Muslimahs in Comics and Graphic Novels: History and Representation

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief overview of the representation of Muslim women in comic books and graphic novels in the hopes of guiding readers towards recommended publications with dynamic Muslimah characters that are properly represented. A largely ignored topic in academic circles and comic studies scholarship, many of the depictions found in mainstream comics still fall back on racial and religious stereotypes. However, the past decade has shown that Muslimah representation has become more multifaceted, with a wide range of fictional Muslim women at the forefront of what Lynn (2016b) is calling “The Golden Age of Muslim women in comics.”

Introduction

Representation of Muslimahs¹ in comics and graphic novels is a largely ignored topic in academic circles and comic studies scholarship, despite the recent rise of Muslim characters in popular comic books (Strömberg, 2011, p. 574). Muslim characters existed in early publications of Western comic books, with the very first noted Muslim superhero appearing in 1944. He was a fez-wearing Nazi-punching character named Kismet from Bomber Comics. He was followed by Black Tiger, a Muslim religious leader from the fictional Middle Eastern country of “Murkatesh” in 1976 and Arabian Knight, an Oriental stereotype with a turban and flying carpet in 1981 (Strömberg, 2011, p. 579). With the exception of Kismet, these early characters only played a minor role in American comic book publications.

¹Muslim women
Depictions of Muslim women in comics have been scarce, with the first named Muslimah only making an appearance in 1988. Whatever representation existed before the events of 9/11 is usually brought up in contrast to the “white, male, Western world” reflected by the white male writers and artists responsible for various portrayals in North American comics (Strömberg, 2011, p. 574). These character designs still fall back on racial and religious stereotypes and disregard the various rights and freedoms that women in Islam have. However, within the past decade, Muslimah representation has become more multifaceted, with a wide range of fictional Muslim women (including scientists, doctors, high school students, and mutants) at the forefront of what is being hailed as “The Golden Age of Muslim women in comics” (Lynn, 2016b).

This paper will give a brief overview of Muslimah representation in comics in the hopes of guiding readers towards recommended publications with dynamic Muslimah characters that are properly represented. The history of Muslims in comics and graphic novels is long and varied, so the paper is broken down into key components and presented in chronological order, to give readers a fuller understanding of how Muslimah representation has evolved.

**Stereotype and Problematic Representation**

The events of 9/11 and “The War on Terror” left a significant impact on American comics (Strömberg, 2011, pp. 574). This is seen in the rise of negative and problematic representation of Muslims and, in association, representations of populations that Western readership equate with Muslims (such as Arab and Middle Eastern peoples). Superhero comics often reflect the inherent biases the United States has against non-Western cultures and religious and ethnic minorities. There was a conspicuous lack of heroic Muslim characters in the 1980s and 1990s, with comic book portrayals falling under some of the following tropes: the bandit, the sinister sheik, and the terrorist (Strömberg, 2011, p. 578). Other portrayals were originally designed as a well-intentioned means of counteracting stereotypes that equate Muslims as terrorists and other villainous archetypes, but they still perpetuate another stereotype: the “Oriental Other” (Strömberg, 2011, p. 577).

Edward Said (1978) defines Orientalism as Western society’s patronization and inaccurate representations of peoples and cultures of Asia, North Africa and the Middle East; its principal characteristic being a “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice” that reduces “the Orient” to primitive and generally inferior unless traditional values are replaced with “contemporary and progressive” Western ideas (p. 50). These depictions (including belly dancers, snake charmers and oil sheiks) are shaped by American and European imperialism and contribute to the process of the dehumanization of “those who do not belong to Western groups or societies” (Strömberg, 2011, p. 579). Said (1978) concludes that Orientalism frequently depicts the Eastern world as an “other,” with limited Western knowledge conflating different Eastern societies and cultures into one “homogenous Orient” (p. 33).

