meat herself, exclaiming, '[f]ine. Fine! I'll just try to shave off delicate slices myself!' (Yupechika 2017: 26). Satoko's noisy meal preparation takes place at a time when Nada and her fellow Saudi friend are present. Perplexed and possibly annoyed at Satoko's behaviour, Nada's friend questions Nada, 'Nada, what on earth is your roommate doing? We've heard those noises every night' (Yupechika 2017: 26). The friend's question indicates that she is unable to rationalize Satoko's daily behaviour and hints of possible annoyance at the noise. Satoko's method of food preparation differs from what Nada and her Saudi friends recognize as a norm for cooking based on their culture and therefore becomes an aspect where the differences in their cultures are amplified leading to a possible conflict (Perry 2017).

However, Nada's reply to her fellow Saudi friend demonstrates an effort to avoid any kind of misrecognition that may potentially damage the relationship between her and Satoko. She refrains from making a judgement on Satoko's behaviour and instead, simply acknowledges it by saying: 'She said she's cutting meat into thin slices' (Yupechika 2017: 26). Nada's reply to her friend indicates an empathetic understanding and acceptance of Satoko's behaviour in the kitchen no matter how different it may be from her own. Incorporating Pierre Macherey's (1978) approach of reading the silences and gaps in text, the analysis into Nada's portrayal by Yupechika can be read to demonstrate that her non-judgemental acceptance of the Other is most likely a result of preceding deep dialogue that must have occurred between her and Satoko. Nada's friend, however, did not have the same empathy or understanding of Satoko's behaviour which led to her possible annoyance at it. This episode also demonstrates Yupechika's emphasis on the importance of deep dialogues in the intercultural portrayal of her characters where they are shown to have the ability to identify differences in each other's behaviour and understand a different way of life without judgement. This representation in the narrative by the mangaka echoes the notion of 'overcoming the golden rule' that

Milton Bennett describes as the key to developing 'empathetic communication' in intercultural engagement ([1979] 2017: 408). In the absence of meaningful dialogue about differences, pre-existing prejudices about the other can come to play which may result in hostility and conflict.

In the 'She Cuts It Close' episode, Nada demonstrates the ability to negotiate and reconstruct her perspectives on cooking practices by accepting Satoko's style. This is evident in her comment, '[m]aybe it's a Japanese thing?' (Yupechika 2017: 26). Nada's approach to understanding Satoko's actions demonstrates an attempt to understand, acknowledge and accept the cultural differences that exist between them. The tolerance and acceptance of different practices and way of life are values shared by both Satoko and Nada which allow them to coexist harmoniously as friends and flatmates. Intercultural relationships can only succeed when both parties are equally invested in learning about each other and being open to accepting the differences in each other. Yupechika's portrayal of these characters indicates the importance she places on curiosity, openness and empathy in an intercultural relationship. The mangaka also shows sensitivity towards understanding what scholars of intercultural studies describe as 'common grounds' or shared 'beliefs and values' between members of different cultures (Martin and Nakayama 2022: 148).

Their curiosity and openness are especially evident in the kitchen where they demonstrate interest in knowing and learning about each other's culinary heritage and are open to trying each other's cooking. This sharing of meals inadvertently opens an avenue for further intercultural exchange and brings them closer as friends. As indicated in various studies on food and culture, food fulfils a social role and brings communities together (or divides them) and creates connections between people and their families, friends, home, culture, heritage and country (Kong and Sinha 2016; Perry 2017). Additionally, food is also instrumental as a medium of expression to convey feelings and affections and creates emotional bonds (Perry 2017).

This intercultural exchange through food is evident in two other episodes, 'Onigiri' and 'Potatoes'. In 'Onigiri', Nada is curious about what Satoko is making for lunch. Satoko explains that she is making '[a]n onigiri! It's a rice ball. […] I guess you could call it Japanese soul food' (Yupechika 2017: 38). Satoko offers the onigiri to Nada to take with her for lunch, '[h]ere, take some with you'. Nada accepts Satoko's offer without hesitation, '[s]ure'. Later, when having lunch with her other Arab Muslim friends, she shows them the lunch Satoko had given her and exclaims, '[a]nd so, I present: Satoko's onigiri special!' (Yupechika 2017: 38).

