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NEGOTIATING CULTURAL HYBRIDITY THROUGH MARVEL'S KAMALA KHAN: READING THE SECRET SUPERHERO IDENTITY *MS. MARVEL* AS A THIRD SPACE*

Introduction

In February 2014 the first issue of a new *Ms. Marvel* comic book series was published and was met with both critical acclaim and commercial success, becoming a bestseller in the US and winning the Hugo Award for best graphic story in 2015. The protagonist of this new *Ms. Marvel* series is sixteen-year-old Muslim Pakistani American Kamala Khan who is a fanfiction writing enthusiastic admirer of the *Avengers* superhero team. The fact that Kamala's experiences are partially based on childhood memories and anecdotes of Pakistani American MARVEL editor Sana Amanat has been particularly positively received by the general public (Kumar, Okwodu). *Ms. Marvel* has also attracted scholarly attention which has so far mostly focused on the treatment of gendered identities in the novel (Gibbons, Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini) as well as its reception (Cox, Kent) – a tendency that is also visible in Jessica Baldanzi's and Hussein Rashid's interdisciplinary essay collection *Ms. Marvel's America: No Normal* (Baldanzi and Rashid). My reading of *Ms. Marvel* will build on existing criticism and employ Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity, mimicry and Third Space in order to open up new interpretative dimensions for this American superhero comic.

In contrast to Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatsky who relate Bhabha's idea of the Third Space to the ways in which certain spatial settings work within the comic (Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatsky 71-72), I argue that it is the superhero persona of *Ms. Marvel* herself that functions as a Third Space. As such, it enables protagonist Kamala Khan to create a new identity incorporating and re-interpreting both elements derived from her Pakistani and from her American background illustrating "that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity [... and] can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha 55). This engagement with hybridity on the content level is amplified by the combination of differently sourced iconographies

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on the level of imagery, as my analysis will show. Because of their focus on cultural exchange through the strategic and selective appropriation of meanings, the concepts of cultural hybridity and Third Space are uniquely suited to investigate liminal characters such as Kamala Khan who are marked by “in-between-ness” (in Kamala’s case between her Pakistani American home and the mainstream Anglo-American public; between her personal religious beliefs, her imam’s conservatism and an Islamophobic public or between her desire to be part of her “normal” peer group while simultaneously passionately engaging in nerd subculture). Reading Kamala’s secret superhero identity as a Third Space allows me to discuss the empowering quality that the transformation into *Ms. Marvel* develops for the protagonist, which I identify as Kamala’s ability to embrace ostensibly contradictory parts of her life and combine them to into armor, both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense. This armor is not only used to protect Kamala herself but is also turned into a positive force for societal transformation. My argumentation is based on a number of close readings that I have selected regarding their engagement with cultural hybridity in both imagery and written language.

The cover of the first collected paperback edition of the series depicts Kamala Khan in her *Ms. Marvel* fan shirt holding three books: two schoolbooks and a religious guidebook (see figure 1 in the appendix, Wilson et al. 2016a). The titles of the three books are “US History”, “Hadith to live by” and “Illustration and Design.” Taking contextual knowledge about the character into account, the books in her hand can be read as visualizing Kamala’s status as a US citizen, as a Muslim (Hadith is a collection of sayings that are attributed to the Prophet Muhammed) and as a creator of artistic work. All three books are roughly the same size and positioned directly next to each other which I read as showing that all three parts of Kamala’s identity (US citizen, Muslim and artist) are equally important to her. Thus, even before buying the first issue of *Ms. Marvel* the potential readers are given a hint about the themes that they can expect to be addressed in this comic book. Although only half of Kamala’s face is visible, it is immediately clear that the protagonist is a person of color. The *Ms. Marvel* fan shirt identifies Kamala as a superhero comics fan and references the practice of wearing fan shirts to self-identify as a member of American nerd subculture (for more information on Muslims in nerd subculture, see Gittinger). The bracelet on her right wrist spells the name “Kamala” in Arabic script – while this detail might stay unnoticed by non-Arabic speaking readers, it could work as a purchase incentive for Arabic speaking buyers.