Many of these stereotypical representations were created by white male writers and went
unchallenged for a long time because Muslim comic book writers and artists are underrepresented in the industry. Muslimahs did not achieve prominence until G. Willow Wilson and Sana Amanat created Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel in 2014. Amanat went on to become the Director of Content and Character Development for Marvel Comics in 2015, indicating the start of Muslimahs becoming power players in prominent companies. However, there is still much to be done in order to turn Muslimah stories and creators from an outlier to an industry standard.

Salima Baranizar

The first documented Muslimah character in comic books was an Iranian niqabi, who debuted in DC Comics in an issue of *Millennium* in 1988. She was chosen by the Guardians of the Green Lantern Corps, intended to be one of ten individuals to be granted immortality and metahuman powers. However, she was never given a chance to do so, as she was killed off in her second appearance, stoned to death by her countrymen in an issue of Blue Beetle titled “Iran Scram!” Her character was riddled with misogynistic and Islamophobic tropes in those two appearances alone, embodying the stereotype of the submissive veiled woman.

She is introduced as a conservative, religious woman who has been raised to hate America like her countrymen, and is presented as a victim from the start. She perceives a message from the Guardians as one from Allah, but is criticized by male religious authorities who claim to know better. They denounce the Guardians as “agents of Satan,” call Salima’s assertions “blasphemous,” and imprison her when she refuses to recant her statements. The only moment of agency she is allowed in the issue is when she breaks free from Blue Beetle’s attempt to take her to America and relays the message. Unfortunately, she ends up paying the price for both refusing to conform to her countrymen’s beliefs and refusing to be “rescued” by Western forces. She is not only victimized by her compatriots, but also subjected to the whims of the Justice League, who are mainly comprised of white, Western men. Over the course of the issue, Salima is stalked by Western secret agents and is nearly taken to America without her consent. These forces claim to be acting in her best interest by taking her away from her country. There are some obvious parallels between her and Joan of Arc as they are both denounced by religious men for their seemingly blasphemous visions, but Salima is never cleared of the charges laid against her, or even remembered after her death.

The Veil

The Veil was a minor villain who made her debut in Marvel Comics in 1991, making a few appearances in *X-Men* during the First Gulf War. She is a mutant who excretes poisonous gas and is the sole female member of an Iraqi mercenary group called Desert Sword, which hosts a number of Oriental stereotypes. The Veil is essentially a personification of the Iraqi military’s use of “chemical

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2Woman who wears a niqab, or face veil which conceals face and leaves eyes exposed
weaponry against civilian targets” during the Iran-Iraq war (Lynn, 2016a). Her characterization leaves her both nameless and faceless, portraying her as something inhuman when compared to the heroic white female American members of the not-so-subtly named Freedom Force (Lynn, 2016a). Any motivations, besides a desire to bring death and destruction to the American X-Forces, are never revealed and she is simply presented as an enemy agent to be defeated. Her defeat at the hands of the Freedom Force is inhumane at best. She is burned alive as the Freedom Force leader quips “barbecued babe, coming up” (Lynn, 2016a). This establishes how the heroes see her as sub-human, sexualizing her even as she suffers an excruciating death. Her character design is problematic as well. It is an unfortunate combination of poor research and Middle Eastern stereotypes from the black veil (technically a niqab) covering the lower half of her face to the bared midriff and harem pants that resemble Jasmine's character design from Disney's *Aladdin*. This choice in costume plays a role in setting up the Veil as an exotic other not worthy of respect. She is also blatantly dressed in the colours of the Iraqi flag and it is notable how her hood, the only white part of her costume, immediately draws attention to the veil she wears. This design choice means that she is immediately associated with the veil through her costume and her lack of a real name, further contributing to her character’s dehumanization at the hands of white, Western military forces.

