Challenging Stereotypical Women and Muslim Representation in Ms. Marvel and Captain Marvel

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It is safe to say that superheroes have become a central part of modern popular culture as numerous superheroes films such as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Black Panther* have broken box office records and earned millions of dollars worldwide. One important film is *Wonder Woman* due to being the first major critically and financially successful female led superhero film. With a stellar performance by Gal Gadot, who portrayed Wonder Woman and direction by Patty Jenkins, the film changed the landscape of the superhero genre and showed that there is a market for a superhero movie with a female lead. While female led superheroes movies are still rare, both Marvel Studios and Warner Bros. are committed to making more films with female directors and female leads. This will lead to more representation of women in superhero movies as these female directors and actresses will impart their unique vision to the genre. This does bring up numerous questions: Has the success of these films changed the comic book industry as well? How has representation in comic books changed from the start of comic books to the modern era due to the rise of superhero films? Looking at two of the foremost female characters in Marvel Comics can help answer these questions. These two characters are Carol Danvers and Kamala Khan.

Carol Danvers is an American female superhero currently known as Captain Marvel who has become Marvel’s most famous superheroine. Her super-powers include super strength, flight, and energy manipulation. Kamala Khan is a Pakistani-American Muslim teenager whose Inhuman genes are activated and gains shapeshifting powers which she uses to fight crime under
the name of Ms. Marvel. Both of them are surrounded by a diverse supporting cast of women, Muslims, and other rarely seen archetypes. These characters give a good glimpse of female and Muslim representation in contemporary Marvel comic books. The analysis of these characters showcases the changing perception of women and Muslims in popular culture through the use of comic books. By looking at the history of Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel, the reader can see the development of the depictions of women and Muslims until the modern age of Marvel Comics.

Before analyzing the characters, it is important to provide some context on both the genre of comic books superheroes and the historical representation of women and Muslims. A comic book is a monthly publication of comics content that is around 32 pages long and 16.83 cm x 26.0 cm. They were distributed in pharmacies, newsstands, and grocery stores which, Carolyn Cocca states in the introduction to her book Superwomen: Gender, Power and Representation, helped comic books be “easily accessible to a wide variety of people.” This changed during the late 80’s/early 90’s as specialty comic book stores rose to prominence and the comic book market shifted to a direct form of selling its product. Cocca explains that “publishers increasingly turned to distribute comics to specialty stores that could order a specific number of heavily discounted comics of their choosing but could not return unsold merchandise.” This shift led to comics becoming more of a niche product only found in these specialty stores until the early 2000’s led to another change in the industry. While the direct market still exists today, the rise of trade paperbacks which collect between 5 to 6 issues of a comic book series has led to new ways to buy American comic books. These trade paperbacks are found in both comic book stores and chain stores such as Barnes & Nobles, which has a section for these types of books. Another change in the dynamic of selling American comic books came with the Internet. The Internet gives people the ability to buy comic books and trade paperbacks in their homes and receive
them as digital content on Kindle and other tablets. This has led to a demographic shift that will be discussed in detail later in the historical context, but there is still one more issue regarding American comic books. To better situate comic books as a genre, McCloud’s book, *Understanding Comics*, helps us understand what defines a comic book: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). This definition not only encompasses American comic books but newspaper comic strips, manga, and webcomics. Comics and comic books are not the same thing. Comics is a medium while comic books are a format in which comics are presented.

One of the primary characters through the history of comic books is, of course, the superhero. According to Peter Coogan who wrote the essay “The Definition of the Superhero”, superheroes can be identified by three aspects of their character: mission, powers, and identity (76-77). Coogan describes the superheroes’ mission as “pro-social and selfless... And must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda” (77). This mission parameter does little to differentiate the superhero from other heroic archetypes but when combined with the next two aspects, the archetype of a superhero grows clearer. The second important aspect of the superhero is the powers. Superheroes are embodied with abilities beyond that of a normal person such as super-strength or flight. Superpowers mark a clear difference between superheroes and other types of heroes. While this is true, there are many characters that do not have superpowers, including Batman and Iron Man. This is where the third aspect of a superhero comes into play, identity: “The identity element comprises the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename” (Coogan 78). In other words, both the codename and the costume create the iconic secret identity in the superhero genre. Previous heroes such as Zorro had secret identities and codenames, but “the heroic identities of these
characters do not firmly externalize either their alter ego’s inner character or biography” (Coogan 78). The other part of the identity aspect is the costume. The superhero costume “proclaims their identities” in a way that pulp and other heroic archetypes do not (Coogan 79). The most notable superhero whose costume proclaims their identity is Superman. Superman wears the symbol of his family on his chest hence the big S of the house of El. Both codenames and emblematic costumes are crucial parts to the idea of identity in superheroes. As mentioned before, not all superheroes have all three aspects previously mentioned. The three aspects don’t have to appear in every superhero but at least two of them should suffice to label a character as a superhero. With the definition of a superhero and comic books in hand, it’s time to look at the history of representation of female superheroes in Marvel Comics.