Nada's acceptance of a Japanese dish from Satoko even though she had not heard of it before indicates her openness to experience aspects of Satoko's culture. In doing so, she counters stereotypical perceptions that Muslims do not accept and consume food prepared by non-Muslims. Nada's acceptance is an indication of the trust that has been built between the two of them based on the deep understanding they have about each other's cultures and faiths. Nada is confident that Satoko would not offer her any food that would be non-halal or forbidden for her to consume. Such a portrayal suggests the importance placed by Yupechika on mutual respect and understanding between these characters. As Nada tastes the rice ball in 'Onigiri', she is shown to be opening herself up to the tastes and flavours of Japan. She then goes on to proudly savour the onigiri, 'mm! this is good' (Yupechika 2017: 38). Nada's adaptation to and acceptance of new cultural experience through food is key to intercultural dialogue (Barrett 2013).

Like Nada, food tends to be a preferred entry point into a new culture for many. The new tastes and flavours of a cuisine are perhaps the fastest and safest way of initiating oneself into a different culture as studies into intercultural communication indicate (Kim 2012). Similarly, for Satoko and Nada, as neither has travelled to the other's country, their initiation to each other's cultural traditions as seen in this and other episodes ('Saudi Champagne', 'Arabic Dessert', 'Dates', 'Sushi Party' and 'Steamed Buns') occurs a lot through food (Yupechika 2017). The sensorial and gastronomical pleasures one may experience through the consumption of a dish or cuisine from a different culture naturally evokes an appreciation of its culinary culture and can further ignite interest in the culture's other traditions and practices.

In addition to creating an appreciation for Japanese cuisine, eating a dish prepared by Satoko also allows Nada to feel appreciation for her roommate which then develops into the feeling of reciprocation. As seen in Nada's response to her friends, 'once Satoko gets sick of cooking, I'll take over' (Yupechika 2017: 38), Nada's desire to cook for Satoko as Satoko had done for her is evident here as is the growing bond between them. Yupechika through these characters creates a narrative that allows the reader to contemplate the ease with which food sharing can be the bridging capital for intercultural, inter-religious engagement to happen.

The social and cultural functions of food in creating the bond between people, especially among women, are highlighted in this manga. Throughout the text, Satoko and Nada are seen exchanging recipes and learning a lot about both Saudi and Japanese traditions and practice revolving around food and eating. This sharing of food and culinary traditions is considered a type of 'home-building' within intercultural discourse (Flowers and Swan 2012). For many international students away from their native home countries, home is rooted in their ethnic cuisines. Therefore, the dining and kitchen spaces where they prepare, eat and share their cuisines with those from other cultures become 'the shared spaces where the intercultural exchanges occur through mutual respect and acceptance' (Perry 2017: 194).

In the following story titled 'Potatoes' (Yupechika 2017: 39), Nada is preparing dinner for Satoko. In this episode we see how in addition to forging intercultural ties, culinary spaces can also become a space for potential misrecognition and conflict in an intercultural relationship due to different cultural traditions and conventions about food (Perry 2017). Satoko walks into their flat and casually asks, '[w]hat's for dinner today' (Yupechika 2017: 39). Satoko's question indicates that the two friends have established a routine of cooking for each other. The act of cooking for each other is an indication that the two have developed a form of intimate, familial friendship where they take care of each other and trust the other to nourish them. However, on this occasion, a potential misunderstanding occurs due to cultural differences as Nada answers 'Potatoes' in reply to Satoko's question. As harmless as Nada's answer may seem, Satoko is surprised and disappointed that the dinner Nada is preparing only consists of potatoes. Satoko's disappointment can be attributed to her lack of awareness of the Saudi convention of naming a dish after the main vegetable used in it. She, therefore, mistakenly assumes that Nada had only cooked potatoes for dinner and is rather disappointed. However, she does not visibly nor verbally express her doubts or disappointments out loud to Nada to avoid a conflict or hurting Nada's feelings. Nada, however, sensing that Satoko may not fully understand the name of the dish, explains to Satoko about the conventions of how dishes are named in Saudi Arabia. Satoko then

realizes that the dinner Nada has prepared is not just potatoes but a type of stew that also consists of lamb and other vegetables.