**Sooraya Qadir**

Sooraya Qadir made her debut in *X-Men* in 2002 as the superheroine Dust, and for over a decade she was one of the only positive portrayals of Muslimahs in comics. She is presented as a powerful mutant from her early appearances and is shown to be capable of defending herself against a man who tries to pull off her niqab. Simultaneously, she is a representation of the oppressed Muslim woman trope, mirroring how American military forces in Afghanistan were supported and encouraged by white feminists in the movement for the liberation of Afghan women (Lynn, 2016a). Despite her immense powers and capabilities, Sooraya still has to be “liberated” by a team of white male X-Men who annihilate an entire Afghan village and take her away from her home country in the process. It is left unclear whether this removal was willing on Sooraya’s part, given that panels show her unconscious in a white man’s arms as the X-Men prepare to leave Afghanistan.

She is also a product of “contradictions and poorly-researched inaccuracies” due to her white American creator (Lynn, 2016a). Sooraya is established as being of Afghan descent, but she is only ever shown speaking Arabic, presumably based on the assumption that Middle Eastern people speak the same language. In reality, Arabic was a language known to only a few people in the country during the time period. It is more likely that she would have spoken Pashto, Dari, or one of the many minority languages found in Afghanistan (Lynn, 2016a). Her character design is questionable as well. While it should be noted that Sooraya wearing her signature black niqab is presented as a personal choice in order to protect her modesty, this choice of clothing would have been inaccurate given that the
blue burqa\(^{3}\) was mandatory for Afghan women in the early 2000s (Lynn, 2016a). There is also an odd sexualization despite her choice to wear the niqab. Her chador\(^{4}\) is drawn as extremely form-fitting when it ought to be loose. The writers have her state that she wears the niqab to protect herself from men, but the way it is worded frames her as an object of desire that needs to remain hidden from lustful Muslim men (Dar, 2017c). The fact that the writers include a scene where Sooraya loses both her niqab and chador after transforming and is left naked behind a bush is suspect, considering other female mutants do not lose their clothing upon using their powers despite just wearing tank tops and shorts. White male writers with the assumption that there are no Muslim comic book readers have continually mishandled her characterization throughout the years. The results include inconsistencies and false assumptions throughout Sooraya’s portrayal. They misrepresent the way Muslim women pray and display ignorance regarding the difference between types of Islamic female dress such as the niqab and the burqa. They operate under the assumption that the niqab and the burqa are to “protect Muslim women from men” rather than a means to observe Islamic teachings of modesty for all genders (Dar, 2017c). There are many instances where Sooraya is presented as a “ham-fist sermon of acceptance” to female characters who constantly shame her for wearing the niqab and being “subservient to men,” or “prudish and judgemental” in slut-shaming other female characters, albeit inconsistently (Lynn, 2016a). The result leaves Sooraya severely judged and constantly defending her choice to wear the niqab, excluded from a community of her schoolmates when she is meant to be in a place where all mutants are accepted (Dar, 2017c).

**Jalila and Aya**

Even non-Western comic books like *Jalila: Protector of The City of All Faiths* and *Aya: Princess of Darkness* are not immune to problematic representation. The titular characters are two of the Muslim superheroes featured in AK Comics, an Egyptian-based publishing company founded by Dr. Ayman Kandeel in 2004 and the first large scale production of superhero comics in North Africa and the Middle East. The company's intention is to “fill the cultural gap by providing Arab role models, specifically Arab superheroes for younger generations” as a means to combat sexism, racism, and create a better understanding of the Muslim world (Dar, 2017a). However, the way that Jalila and Aya are portrayed is not much of an improvement from the portrayals of Muslim women found in mainstream Western comics. The writers and artists for both publications have a tendency to focus on hypersexualizing female characters instead of character development, which is especially unfortunate in Jalila’s case as she is only a sixteen-year-old girl. Jalila’s creators are Egyptian, but her costume is rather reminiscent of Jasmine’s midriff-exposing outfit in Disney’s *Aladdin*, evoking the image of an Oriental Halloween.