Marvel has a long history of female characters such as She-Hulk and Storm but before touching on the historical context of Marvel Comics, the definition of what representation is within popular culture should be tackled. Stuart Hall gave a definition of representation in his essay “The Work of Representation” in which he explains, “Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language” (17). This meaning is “produced and exchanged between members of culture” and “it does involve the use of language of signs and images which stand for or represent things” (15). In the context of comic books, the language that is comics is made up of images and words working together to depict psychical objects or concepts. Representation is created and exchanged through the use of cultural artifacts such as books, films, and television series. This short definition of representation will become important when approaching the history of both female and Muslim characters in Marvel Comics. Now we can shift to when female superheroes first appeared in American comic books.
During the 1940’s, World War II was ongoing and the U.S. was recovering from the Great Depression. Around this time, superheroes were starting to become popular icons for entertainment during the period known as the Golden Age of Comic Books after the creation of Superman in the late 1930s but it was not until the 1940s when female crimefighters and superheroes started to appear. The first known female crimefighter is The Woman in Red who subverted the current idea that a “female comic book crime fighter is that of a sexy nymph in a revealing costume” by wearing a “sweeping scarlet cloak with matching mask and skullcap” (Madrid). In “1940s: A Secret Life,” Mike Madrid states that many female superheroes and crimefighters “had been forced into the roles of well-mannered daughters or girlfriends, and a secret life gave these women a chance to be themselves.” He uses the example of Phantom Lady who is Sandra Knight: a daughter of a senator who has a fiancée. By becoming Phantom Lady, she is able to become an alternate self as a crime fighter than a boring, rich daughter. Unfortunately, on the major team books such as Justice Society of America, women were treated as sidekicks to the male heroes. This type of story would “reinforce the notion that women were better as assistants to male heroes, rather than working on their own— an idea that comic books held onto for many years” (Madrid). Marvel Comics’ female superheroes did not appear until later on after the World War II.

During the post-war era, superheroes were losing popularity and publishers tried to rectify that by creating a variety of superheroes, specifically female superheroes. The company that would become Marvel Comics, Timely Comics, was no exception, creating characters such as Miss America, Sun Girl, and Namora. These characters did not break any of the stereotypes already discussed and readership still went down until most popular American comics were
crime, horror, or romance comic books. This would last until the next big era of superhero comic books: The Silver Age of Comic Books.

The Silver Age of Comic Books started with the relaunch of a modern Flash in 1956 which led to more superhero content created by both DC Comics and the newly created Marvel Comics. In the year 1961, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby would create the first modern Marvel superhero team: The Fantastic Four. The series would be celebrated for giving characters an extra sense of realism as they would have personal conflicts with their self-identity and their teammates. As famed comic book writer Grant Morrison explains, “The Marvel Superhero was born—a hero who tussled not only with monsters and mad scientist but also with relatable personal issues” (93). Morrison continues, “In the Marvel universe, heroes needed reasons, motivations” (96). Unfortunately, the motivations and characterizations of female superheroes did not advance much in this era. In his chapter, “1960s: The Modern World,” Madrid notes that “Marvel’s heroines were consumed with thoughts of romance and marriage, perpetuating a dated 1950’s female stereotype.” He uses the example of the Wasp who is married to Hank Pym (Giant Man) and joins the Avengers only because Hank does. Her internal thoughts are mostly devoted to her husband; being a superhero is not that important to her even though she joins a superhero team. In short, women were written as romance obsessed people with no actual motivation to fight crime or to improve the world.

During the 1970s, women experienced liberation as second wave feminism swept through the country and new opportunities were available beyond just marriage. This was showcased in Marvel Comics as the superheroines started to move beyond the stereotypical representations of romance obsessed characters. In his chapter, “1970s: Sirens & Suffragettes,” Madrid explains, “women became superheroes to benefit society and themselves, not to win a man’s love.” which
is markedly different from the previous decade. One such character is Black Widow who “was a thrill seeker who chose the life of a crime fighter for the excitement it brought her. She didn’t do it to aid a boyfriend” (Madrid). This change in characterization spread to other characters such as Spider-Woman, but the most important female superhero introduced in this era is Ororo Munroe who is otherwise known as Storm from the X-Men series.