In this episode, we see how Yupechika, through the narrator, mitigates cultural misunderstanding by providing an explanation which resolves the confusion. As seen in the episode, 'Potatoes', the narrator explains that '[s]ome Saudi recipes are nicknamed after their main vegetables. "Potatoes" meant Nada was making a dish … of lamb and potatoes cooked in spicy carrot and tomato broth' (Yupechika 2017: 39). The cultural insights provided by Yupechika can be seen as increasing the intercultural understanding of Japanese and Saudi practices for readers at large. At the macro-level, this manga echoes Berndt and Kummerling-Meibaur's (2013) perspective of manga as a site for intercultural engagement. In doing so, the mangaka Yupechika can be commended for her efforts towards increasing global intercultural awareness and understanding through her narrative.

The intercultural exchange that occurs over food indicates how food can be a mechanism for enabling empathy, tolerance and connection across different ethnic groups (Flowers and Swan 2012). This manga demonstrates how conflicts in intercultural relations can be mitigated through careful and respectful reactions to different views and traditions. Additionally, through Satoko and Nada who demonstrate curiosity and openness towards new cultures and experiences, Yupechika provides a narrative that counters stereotypes about people from conservative societies like Saudi Arabia as being closed and unaccepting of different cultures and ways of life (Meijer and Aarts 2012).

Styles across culture: Building intercultural friendship through fashion

The second theme of the article focuses on how Satoko and Nada bridge the cultural differences through fashion. Here, it is important to establish that a person's culture and religious beliefs can shape her relationship with clothing. In the story titled 'Choice', Nada comments that '[t]he world revolves around physical beauty', and the way an individual chooses to dress can affect how others perceive and even judge them (Yupechika 2017: 17). As a Saudi Muslim woman, Nada's attire is dictated by her faith and culture. The term hijab, which includes the attire and head covering, is part of the outdoor attire for the majority of Muslim women including those from the Middle East. Nada tells Satoko that she feels 'invincible' (Yupechika 2017: 17) when she wears the hijab as it shields her from unwanted attention. Nada also admits that wearing the hijab in America makes her more aware of who she is. This notion is echoed in an article on wearing the hijab in North America in which the writer expresses that '[m]y hijab is my identity, my right, my voice, my freedom. I am not oppressed because I wear it' (Kanso 2016: 24). However Nada recognizes that the veil within the western context is, 'both a blessing and a curse' (Yupechika 2017: 16) as it is a very visual indicator of Islam. The negative perception in the West towards veiling, as Abbas argues, is that it 'encourages separate lives, destroys multiculturalism, breeds intolerance' among members of culturally diverse society (2011: 72).

Nada's sentiment thus, echoes previous studies into veiling especially in the context of post 9/11: 'Veiled women, particularly, are singled out because they are visible and their affiliation to Islam is made overt through their head wear' (Raihanah et al. 2015: 113). Furthermore, the issue is made worse with the lack of dialogue between 'Muslim women and mainstream society' and

'the lack of positive representation of the hijabi [a Muslim woman in head-scarf] in the media' (Raihanah 2018: 113). Yupechika through her characters addresses these concerns and presents a more diverse perspective. As Nada asserts, wearing the hijab should not prevent her 'from standing out as a woman' (Yupechika 2017: 17). Yupechika through this conversation on veiling shows that Nada as a Muslim woman continues to carve ways to 'stand out' as an individual with a critical voice on how she lives.