The issue itself starts with introducing Kamala to the readers by showing her in various social settings: with her friends, with her family at home and at school. Although her relationship with her parents is affectionate, Kamala often feels misunderstood by them and struggles to come to terms with their conservative set of values and ambitious expectations. The portrayal of Muslim parents as conservative entails the danger

of affirming negative, Islamophobic stereotypes. To counter this problem, the *Ms. Marvel* comics endeavor to disrupt such simplified, binary-affirming (liberal-Western vs. conservative-Oriental) characterizations by consciously playing with their readers' expectations. One example for this is Kamala's parents' strict prohibition on her attending parties where boys are present that is contrasted with their approval of Kamala's deep friendship with Italian American Bruno Carrelli who is male but trusted by Mr. and Mrs. Khan. Another example for the series' questioning of stereotypes is the introduction of Tyesha Hillman who later marries Kamala's brother Aamir. Tyesha is an African American convert to ultra-orthodox Islam and always wears an abaya and a hijab when she leaves her house. However, she is also a fan of science fiction literature – a hobby that she shares with protagonist Kamala – and she is working full-time as a legal assistant thereby providing for her and Aamir's family (Wilson et al. 2016b).

Growing up as a second-generation immigrant in the United States, Kamala often feels excluded by her mostly Anglo-American classmates. While she has a number of close friends such as Turkish American Nakia Bahadir or the afore mentioned Bruno Carrelli (who later becomes her superhero sidekick), Kamala strives to be more popular, but is also confronted with her classmates' xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic prejudices. After sneaking out to attend a party with her more popular classmates, Kamala's hopes of fitting in are disappointed when she is bullied by the other Anglo-American students. As Kamala leaves the party, a mysterious mist descends upon her equipping her with superhuman abilities and causing hallucinations.

Heroic visions

A splash page shows how Kamala sees her three favorite superheroes in a vision: Tony Stark in his *Iron Man* suit, Carol Danvers who was previously *Ms. Marvel* and now calls herself *Captain Marvel* and Steve Rogers in his *Captain America* costume (Wilson et al. 2016a, 15; see figure 2 in the appendix).¹ Their setup is reminiscent of motifs found in European Renaissance art. The figure *Captain Marvel* at the center of the image invites comparisons to the paintings *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* by Italian artist Sandro Botticelli as her posture resembles that of Venus in both pieces of art. Portraying Carol Danvers in the style of the ancient Roman goddess of love, lust and beauty can be read as a tongue-in-cheek comment on previous representations of the character as an object of sexual desire rather than as an independent complex superhero. Furthermore, *Primavera's* theme of the beginning of spring that is also taken up in the quoted poem on the page emphasizes the importance of Kamala's personal development of becom-

1 This article mentions a number of superheroes without going into detail concerning their background. For a concise introduction to the superheroes mentioned, see Duncan and Smith 2013.

ing more mature and taking responsibility for herself and her social environment. Additionally, the paintings *Sistine Madonna* and *The Assumption of the Virgin* by Italian artists Raphael Sanzio and Titian respectively can be read as another point of reference. Once again, it is the character of Carol Danvers that produces intertextuality as her facial expression and the blue and red colors of her costume connect her to the depiction of the Virgin Mary in both pieces of art. Taking the intertextual references between Carol Danvers and both Venus and the Virgin Mary into account, one can read these as a critique of traditions of representation that depict female characters as either sexually available Venus or as innocent Virgin Mary, but do not leave room for more complexity in their characterization.