Ororo was born in New York City but was raised in Egypt until her parent's death. Due to being a mutant, her powers to control weather manifested themselves at a young age, and she was worshiped as a goddess by the people from the Serengeti. Later, when Professor X recruits her to his new team of X-Men, she returns back to the U.S. This opens her up to new experiences as Madrid argues “Professor X lured Ororo from her life of isolation to discover a new one. The limitless promise of a new world of sights and sensations was what women in the real world were experiencing as new doors opened for them.” This reflection of changing cultural values in comic books will be seen later again in the upcoming decades. Another interesting dynamic of Ororo is her codename: Storm. “Ororo was codenamed Storm, one of the first heroines to bear a modern nom de guerre that didn’t use ‘girl,’ ‘woman’ or ‘lady.”’ (Madrid). This might seem like a small point, but Ororo going by the name of Storm gave her a sense of equality that other female superheroes never had. She had her own identity that was not related to another male superhero and which did not proclaim her gender by the use of girl or woman in her codename.

One final change that Storm brought was her role in the X-Men. Madrid suggests, “Storm was far from the token girl of the new X-Men. She commanded the respect of her teammates, with the same ease that she controlled lighting, wind and rain.” Storm was elevated beyond the role of a damsel in distress or token female member as she was treated as an equal member of the team who was respected by the others. Even Wolverine, who was notorious for not getting along with
many people, treated her with respect. Storm broke ground at nearly every level in female representation of the times but she would also change as the decade closed. At the end of the decade, another change with society would lead to the rise of the anti-hero and darker storylines.

The 80s was a decade where the reaction towards the previous decade of liberation was met with cynicism. This was shown in the popularity of the anti-hero such as The Punisher and Wolverine who had no compunction for killing their enemies. As Madrid explains in his 80s chapter, “1980s: The Dark Road,” “stories became more violent and heroes became more morally conflicted,” which is a stark difference from the previous decade of liberation and potential. He continues, “Unlike the earlier heroines who strove to find love, Elektra eliminated emotions from her life. . . What was left was a grim, emotionally crippled, but incredibly sexy murderer- the ultimate belle dame sans merci.” Madrid explains further, “Despite the advances that women had made in comic books, there was still a message that they could not handle power as well as a man.” We see this in Elektra who closed off her emotions during her training to be a killer. While the 80s is known for dark storylines, the 90’s would change the representation of women again but this time for the worse.

The 90s comic book industry was the peak of comic book sales with American comic books selling like never before with many variant covers of the same comic book so that consumers would buy one comic book multiple times for the sake of collecting. This collecting craze would lead to a market crash that almost killed Marvel Comics as they filed for bankruptcy during the late 90s. Before the crash, however, X-Men was the bestselling comic book during this era with multiple female members yet representation of women took a nosedive. As Madrid explains, the women “had transcended the traditional comic book illustration style to look less like superheroines and more like supermodels.” Artists and their work were more popular than
writers and their storylines, so they took a back seat for big, tough men and sexualized women with no character. Female characters were drawn as super models who “thrust out their hips and struck fashion model poses” (Madrid). Unfortunately, this type of drawings would continue into the early 2000s, as female superheroes were still sexualized and underrepresented in American comic books. It is only until the 2010s where female presentation improved drastically.

As the 21st century started, female superheroes were still being drawn in poses derived from original photographic images of swimsuit or porn models” even though the dynamic between writer and artist shifted to more equal ground (Morrison 350). Two factors would arise to change the way women were represented in comic books. The first one was the rise of the Internet. This led to a “more inclusive form of comic book fandom” as women did not need to go to a male centric comic book store in order to talk about their favorite comic books and writers (Lynskey). Sites such as Women in Refrigerators which was created in 1999 by Gail Simone, a current comic book writer, also contributed to the discussion around female superheroes. The site name comes from a DC Comics storyline where Green Lantern (Kyle Rayner) finds his girlfriend dead and stuffed inside his refrigerator. The site lists all female superheroes that have been subjected to traumatic experiences or death in different storylines, including Rogue, Ms. Marvel and Batgirl. This site would be the first of many that would bring up the issue of the portrayal of women in comic books. Another such site is a Tumblr blog called The Hawkeye Initiative which features the male superhero Hawkeye drawn in the exact poses as female superheroes on typical covers or inaction scenes. The blog highlights how ridiculous and anatomically impossible these poses are once a male superhero is drawn in the same way. The Internet led a demographic shift where “women accounted for 48.13% of the 32 million self-identified comics fans on Facebook” in 2015 and 37% of a 72,000-book buying panel in 2017 were women which leads to a second
 major factor: money (Lynskey, Alverson). The writers of *A-Force* have said that social media is the motivation behind female-led comics (Dockterman). This demographic shift has led the major comic book publishers to try to diversify their comic books in order to sell to a new audience that has grown in recent years, hence the need to tone down the sexualization of these characters in favor of more practical costumes and more nuanced character development such as She-Hulk, Captain Marvel, and Ms. Marvel. Even though there are still sexualized characters in comic books as Jill Lepore notes after reading the first issue of *A-Force* which is an all-female team series, “they all look like porn stars.” While the major publishers still stumble when it comes to drawing women in comic books, the recent demographic shift has led to a more nuanced representation of women in superhero storylines in comparison to the 60s and 90s representation of romance obsessed characters and babes drawn as supermodels. Now it is time to discuss the representation of Muslims in Marvel which, unfortunately, has been even worse than the representation on women until the debut of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel.