Quite often, when non-Muslims see a Muslim woman fully covered from head to toe, they perceive the hijab as a symbol of female oppression. This is clearly shown in the story titled 'Perspectives' when Satoko's American friend Miracle, regards a group of Muslim women wearing the hijab or burqa as 'poor things' as 'they have to cover themselves up' (Yupechika 2017: 69). Similarly, Satoko admitted that she initially thought that Nada 'would feel bad wearing it' (Yupechika 2017: 17). Miracle and Satoko's pre-existing prejudices about the veiled Muslim women as victims of Islamic patriarchal oppression can be seen as a projection of western centric views of gender inequality in Muslim society. However, as seen in Nada's comment about a poster of a woman in a bikini, Muslim women also have a counter-discourse about women based on their attire. Ironically, in the same episode, Nada uses the same expression, 'poor thing', when she sees a picture of a woman wearing a bikini, and comments, '[h]ow can they show a woman dressed like that?' (Yupechika 2017: 69).

Feelings expressed by Miracle, Satoko and Nada about the attire of the other can also be based on the feeling of empathy as women themselves. Miracle and Satoko can be seen as empathizing with the veiled woman who is covered up regardless of the weather. Nada too feels a sense of injustice for a white woman who she sees as being exploited for her body and shows a heightened sense of empathy for other women. Through this narration, Yupechika appears to challenge the conventional cultural perspectives and world-view between the women, especially at the beginning of their rela-tionships. As seen in the manga, over time, Satoko muses that her interac-tions with Nada and Miracle had led her to 'realise that there are so many perspectives out there' (Yupechika 2017: 69). This story illustrates what schol-ars in gender and interculturality consider as the need for cultural and reli-gious differences to be identified, understood and accepted through an open dialogue (Mahoney 2019). Yupechika exemplifies this negotiation and accept-ance of cultural differences through dialogue via the characters of Satoko and Nada in this manga.

Through this manga, non-Muslim readers gain an insight into tradi-tions and practices related to the choices a Muslim woman makes about her attire in both the public and private domains. As seen in the story, 'Show Skin' (Yupechika 2017: 23), even though Nada dresses modestly in public, in her private or personal space at home with immediate family members and female friends, she is free to dress in the way she wants. For example, during their all-girl parties at home (Yupechika 2017: 12, 110), Satoko and Miracle are dazzled to see Nada's friends emerge like beautiful butterflies from their hijab cocoons with make-up, beautifully coiffed hair, expensive jewellery and fash-ionable clothes. The enthusiasm and attention that Nada and her friends give to their fashion, style and appearances using make-up and accessories can be seen as Yupechika providing a counter narrative to stereotypical perceptions about veiled Muslim women as deprived of style and glamour.

Through Satoko's interactions with Nada and her Muslim friends, she learns that there are many types of hijabs, depending on which part of the

Arab world the Muslim woman comes from. The reader learns in the story titled 'Veils' that even though the hijab is the most common type of Muslim covering, the hijab styles vary according to the culture and traditions of countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia (Yupechika 2017: 9). The different hijab styles also show the diversity in Muslim attire according to different cultural contexts. Beyond entertainment, such educational elements in this manga broaden the horizon of its readers about other cultural and religious practices. As a woman, Nada finds the hijab a very useful and convenient piece of clothing. On days when she is running late, she uses the conservative abayah robe (outer garment) and niqab (face covering) as this means she does not have to waste time deciding what to wear and only has to do her eyes before leaving the house (Yupechika 2017: 8).

In the story titled 'No Pressure' Satoko learns that not all Muslim women wear the hijab which highlights the fact that Muslim women do have the agency of choice (Yupechika 2017: 100). As Nada informs Satoko, '[t]he world is filled with different people [and] that includes different Muslims'; '[w]e can't look down on people or isolate them just because they dress or live differently' (Yupechika 2017: 100). Nada's views capture the prevalent stereotypes about Muslims as shown in the research conducted on the perceptions of Muslims and Islam in the United States and around the world by Lipka (2017). Through Nada, Yupechika signals the reality that Muslims are made up of diverse nationalities and cultures. They are individuals with their own ideas, opinions and perspectives. In the third and final section of analysis, the theme of faith is problematized by focusing on how diversity in beliefs is represented in *Satoko and Nada*.