In previous scholarship, the imagery of the splash page has been associated with the painting *Transfiguration* by Italian Renaissance artist Raphael Sanzio with Carol Danvers in the position that Jesus Christ takes in the original painting which Priego reads as endowing the scene with messianic undertones (cf. Priego n.p.). Complementing Priego's analysis, I regard this setup as consciously engaging (potentially subverting) readers' expectations about what a lifechanging revelation should look like in a playful way: this is implied by the insertion of the reference to *Transfiguration* which is often considered to be highbrow art into this medium of popular culture. The playfulness of the scene is further intensified by the depiction of seemingly random animals all over the panel, among others a winged sloth that is held by *Iron Man*, a number of seagulls one whom is donning a facemask that is commonly associated with *Wolverine* (thereby foreshadowing the character's cameo appearance in a subsequent issue) and a hedgehog that raises an oversized green *Hulk*-like hand to form the peace sign (*Wolverine* and *Hulk* are fictional characters appearing in MARVEL comics, for more information on their backgrounds see Duncan and Smith 2013). The sloth and the hedgehog are later revealed to be stuffed animals that Kamala owns referencing the fandom practice of collecting merchandise connected to one's favorite franchises.

The iconography inspired by both European art history and American superhero comics is expanded by the inclusion of a passage from a poem by South Asian Sufi poet Amir Khusro (1253-1325 CE) – which, however, remains uncredited (Priego n.p.). Usually the language of Urdu (the original language of the poem and native language of Kamala) is written using the Perso-Arabic alphabet; I consider the use of Latin script here as a concession to the anglophone North American target audience of the comic. The readers' attention is immediately drawn to the original (Urdu) text of the poem that is spoken by Carol Danvers: the words are set in a different font and exceed the boundaries of her speech balloon. The text is translated into English by *Iron Man* and *Captain America*, albeit in a much smaller font size and using the same font that the comic book employs for Kamala's own direct speech. The poem that deals with

the coming of spring can be connected to Kamala's coming-of-age story: "the yellow mustard is blooming, the Mango buds click open" metaphorically refers to Kamala's awakening of her superhuman abilities that have lain dormant inside of her since birth. Seeing three prototypical American superheroes recite an ancient South Asian poem illustrates how Kamala's worldview is shaped by a variety of influences. The inclusion of Carol Danvers, Steve Rogers and Tony Stark specifically can be read as representative of different periods² of American comic book history: I read Steve Rogers' *Captain America* as standing for what is commonly referred to as the Golden Age of comics since he was introduced in March 1941 as a patriotic conscientious supersoldier who fights against the Axis powers in World War II. Following this line of thought, Tony Stark's *Iron Man* (first introduced in 1963) stands for the Silver Age of comics as demonstrated by his engineering ingenuity combined with personal flaws. Carol Danvers then embodies the post-Silver Age era in which the medium gradually turned towards the exploration of social issues and explicitly engaged with questions of female empowerment through the increased creation of superheroines. The three superheroes seem to invite Kamala to rank herself among them. The inclusion of *Iron Man* and *Captain America* in particular can be read as emblematic for Kamala's relation to the United States as a nation with the two superheroes embodying two different views on Kamala's home country. Steve Rogers alias *Captain America* has stood for patriotism, integrity and conscientiousness ever since his creation, whereas Tony Stark alias *Iron Man* is usually depicted as a wealthy scientist who is willing to use questionable means to achieve his ambitious goals (Brownie and Graydon 56; 145). I read Kamala as attracted to the ideals that *Captain America* represents while simultaneously being aware of the threats that corporate capitalism (here personified by *Iron Man*) poses to these ideals.

The positioning of iconographies, symbols and textual fragments from different sources alongside each other on this splash page can be read as an example of cultural difference. Bhabha develops this concept in contrast to cultural diversity as the acknowledgement of cultural differences without relying on fixed representations instead affirming the idea that meanings are in flux thereby avoiding the perpetuation of established hierarchies (Bhabha 50-51). This idea of cultural difference is reflected in both the imagery that combines motifs derived from European art history, South Asian literary history and US comic book iconography (as I have shown using Kamala's vision as an example) and in the characterization of Kamala, as the scene in which her superpowers are revealed to her emerges as a foreshadowing of Kamala's later personal development that leads her from perceiving her own difference primarily as a burden to realizing that it can also be an asset: as soon as Kamala learns to balance the different

2 My use of the periods of American comic books is based on Klock 2002.

aspects of her identity, they will create a coherent harmonious overall picture just like the different elements on this splash page.