Muslim representation in Marvel can be divided into three major eras: pre-9/11, 9/11, and post-9/11. During the pre-9/11 era, most of the Muslim characters were characterized as stereotypical Arabs with costumes who rode magic carpets or camels. Nicholaus Pumphrey argues that most Muslim characters were based “on orientalist stereotypes that would be recognizable and supported by the American audience “(784-785). This relates to Said’s *Orientalism* which argues that Orientalism is “a system of knowledge about the Orient an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness.” This is why writers would resort to stereotypes due to American audiences already having an idea of what Muslims and the Arab world is even though it is a negative, generalized viewpoint (6). Comic book writers and artists chose to reinforce stereotypes instead of challenging them with their
characters, art, and storylines. Many characters from Marvel would have numerous stereotypical characteristics that would link them to Orientalism. One such character is Sinbad who is pirate that wore a “turban, pointy shoes and rescued damsels dressed like belly dancers, from monsters and jinn” (785). Another similar character was the Arabian Knight “who also wore a turban, Turkish styled trousers, and pointy shoes. He was bearded, flew a magic carpet, brandished a large scimitar” (785). These two characters showcases how stereotypical the representation of Muslims and Arabs were in Marvel Comic, but these exaggerated Orientalists portrayals would only get worse after 9/11.

After 9/11, the appearance of Muslim terrorists grew in popular culture and Marvel Comics was no exception. As Pumphrey notes, “After 9/11, Marvel perpetuated the stereotypical portrayal of terrorists in many of their comics; most visible was the retcon story arc of Iron Man called Extremis” (781). Pumphrey here discusses the new origin story of Iron Man that was updated for a modern era. Instead of fighting communists, Iron Man broke out of his prison while fighting Muslim terrorists. This update was made to situate Iron Man more in the modern era, but the use of Muslim terrorists means it produces and spreads the negative stereotype of a Muslim as a possible terrorist. It is only after a few years where Muslim representation improved with the characters of Dust and Ms. Marvel.

Dust was created by Grant Morrison in 2002 in order to reject the post-9/11 fear that the world was still experiencing (Pumphrey 789). Unfortunately, her costume and characterization were still based on Muslim stereotypes. Dust wears a burqa and stereotypically spoke Arabic instead of Pashto or Dari (Pumphrey 790). Instead of creating a new character who subverts Muslim tropes, Morrison created a character that reflected American consciousness when it comes to reinforcing stereotypes. Nevertheless, Dust was the tentpole of Muslim representation
in Marvel until the creation of Kamala Khan otherwise known as Ms. Marvel. This new creation buckled most of the stereotypes regarding Muslims by being a relatable and ground breaking character similar to Peter Parker (geeky and awkward) who just happens to be a Muslim. She became an instant success in the industry as her series regularly sold out in stores. Before Kamala, there was another female success story in the Marvel universe. This character is Carol Danvers otherwise known currently as Captain Marvel.