Interfaith dialogue: Accepting diverse beliefs

The themes of faith, religious practices and being a Muslim form a crucial focus of Satoko and Nada's friendship. The manga opens with the story titled 'Their First Meeting' (Yupechika 2017: 4), in which Satoko meets a niqabi (a Muslim woman with a face covering) who later turns out to be her roommate, Nada. Her initial misgivings rooted in Nada's attire is obvious in this episode, as she privately worries, '[w]hoa is this […] really gonna work out?' (Yupechika 2017: 4). Yet as their friendship blossoms, as seen in the previous two sections, Satoko begins to shed some of her preconceived notions of Nada. Her retrospective admission clearly indicates a change of perception towards her Muslim housemate: 'Before I moved in with her. […] I thought of Muslim women as quiet and reserved. But Nada's charming – and perky!' (Yupechika 2017: 5). In another story, Satoko reiterates this point when Nada in her excitement lifts her abayah to show the dress she had recently purchased: 'It wasn't what I expected when I first met her […] but it turns out that Nada's not that different from my other friends' (Yupechika 2017: 7). The constant reminder that Nada is like her other friends despite her religious and lifestyle differences signals the importance placed on similarity in this intercultural, inter-religious friendship.

Another important issue within the theme of religious identification is the importance of an empathetic perspective when dealing with people from different religious backgrounds. As discussed earlier, when her friend Miracle comments about the niqabi and hijabis, Satoko's initial response was to echo the same sentiment, '[p]oor things? I used to feel the same way as Miracle' (Yupechika 2017: 69). However, by sharing living spaces with Nada, Satoko

gradually develops an understanding of the latter's religious and cultural sensibilities. This reiterates the importance of common spaces in a multicultural friendship where deep dialogue can occur.

Furthermore, *Satoko and Nada* touches on the intercultural, inter-religious sense of being seen from a Japanese woman's perspective. Satoko experiences vicariously a range of issues that her Muslim friend has to deal with such as 'veiling' (Yupechika 2017: 9), fasting 'while the sun is out' (Yupechika 2017: 11) during the month of Ramadan, the five daily prayers (Yupechika 2017: 41, 42), consuming halal food 'that means it's safe for Muslims to eat' (Yupechika 2017: 40), co-mingling between men and women (Yupechika 2017: 47) and performing pilgrimage (Yupechika 2017: 95). The manga takes up critical engagement of inter-religious dialogue by introducing the readers to the primary Islamic canon of the holy scripture, i.e. 'The Quran' (Yupechika 2017: 72), and the Hadith which are '[t]he book of the Prophet's teachings' (Yupechika 2017: 58). Likewise, the manga portrays some of the societal challenges faced by Muslim women in some parts of the world such as whether to attend prayers at the mosque (Yupechika 2017: 58, 59) instead of praying at home, to hold a profession such as a doctor (Yupechika 2017: 63) and to drive (Yupechika 2017: 23, 24). The latter affected women in Saudi in the past, albeit this has since been lifted following the authority's new ruling in 2018 (Gannon 2020).

Unlike many narratives on Muslims by non-Muslim writers which depict the former as either exotic or victims of patriarchal cultures (M. Alosman et al. 2018), Yupechika's manga paints a broader picture of a Muslim woman whose commitment to her faith is met on equal footing by her personality and interests in developing friendship with people from different cultures, religions and nationalities. Also, unlike other manga written by women mangaka which focuses on issues of relationship both romantic and platonic (Takeuchi 2010), Yupechika through her stories and illustrations appears to use the friendship between Satoko and Nada as a means to explore inter-religious topics which Japanese readers may be unfamiliar with.

In *Satoko and Nada*, Yupechika also presents views of religion from a Japanese perspective. In a story titled 'Social Media Debut' (Yupechika 2017: 68), Satoko mulls over her religious identity. When she had to declare her 'religious beliefs' upon setting up a Facebook account, Satoko was uncertain and looked to her Japanese friends for ideas. The answers may appear to belittle the question of religiosity: 'Mint Chocolate', 'Atobe-sama from P-Ten', 'Yomiuri Giants Baseball'.