First transformation

When Kamala is told that she has received shapeshifting abilities, she immediately decides to imitate her favorite superhero, *Ms. Marvel*. Changing her hair, skin and eye color as well as her body type, Kamala transforms into a white blonde woman who conforms to Western conventional ideals of beauty. What might at first simply look like a symptom of Kamala's internalized sexism, can acquire additional potential meanings when read through Bhabha's concept of mimicry, used here in the sense of a "copying of the colonizing culture, behaviour, manners and values by the colonized [which] contains both mockery and a certain 'menace', [... because it] reveals the limitation in the authority of colonial discourse" (Ashcroft et al. 125). As mimicry is created by the partial adoption of a dominant group's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, it will be interesting to see which parts of Carol Danvers' *Ms. Marvel* Kamala adopts (Bhabha 122-123). While Kamala's *Ms. Marvel* looks similar to Carol's version, there are noticeable differences in their physical appearances: whereas Carol has often been drawn with disproportionately large breasts and long legs (as that was a common way of portraying female characters in superhero comic books throughout the 1970s to 1990s according to Duncan and Smith 2009: 257), Kamala's *Ms. Marvel* features more realistic proportions. Thus, Kamala's becoming of *Ms. Marvel* "that is almost the same, but not quite" the same as Carol Danvers' *Ms. Marvel* can be considered as a critique of sexist traditions of female representation in American superhero comics (Bhabha 122).

Kamala's transformation is depicted as ambiguous: at first, she feels empowered by her ability to look like her favorite superhero, but simultaneously Kamala also realizes that *Ms. Marvel*'s late 1970s costume (and her unrealistically drawn bodily proportions) would today be considered "politically incorrect" as she states in a conversation with her vision of Carol Danvers (Wilson et al. 2016a, 17). This consciousness prevents Kamala's chosen style from being merely read as internalized sexism and adds an element of mockery to it. By criticizing stereotypical representations of female superheroes as overtly sexy and catering to the male gaze, Kamala's transformation illustrates that "mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics" (Ashcroft et al. 125). As such, Kamala's mimicry can be read as a strategy of resistance against those sexist stereotypes.

However, soon Kamala starts to feel uncomfortable copying Carol Danvers' look as she perceives her revealing costume as impractical and not consistent with her personality: captions tell the reader that Kamala realizes that "being someone else

isn't liberating" and she feels so exposed in Carol's superhero outfit that she prefers borrowing a pullover from a homeless man to walking the streets dressed in nothing but Carol's costume (Wilson et al. 2016a, 34-35). Kamala also learns that her capacity for accelerated healing only works when she looks like herself. Reading Kamala's first transformation as mimicry thus visualizes both the potential of practices of mimicry for resistance, but also shows its limitations for the personal empowerment of those performing it. While Kamala's imitation of Carol Danvers' style at first succeeds in increasing Kamala's confidence thereby enabling her to perform heroic acts, it also harms Kamala by blocking her healing factor and makes her aware of her own stereotypical ideas about what a female superhero should look like. This becomes apparent when Kamala explains to her friend Bruno how she feels pressured to look like a conventionally beautiful white woman in order to be perceived as a superhero: "[E]verybody's expecting **Ms. Marvel**. A **real** superhero. With perfect hair and big boots. Not Kamala Khan from New Jersey" (Wilson et al. 2016a, 32). Bruno thereupon encourages her to create her own superhero identity.