Carol Danvers made her debut in *Marvel Super-Heroes #13* (1968), an anthology of reprinted stories with the exception of the lead story. The original story was written by Roy Thomas and drawn by Gene Colan. The lead story’s main character in this case is the original Captain Marvel otherwise known as the alien Kree spy Mar-Vell. He grows fond of Earth and its inhabitants during his mission, so he betrays his commanding officer and stays on Earth to protect it. During his time on Earth, he takes the persona of Dr. Walter Lawson in order to spy on humanity without revealing his alien identity. It is during his time as Lawson where he meets Carol Danvers. She is a United States Air Force officer and security chief to a restricted military base yet the first thing that Mar-Vell thinks when he sees her is “girl” (Thomas). As a character in the series, she primarily serves as a love interest to Captain Marvel even though she is an accomplished woman with an extensive background in the military. As Alex Abad-Santos' puts it, “She was a supporting character, a trope really, who had a thing for Captain Mar-Vell.” In other words, like other female comic characters, she is written in service of the main character. This would continue through the series until she is caught in an explosion during a confrontation between Captain Marvel and his jealous commanding officer Yon-Rogg. This blast would lead Carol Danvers’ life to change dramatically as she herself becomes a superhero, Ms. Marvel.
Ms. Marvel’s first issue was published in 1977 during the time where female superheroes and their depictions improved with characters such as Storm. Unfortunately, Ms. Marvel, leaves much to be desired as a female superhero comic series due to the overreliance on male superhero tropes and bad characterization of Carol Danvers. The first thing to highlight is the name Ms. Marvel itself. Ms. Marvel takes her name from Captain Marvel, but her name is derivative and non-unique. Not only does her name highlight her gender in a way that Captain Marvel does not but it serves as a “brand extension” similar to other female superheroes with derivative names such as She-Hulk and Batgirl. (Lynskey). Anne F. Peppard echoes this sentiment, “Ms. Marvel’s name can be considered problematic in as much as it links and arguably subordinates her to the male superhero Captain Marvel, whose name, unlike that of Ms. Marvel, connotes institutional authority” (114). This leads to the second major problem with Ms. Marvel: her powers. She has enhanced strength, the ability to fly, and precognitive seventh sense. Her powers are derived from the explosion she was caught in so her powers are Kree based. Again, it's derivative of Captain Marvel’s powers as a Kree warrior. As Abad-Santos wrote “Her powers fell into traditional superhero lore” making her even more traditional than Storm who has a unique codename and powers that no other superhero possessed. In short, Ms. Marvel is derivative of Captain Marvel from name to powers, and her characterization is also problematic.

The main problem with Carol Danvers’ characterization is that she does not know that she is Ms. Marvel and the other way around at the beginning of the series. When she “changes” into Ms. Marvel, she faints and turns into her superpowered alter ego but retains no recollection of the events that happened while she is Ms. Marvel. At the same time, Ms. Marvel does not recall Carol Danvers’ memories. This dynamic is troublesome because it “can imply that because she is a female, she could not handle the notion of being a superhero” (Cocca). Carol Danvers
herself exclaims, “God in heaven, this is tearing me apart... Help me!” (Claremont and Mooney). This suggests she cannot handle being Ms. Marvel. Another factor to include in this dynamic is Carol Danvers’ therapist, Doctor Michael Barnett, who discovers her condition before she does. This is also problematic because while Carol Danvers realizes that she is Ms. Marvel she still needs the assistance of a male character in order to solve her problem of split psyche. As Nathan Miczo notes “she is rendered fully passive due to her loss of self when she changes into Ms. Marvel” (173). This state of passivity is magnified by her need for help from Barnett in order to merge her two psyches together. While this aspect of the plotline is resolved relatively quickly, the damage is already done, and Carol Danvers becomes a passive female in need of assistance from a male character. The second problem with Ms. Marvel’s origin story is the constant highlighting of her female-ness over her characteristics. In Ms. Marvel, the reader is bombarded with lines relating to Ms. Marvel’s gender. As Claremont and Mooney point out, lines like “I've seen tough—but that little lady makes Lynda Carter look like Olive Oyl” or “Did you see that broad? Did you see what she did?” permeate the first story arc of Ms. Marvel’s series. Ms. Marvel’s gender becomes a central point of the story, even though this never happened to other characters such as Storm. Her storylines with the X-Men focus on her heroics and not on her gender. Both characters were being written around the same time so its noticeable that Ms. Marvel’s gender is brought up again and again. Carol Danvers works for a misogynistic boss named J. Jonah Jameson and their interactions involve debating the merits of a working woman. It seems groundbreaking at first glance to have a female character stand up to her boss and his outdated ideals, but Carol Danvers has no character depth beyond being a woman. She has no motivation or goals. She has no major characteristics that define her other than her gender. This leads to Carol Danvers being nothing more than a spokesperson for feminism but
not an actual character with depth or nuance. As Abad-Santos argues, “she was a vessel for a public service announcement rather than a unique character.” This defines Carol Danvers to the point that it hurts the message that it tries to spread. Thankfully, these moments would be toned down as Chris Claremont focused his attention on the series and the plot later switched focus to Ms. Marvel’ heroics. Unfortunately, Ms. Marvel would be cancelled by issue 23. She would later join the Avengers where her nadir in terms of female representation would happen in Avengers #200.