Satoko's direct response to her friends' query about her religious conviction indicates the ambivalence she feels towards the issue of religion. It is vital to note that Yupechika is very candid about Satoko's religious sensibilities as a Japanese person. When Miracle – a Christian – who has shared about her church activities with Satoko and Nada (Yupechika 2017: 57), asks whether she is a 'Buddhist' (Yupechika 2017: 66), Satoko's comments appear to confuse her friends: 'I guess I don't really have a particular religion'. Initially, they felt sad for Satoko's lack of religious attachment. Nada starts by saying, '[i]t's okay Satoko. whatever you believe in […] we'll always love you!' Miracle concurs by adding, '[t]hat's right! there's more to you than religion!' As individuals with a strong religious identity, Miracle and Nada look upon Christianity and Islam, respectively, as a foundation of their faith. They appeared empathetic towards Satoko and offered her their acceptance of her.

However, their empathic stance appears to diminish slightly when Satoko tells them, 'I'm technically Buddhist […] but I wouldn't say that's all […] that

I believe in […] all Gods, from all countries are fair game. I respect them all' (Yupechika 2017: 67). Nada's question, '[s]o you believe […] in a bunch of different gods?', and Miracle's response '[t]here's only one God, Satoko' (Yupechika 2017: 67), appear to indicate their inability to shed their religious stance as they consider Satoko's 'polytheistic' one. Yupechika as a mangaka appears open to a multi-religious experience and the repercussions it would have on her Japanese character. She positions Satoko, and indirectly the Japanese manga readers, in situations to reflect on their religious identity. And Satoko's final say on the issue appears to settle the matter: '[i]t didn't seem weird back in Japan' (Yupechika 2017: 67). Satoko neither judges others for their prominent religious perspectives nor does she appear to need to fit into societal expectations of having a religious association.

A final point on the theme of interfaith dialogue in this manga is that through the character of Satoko, Yupechika presents a caricature of an animated and curious individual who puts herself in situations that force her to experience a new culture without favour or fear. In the story titled 'Secret Room' (Yupechika 2017: 97), Satoko is shown to have running thoughts about Nada's religious practices, especially those which are performed in public. As her interior monologue indicates, she is always observing how the Muslims practise their faith. She wonders, 'I've seen men pray outside before […] but where do women pray when they are not at home?' and when Nada shows her the space which is available '[n]ear the school infirmary', Satoko reflects on its availability in Japan, as she says, '[y]ou don't find this much in Japan' (Yupechika 2017: 97). The constant oscillation between observing the other as someone different and tapping into the curious and inquisitive nature of 'wanting to know' gives Satoko and Nada the ability to cross the religious and cultural borders that would otherwise perpetually separate the two characters. The choice to courageously explore unknown and unfamiliar contexts and perspectives are therefore vital for intercultural communication in this diverse world.

CONCLUSION

Yupechika, in *Satoko and Nada*, represents interculturalism through a narrative of friendship between two friends from different national, cultural and religious contexts. A key finding of the study is that Yupechika incorporates pre-existing prejudices in the engagement between the two culturally diverse characters. The two are shown to negotiate their cultural and religious differences with empathy and curiosity. They both see each other as individuals rather than representatives of their specific culture and ethnic group. This analysis reveals Yupechika's negotiation of intercultural differences that help establish a loving friendship and sisterhood between the two women.

Yupechika's narrative appears to familiarize the Japanese readers with aspects of Islam and Saudi culture. The narrative arch reveals the importance of empathy, space and value sharing in forging intercultural understanding without coming across as proselytizing.

To conclude, this study has revealed that manga can be a powerful cultural text for increasing intercultural understanding, breaking cultural stereotypes and potentially dispelling prejudices. This reading into Yupechika's intercultural narrative is a microcosm of the type of dialogue needed in the world today to overcome the acute racism and xenophobia.

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