Creating an own Superhero Identity

With Bruno's help, Kamala designs her own costume (for a picture of the new costume, see figure 3 in the appendix). Just like the original *Ms. Marvel* outfit, Kamala's new costume has a bathing suit as a basis – however, while Carol Danvers wore a sleeve- and legless one-piece swimsuit, Kamala modifies her old burkini (for more information on the history and reception of the burkini, see Akou). As she removes the hood that normally covers the wearer's head, this item of clothing is not recognizable as such anymore – thereby sidestepping the potential pitfalls that this controversial garment could entail – and the resulting costume is more reminiscent of a shalwar kameez (a traditional outfit worn throughout the Indian subcontinent) with its long shirt that covers the top of her trousers. On its front, the costume prominently features a stylized yellow lightning bolt, the symbol of superhero *Ms. Marvel*. Kamala also wears a red dupatta that does not cover her head though, but instead flows behind her like a superhero cape. Brownie and Graydon explain the implications that the cape in superhero comics may have: first, the image of "the flowing red cape" can create "the illusion of motion" giving the superhero a more dynamic look (Brownie and Graydon 16). Second, they take the history of the cape as "military garb" into account: using the example of ancient Roman emperor Julius Caesar, they outline how "Julius Caesar wore a crimson cape into battle [... which] transformed Caesar's actions in combat into a propaganda performance" (ibid.). Brownie and Graydon transfer this to *Superman* with his red cape "positioning him as a majestic general who aims to inspire others to

act according to the same set of moral principles” (ibid.). I suggest that as a comics fan Kamala is aware of the implications that wearing a red cape entails for a superhero and deliberately chooses to wear her dupatta like a cape in order to include herself in this tradition while simultaneously proudly displaying her South Asian family background.

The costume’s color scheme takes up the blue-red-yellow combination of *Captain Marvel’s* outfit and is based on the classic bright primary color arrangement for American superheroes in general dating back to the creation of *Superman* in 1938 (Brownie and Graydon 16). The red and blue of the costume also evokes the colors of the US flag which serves to remind the readers of Kamala’s status as a US citizen and can be read as an expression of her self-identification with the United States as a nation. Kamala’s mask is a nod to classic American superhero outfits. Brownie and Graydon explain that the mask of a superhero serves three functions: “It transforms the wearer from ordinary civilian to superhero, disguising him in order to protect the identity of his alter ego, and those he cares about” (Brownie and Graydon 28). This is also true for Kamala who keeps her superhero identity secret from her family and most of her friends in order to protect them. Kamala’s golden bracelet is a family heirloom that is transformed into protective gear by her friend Bruno, who persuades Kamala’s mother to trust him with the valuable bracelet that has been in the family for generations and has travelled with Kamala’s great-grandmother Aisha from Mumbai (then still called Bombay) to Karachi during the Partition of India and from Karachi to Jersey City with Kamala’s mother Muneeba Khan. Bruno tells Muneeba: “[T]he first time I saw Kamala wearing these, they were so big on her that it was like she was wearing armor. Like they were protecting her. That’s what I want to make for her. Armor...” (Wilson et al. 2016c, 82).

Thus, Kamala’s costume unites traditional American superhero comic iconography with specific elements derived from her Pakistani American background thereby expressing pride of her family’s cultural heritage. The motif of taking ownership of otherness through a superhero costume is a recurring theme in American comic books, as Brownie and Graydon outline (Brownie and Graydon 18). They use *Superman* as an example for this practice who “display[s] his Kryptonian heritage” through the crest on the chest of his costume (which is the family crest of the House of El and also the Kryptonian symbol for “hope”) thereby “promot[ing] his alien identity” (ibid.). However, Brownie and Graydon also acknowledge that superhero “[c]haracters cannot appear too ‘Other’ as their strangeness would render their meaning inaccessible. In order to successfully communicate a set of values, the costume must be reassuringly familiar” (Brownie and Graydon 25). By combining elements of Muslim (burkini) and South Asian (shalwar kameez and dupatta) clothing with classic American superhero

iconography (cape, mask, color scheme), Kamala's costume manages to balance familiarity with Otherness.