This issue starts with Carol Danvers in Avengers HQ going into labor after being pregnant for only a couple of days. She gives birth to a boy, but the whereabouts of the father is a mystery and she does not recall how she got pregnant. When Wasp tries to congratulate her, Ms. Marvel responds, “I’ve been used! That isn’t my baby! I don’t even know who the father is!” So far, the story eloquently portrays a possible rape victim that is not aware of the father of her boy up to this point. As Carol Strickland argues, “There was no trace of maternal instinct that any other conventional heroine would have been oozing.” This subversion of female character tropes is the high point of the story as it worsens as the plot moves forward. The baby rapidly ages in both mind and body while Carol refuses to see him. By the time she does, he has become a full-grown man who is working on a mysterious machine. He calls himself Marcus and starts to explain what happened after Hawkeye destroys his machine thinking it is a threat to the Avengers. He turns out to be the son of Avengers villain Immortus who resides in a dimension called Limbo. During his time in Limbo, Immortus grew lonely and desired a “mate” from Earth. He found one in an unnamed woman who he rescued. Then, in Marcus’ own words, “Once back in Limbo through a combination of gratitude and the subtle manipulations of my father’s ingenious machines, the woman fell in love with him.” Marcus was born from this “encounter”
but Immortus would disappear suddenly from Limbo, leaving Marcus alone. He then decided to leave for Earth but could not because he was born in Limbo. So, he kidnapped Ms. Marvel from Earth and set out to win her over. Marcus then admits that “with a subtle boost from Immortus’ machines – you became mine.” In other words, Ms. Marvel was raped by Marcus through mind control so he could then be born into Earth by her. The artwork accompanying this scene of rape “goes to great lengths – two close up panels—to show Ms. Marvel’s ecstasy during the pseudo-mating” (Strickland). The message conveyed here is sickening because it portrays rape as enjoyable to the victim. Unfortunately, it gets worse as Marcus cannot stay on Earth after the destruction of his machine, so he has to go back to Limbo. Ms. Marvel, still under the influence of Immortus’ machines, decides to leave with Marcus to Limbo while the Avengers do not question this reversal in attitude towards Marcus. The image of the angry, raped victim is replaced with a woman who loves the man that raped her and gave birth to. The final panels of the issue with Ms. Marvel shows her comforting the man that raped her as they both depart to Limbo. As Strickland argues, “It is a fitting end to this male fantasy. A desirable woman/mother figure is raped and then chooses to be the lover of her rapist/son. Raping is manly. Women love to be raped.” The representation of women in this issue is sickening as it portrays them enjoying rape and being in love with their rapist even though they are victims of sexual assault. It is incredible that this issue got published but the lack of fallout was even worse.

Other than Carol Strickland’s essay, the issue received no widespread anger over the contents from readers and fans. The comic book world kept moving and one of Marvel’s premier superheroines was raped without backlash. Chris Claremont would later write a comic book issue dealing with the lack of fallout. The issue was *Avengers Annual #10* where the Avengers visit Carol in the X-Mansion where she stays after an attack by Rogue leaves her with little memory
of her identity. While the issue never uses the word “rape,” it still portrays an angry, rape victim abandoned by her friends and teammates. She is able to break free from Marcus’ mind control after he dies by rapid aging. Carol admonishes the Avengers for letting her leave with Marcus even though she was clearly under the effects of mind control. As Carol explains, “There I was, pregnant by an unknown source...confused, terrified, shaken to the core of my being as a hero, a person, a woman... Your concerns were for the baby, not for how it came to be – nor of the cost to me of that conception” (Claremont). Claremont summarizes what the story should have been with eloquent detail by using Carol to describe the real horror that happened to her while criticizing the Avengers for not standing by her side when she needed them the most. The strongest moment in the speech is when Carol questions the Avengers for not realizing what happened to her: “I didn’t love Marcus! I never loved Marcus! Don’t any of you realize what happened months ago. What Marcus did to me ?!??” (Claremont). By confronting the Avengers and their apathy toward her plight, Carol gains a sense of closure to her circumstance as a victim who was under the influence of Immortus’ machines. While Carol would rejoin the Avengers later in time, *Avengers Annual #10* still remains one of the highlights of Claremont’s career as a writer for Carol Danvers. While the following decades saw Carol Danvers being used sporadically as a character, it is only with the relaunch under the name of Captain Marvel where Carol Danvers would soar to new heights as a ground-breaking character.

During the Avengers vs. X-Men storyline, the original Captain Marvel is briefly revived and subsequently gives his life to protect Kree from the Phoenix Force. Shortly after, Carol Danvers decides to take the codename of Captain Marvel under a relaunch written by Kelly Sue DeConnick who inspired a cult following nicknamed the Carol Corps. These fans celebrated the new Captain Marvel for being a “a real person to admire” (Freeman and Taylor-Achfield 321).
There are multiple reasons why this depiction of Carol Danvers is the highlight of her career as a female superhero. First, the new codename gives her a new lease on life with a gender-neutral identity that does not showcase her gender. Secondly, the new uniform which is inspired “on an air force uniform” is markedly differently to her old bathing suit costume that she once wore (Freeman and Taylor-Achfield 321). While still form fitting, the new costume only shows the skin of her face and nothing else which is a dramatic improvement over her old costume that exposed her legs and arms in a sexualized manner. Finally, Carol Danvers of this era is written as a person first and a woman second. DeConnick writes Carol Danvers as a character with goals and motivations. The gender of Carol Danvers takes a backseat to portraying her as character. While the first story arc deals with gender inequality in the military and work place, Carol Danvers’ character arc deals with the legacy of being Captain Marvel while exploring her past, in this case literally, as she ends up traveling through time until she arrives at the site of the blast where she received her powers. Under DeConnick’s writing, Carol has the option of changing the timeline so that she doesn’t receive her powers; “her version of the origin has Carol actively choosing to become Captain Marvel” (Cocca). This adds an active role to her origin story beyond being a damsel in distress for the heroes and villains to fight over. As Carol fights to get back into the present, she reflects, “Get inside... If you want the life you left back... get...in...side” (DeConnick). The improvement on Carol Danvers’ characterization also continues as she is written as “controlling, stubborn, and cocky. She’s also selfless, hilarious, and loyal” (Abad-Santos). None of these characteristics highlights her gender unlike her original series where every other line of dialogue evoked her gender. Even the supporting cast is an improvement over her previous storylines, as the supporting cast is predominately female. From the all-female Banshee Squadron to Spider-Woman, the supporting cast is diverse in looks and are not prone to
negative female tropes such as cattiness and jealousy. This supporting cast “meant that no longer would Carol have to carry the representational weight for all women” (Cocca). By writing a well-developed Carol Danvers surrounded by a female supporting cast, DeConnick elevated her to becoming Marvel’s premier superheroine similar to Wonder Woman. In issue #14 of her solo series, we see a cameo from the future Ms. Marvel: Kamala Khan.

Kamala Khan’s first appearance was as a bystander to Captain Marvel’s heroics on issue #14 in 2013. It was not until the following year when Kamala headlined a relaunched Ms. Marvel in 2014 as the first comic book series starring a Muslim superhero lead. Written by G. Willow Wilson, a Muslim, the series became an overnight success as the first issues sold out and the trade paperbacks reached New York Times bestsellers in the graphic novels list. It was reviewed in numerous outlets such as NPR who gave a positive review calling it a “elegant, believable ‘Marvel’” (Lehoczky). This was revolutionary since, as I previously mentioned, almost all Muslim characters in Marvel where either villains, terrorists, or walking tropes on Muslim perceptions. Kamala, on the other hand, is a Muslim teenager who geeks out about superheroes and their adventures. She has been described as a “Peter Parker type- anxious, clumsy, winsome” (Tolentino). She lives in Jersey City unlike most Marvel superheroes who live in New York City. In Kamala’s origin story, she one day sneaks out to join a high school party that she is not allowed to attend. During the party, the class bully, Zoe, makes fun of her, her family, and her religion. After a fight with her best friend, she decides to leave and go back home. On the way home, she is exposed to a substance known as Terrigen Mists which activates her latent Inhuman genes and she grows into a cocoon. During her time in the cocoon, she has a vision of Captain Marvel, Captain America, and Iron Man telling her “You are seeing what you need to see. You stand at a crossroads” (Wilson). The vision continues with the superheroes telling her, “You
thought that if you disobeyed your parents—your culture, your religion—your classmates would accept you” (Wilson). Kamala replies, “They-- they laughed at me. Like, Kamala’s finally seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior brown people and their rules to the curb” (Wilson). This statement firmly establishes Kamala as an “other” to her classmates as a Muslim Pakistani-American. It also illustrates Orientalism’s theory of power where the relationship between the Occident and Orient is of domination through hegemony (Said 5). This is demonstrated as Kamala refers to the generalization of Muslims as an inferior people. The vision goes on as Kamala says to Captain Marvel, “I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. I want to be you” (Wilson). The series acknowledges how Otherness seems more complicated than being “normal” by using Kamala to express her inability to fit in. The vision ends with Kamala getting her wish as she breaks out of the cocoon but looking as classic Ms. Marvel with blonde hair, white skin, and wearing the classic costume.