In contrast to Kamala's first transformation into a Carol Danvers-lookalike, her new costume can be read as a counter-narrative to "classic" American superhero comics and as a critique of its canon which can be perceived to rely on representations of female superheroes as merely visual treats for a primarily male heterosexual audience. By selectively appropriating elements from diverse sources, Kamala turns the making of her costume into a space of negotiation, an ambivalent space in which social identities and ideologies are questioned and negotiated akin to Homi K. Bhabha's "Third Space of enunciation" (Bhabha 54) – a "space in which cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and identities" (Ashcroft et al. 53-54). The result of these negotiations is Kamala's new costume which I argue exemplifies that Third Space encounters can create something new and substantially different than just conglomerates of new and old elements (Bhabha 56).

The readers witness the emergence of Kamala's *Ms. Marvel* as a new cultural form. In Kamala's new secret superhero identity, her liminal position that she had previously perceived as a burden, works to her advantage. I read Kamala's superpowers of supreme flexibility and adaptability (she can change the size and shape of body parts or her whole body) as a positive reinterpretation of and resistance against her personal experiences of socially enforced conformity. While Kamala's accelerated healing factor keeps her safe physically, it could also be considered as a metaphor for her acquired resilience. Her newly found mission to protect her hometown imbues her with a sense of purpose that boosts her confidence. Kamala's superhero identity is not only inspired by her role model Carol Danvers, but also rooted in her religious orientation. Although Kamala is skeptical towards the conservative imam of her mosque whose warnings against the dangers of premarital sex and whose insistence upon gender separation inside the mosque appear outdated to her, she regards her quest for protecting Jersey City as rooted in her personal religious beliefs. The captions that inform the readers about Kamala's thoughts immediately before her first rescue mission make clear how Kamala's religious orientation influences her self-perception as a superhero:

"There's this ayah from the **Quran** that my dad always quotes when he sees something **bad** on TV. A fire or a flood or a bombing. 'Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all mankind—and whoever **saves** one person, it is as if he has **saved all of mankind**'" (Wilson et al. 2016a, 28).

Kamala is willing to help even those people who have previously bullied her, as evidenced by her first heroic act: she saves Zoe Zimmer, the girl who made fun of her at the party. Zoe had drunk too much alcohol at the party and fell into a lake where Kamala as *Ms. Marvel* saves her from drowning by lifting her up with an embiggened hand. While

Kamala is willing to employ her oversized fists to fight, she solves conflicts just as often by talking to people in a compassionate way. This portrayal contradicts stereotypes of Muslim people in North American comic books as irrationally angry and as threats to a Western way of life that used to be prevalent in the previous decades and are only slowly abandoned in present-day products (Gibbons 450; for more information on the representation of Muslims in US comics, see Stroemberg).

Conclusion

I conclude that employing Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity and Third Space can help us to understand how Kamala Khan's "in-between-ness" (between her Pakistani American home and the mainstream Anglo-American public; between her personal religious beliefs, her imam's conservatism and an Islamophobic public...) becomes a source of empowerment when she transforms into *Ms. Marvel*. Whereas adapting her behavior to various surroundings such as school or family gatherings is perceived as a necessary nuisance by Kamala, it also trains her ability to quickly assess situations and react accordingly which makes her even more effective as superhero *Ms. Marvel*. When creating her own superhero costume, Kamala combines elements derived from US superhero comics iconography and her Pakistani family background. She strategically and selectively appropriates the meaning of some symbols while she re-interprets the meaning of others, as my analysis of her dupatta has shown which is simultaneously a reference to classic red superhero capes and a way of integrating a traditional South Asian garment into her costume. Kamala's bracelet that as an heirloom symbolizes her emotional connection to her family is turned into armor that protects *Ms. Marvel* from enemy attacks thus turning her family from a source of generation conflict into a supportive part of her identity. Although her Anglo-American classmates are prejudiced against Kamala because of her Muslim faith, it becomes the moral basis of her superhero identity which in turn leads to Kamala saving the lives of exactly those Islamophobic people (among others).