After breaking out of her cocoon, Kamala sees Zoe drowning in a lake. She jumps into the fray to save Zoe’s life while still appearing as Ms. Marvel by enlarging her hand to carry Zoe out of the lake. While Zoe’s life is saved, Kamala doesn’t feel liberated by being another person. As she says “But being someone else isn't liberating. It's exhausting. I always thought that if I had amazing hair, if I could pull off great boots, if I could fly – that would make me feel strong. That would make me happy” (Wilson). This makes Kamala a relatable character as most teenagers also struggle with fitting in, but becoming another person isn't the answer in Kamala’s case. Even after becoming “normal” and “less complicated”, Kamala still feels uneasy with herself and her own identity. The unease in which Kamala is presented with is typical of a teenager’s story but adding Muslim and ethnic overtones leads to a new perspective to that story arc. Wilson This relatability is what makes Kamala such an interesting character due to her
being a Muslim character in Marvel Comics who has failed to represent Muslims in a meaningful way in the past. While Kamala questions some Muslim practices such as the local mosque’s side entrance for women, she does not question her faith towards Islam. The reaction to Kamala’s debut has been positive with numerous people mailing Marvel praising the new series. The fan mail that *Ms. Marvel* received comes from a diverse group of people that could relate to Kamala (Pumphrey). After arriving home and being scolded by her parents, Kamala decides that these shapeshifting powers were given to her for a reason and so starts the story of the new Ms. Marvel.

With help from her best friend Bruno, Kamala builds a costume for her alter ego. Taking inspiration from both her culture and Ms. Marvel’s classic costume, Kamala’s costume “is based on a burqini, the swimsuit that Muslim women wear that allows freedom of movement but still covers the body... Ms. Marvel’s fighting gear is completed with a dupatta, the long scarf worn by many women in the Islamic World” (Madrid). Kamala also uses the classic Ms. Marvel lightning bolt on her chest. These two influences are important due to Kamala embracing both Muslim and traditional comic book heritage in her costume which is noteworthy as previous Muslim characters used stereotypical costumes with no traditional American comic book influences. This subversion of costume tropes helps cement Kamala as a Muslim character yet is still part of the larger comic book universe of Marvel. By the end of the first story arc, Kamala has become known in New Jersey for her heroics while Kamala herself has accepted herself which is illustrated by her not changing her appearance to Carol Danvers on instinct as before. She embraces all aspects of her identity as a geeky Muslim teenager by the use of her costume and powers. Another subversion of tropes is the supporting characters that inhabit Kamala’s world.
Kamala is surrounded by characters that subvert traditional Muslim stereotypes. One such example is Kamala’s family. Kamala’s household includes her mother, father and brother who all live in a traditional suburban house. At first, Kamala’s father is introduced as a short-tempered man who screams at Kamala when she asks to go to a party: “You are excused straight to your room! And stay there until you find your manners!” (Wilson). This image of “a kind to an enraged Muslim man” is presented as “an object of disgust, to be feared and hated” (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 33). The image is then subverted as he is shown later on as a kind, comforting man who truly cares for his only daughter. Even when Kamala sneaks out for her super-heroism, Mr. Khan is depicted as warm and caring to her as he tries to understand the recent change in his daughter. One such example is when he finds Kamala eating at home after sneaking out where he says: “But I am terrified by this new Kamala. I know the pressures on young girls these days... I don’t want that for you, beta. Not for my only daughter” (Wilson). Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini point out, “We see Mr. Khan’s further floating stereotypes of Muslim men, rather than enraged or heartless, he is presented as calm and even tender” (35). This subversion does not stop with Kamala’s family; it also spreads to Kamala’s best friend Nakia and to Sheik Abdullah. Nakia is a Muslim teenager same as Kamala but who dresses in more typical Muslim dress wearing a hijab. She is questioned by Zoe about this and she replies: “Actually my dad wants me to take it off. He thinks it’s a phase” (Wilson). This is interesting because it turns the hijab into a symbol of rebelling against her father unlike most Western depictions of the hijab. Another male authority figure that is shown is Sheik Abdullah who is the local religious leader. After Kamala gets into trouble for sneaking out, she is forced to go to a meeting with him to talk. While Kamala dreads it, she is given helpful advice by the Sheik who calmly asks her about the recent struggles she has had. Kamala keeps the explanation vague in order to protect
her secret identity but she explains enough so that Sheik gives her the advice to look for a mentor to help with her activities. Like Mr. Khan, Sheik Abdullah is portrayed as a calm, caring individual who does not prescribe to the stereotype of an angry, oppressive Muslim man. By having Muslim characters that constantly subvert tropes about the depictions of Muslims, Wilson is able to explore more nuanced and complex characters that happen to be Muslims living in the United States.

With the recent success of *Captain Marvel* in the movie theaters, female superheroes have reached a new level of popularity in popular culture. The depiction of female and Muslims have also had resurgence with the *Captain Marvel* and *Ms. Marvel* comics series as they portray complex characters without resorting to stereotypes. As Cocca suggests, “The current Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel are emblematic not only of the changing faces of superhero characters, but also of the changing faces of superhero comics authorship and fandom.” The recent demographic shift in readership has led Marvel to expand both its female writers and artists but also to have more female leads in their comic series. While female characters are still the minority in the Marvel universe in comparison to the number of male characters, the modern depictions of Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel shows that there is a bright future awaiting female characters in the future.


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