Kamala's choice to create a new *Ms. Marvel* persona as a superhero of color instead of imitating her Anglo-American idol Carol Danvers can be read as a step towards her overcoming internalized sexism and internalized racism: finally she is able to think beyond stereotypes of female superheroes and can picture herself in a role that previously seemed reserved for white women who conform to Western conventional standards of beauty. However, as Kamala's *Ms. Marvel* persona never explicitly professes her faith and does not seem to be perceived as person of color and/or Muslim by the general public within the comic, one might consider her superhero identity as overshadowing her other identities. While *Ms. Marvel* does not appear to be able to

influence attitudes towards Muslim and/or Pakistani American women on the diegetic level of the graphic novel, the commercial success of the comic series points at her effectiveness on the extradiegetic level: celebrated as a “victory for the misfits of the world” (Priego) and created to encompass both a “very specific minority experience” (Kumar) and the universal coming-of-age struggles of contemporary teenagers, *Ms. Marvel* has been turned into a “real-world protest icon” by fans using her imagery to protest mainly Islamophobic socio-political developments (see Romano for concrete examples).

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Abstract: In October 2014 the first issue of a new *Ms. Marvel* comic book series starring Muslim Pakistani American teenager Kamala Khan was published and was met with both critical acclaim and commercial success. In the ongoing series, Muslim Pakistani American teenager Kamala Khan struggles to come to terms with the expectations of her Pakistani parents and her desire to fit into mainstream American society. After mysteriously acquiring shapeshifting abilities, Kamala steps into the superhero role of *Ms. Marvel* which serves – as I argue – as a Third Space that enables Kamala to create a new identity incorporating and re-interpreting both elements derived from her Pakistani and from her US background illustrating “that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity [... and] can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (Bhabha 2004, 55). Under the guise of *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala protects the inhabitants of her hometown Jersey City, NJ, from gentrification, cyberbullying or the exploitation of vulnerable teenagers, among others. I suggest that Kamala’s costume, her superpowers of flexibility and adaptability and her attitude towards her role as a superhero reflect Homi K. Bhabha’s conception of hybridity as an empowering condition and I propose that Kamala’s adoption of the *Ms. Marvel* identity transcends mere mimicry. At the center of my analysis is the liminal character of Kamala Khan as a nerdy female Muslim teenager of color living in the US that resists easy categorization: she is a fanfiction writing enthusiastic admirer of the *Avengers* superhero team and bonds with her brother’s (also Muslim) girlfriend over Frank Herbert’s sci-fi classic *Dune*; she takes a skeptical view towards the conservative imam of her mosque, but she is also a devout Muslim with a life philosophy rooted in her religion; she is willing to risk her life to help even those of her peers who have previously bullied her in xenophobic ways. Relating Kamala’s secret superhero identity to Bhabha’s concept of Third Space allows me to discuss the empowering quality that the transformation into *Ms. Marvel* develops for the protagonist, which I identify as Kamala’s ability to embrace ostensibly contradictory parts of her life and combine them into armour, both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense. In this chapter, I will offer an interpretation of the character of Kamala Khan and her secret *Ms. Marvel* identity as a Third Space examining in how far Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity can open up new interpretative dimensions for this American superhero comic.

Keywords: hybridity, identity politics, postcolonial theory, superhero comics, Third Space

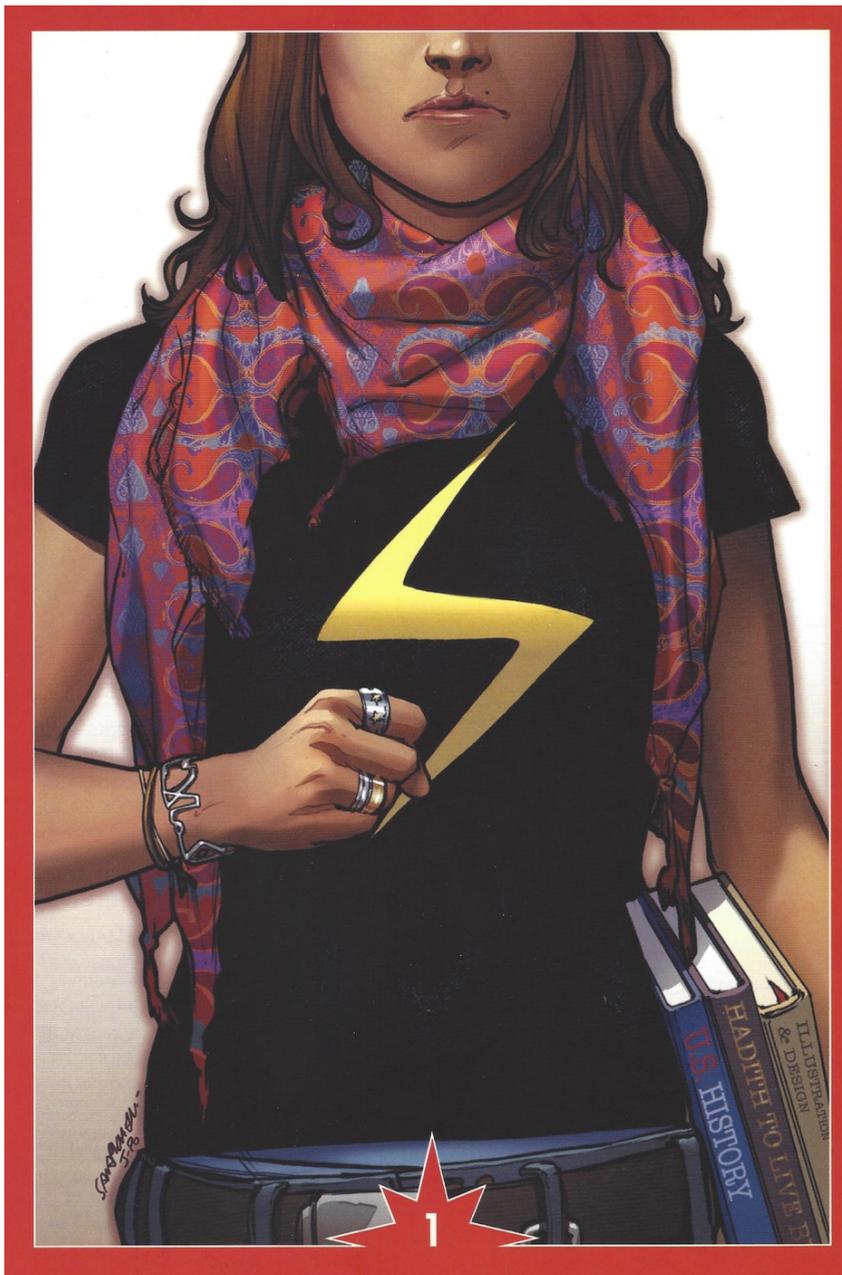


Figure 1: Cover of the first issue

Wilson, G. Willow, writer. *Ms. Marvel Omnibus*. Art by Adrian Alphona, Jacob Wyatt, Elmo Bandoc and Takeshi Miyazawa. Color art by Ian Herring and Irma Knivila. Letters by Joe Caramagna. New York: MARVEL, 2016. Title page.



Figure 2: Kamala's vision

Wilson, G. Willow, writer. Ms. Marvel Omnibus. Art by Adrian Alphona, Jacob Wyatt, Elmo Bandoc and Takeshi Miyazawa. Color art by Ian Herring and Irma Knivila. Letters by Joe Caramagna. New York: MARVEL, 2016. p. 15



Figure 3: Kamala's costume

Wilson, G. Willow, writer. *Ms. Marvel Omnibus*. Art by Adrian Alphona, Jacob Wyatt, Elmo Bandoc and Takeshi Miyazawa. Color art by Ian Herring and Irma Knivila. Letters by Joe Caramagna. New York: MARVEL, 2016. Appendix.