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\(^{3}\)One-piece veil that covers face and body with a mesh screen to see through  
\(^{4}\)Outer garment or cloak consisting of body-length cloth wrapped around the head and upper body leaving only the face exposed
costume instead of practical Egyptian fashion. Egyptian censors have since covered up her exposed stomach, but it does little to change how she is portrayed (Dar, 2017a).

Jalila fights crime in the Middle East and gets her powers from the less-than-lab-safe radiation suit that her parents created, but the audience knows little else about her. There is no backstory regarding her relationship with her family, no mention of any friends, and her faith is almost never addressed other than a mention of her mother wearing a hijab. The constant fetishization of her character also happens in-universe on several occasions. The most prominent example is when a sleazy old man puts a knife to her throat and gleefully implies that he is going to sexually assault her (Dar, 2017a). In many Western and non-Western representations, Muslimahs are threatened with violence on occasion, but they do not go as far as to include this kind of sexual violence against Muslim women in publications. While Jalila is intended to be a means of promoting feminism and gender equality in North Africa and the Middle East, the message is muddled due to her character’s sexualization (2017a).

Meanwhile, Aya is depicted as a dark blonde Syrian, which is a step towards establishing that there are no limitations to what Muslim women can look like, coming from various ethnic populations (i.e. Latin America, North and West Africa, East and Southeast Asia, Oceania, etc.) besides South Asia and the Middle East. However, she is still heavily sexualized, wearing a skin-tight bodysuit while her civilian self wears a midriff-exposing t-shirt to law school. Egyptian censors attempt to cover her midriff, but it is obvious how similar Aya and Jalila’s characters are in terms of characterization and hypersexualization. Dar (2017a) is quick to point out the lack of culture and individuality in Jalila and Aya: both exhibit the same cocky and sarcastic attitude despite AK Comics stating that Aya’s character is meant to be overly serious. There is almost no mention of Aya and Jalila’s respective cultures in either of their publications. Both women simply have Arabic aliases when the official language in Egypt is Maṣri, and Jalila is never referred to by her civilian name, Ansam Dajani. The writers also neglect to touch upon the lesser known dialects and languages spoken in Egypt and Syria. The failure to provide distinctive surnames perpetuates the stereotype that North African and Middle Eastern cultures are homogenous and it shines a light on how the writers fail to take into account the various histories and cultures that could potentially affect Aya and Jalila’s characterizations and storylines.

**DC Comics**

DC Comics’ Muslim characters are not quite as high profile as Marvel Comics’, only taking supporting and minor roles in white hero-featured titles like *Justice League* and *Green Lantern*. One such character was Rampart from *Sovereign Seven*, a prince from a fictional Muslim society who was created after the Gulf War (1990-91) in 1995. However, Rampart is quickly killed and replaced by

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Referring to a perspective in the context of a fictional universe, in contrast to a perspective from the real world

Colloquial Egyptian Arabic
Power Girl, a white woman. This is not the only instance of the company’s problematic representation of Muslims. Frank Miller’s infamous *Holy Terror, Batman!* primarily showcased the dehumanization of Muslims in a plot described as “Batman kicks Al-Qaeda’s ass” (Dar, 2010, p. 99). Muslimah characters remained scarce until *New 52* and *Rebirth* (Strömberg, 2011, p. 574), and while there have been Muslim characters presented as co-leads in recent years (i.e. Simon Baz from *Green Lanterns*), there has yet to be a female Muslim character with her own solo title.

**Kahina Eskandari**

Kahina Eskandari, a Palestinian super heroine with ferrokinetic abilities, was originally created by Milestone Comics in 1993. She made an appearance in an issue of *Hardware* before making the move to a continuity known as the “Dakotaverse” in DC Comics in 1994. Her superhero alias, Iron Butterfly, is derived from the medieval style armour that she wears into battle, which comes with a pair of metallic angel style wings that allow her to levitate (Pennington, 2017). Kahina is one of the more masculine portrayals of Muslimahs in comics. Her character design forgoes the usual “boob armour plate” for something bulky and physically imposing. Her hair is cut short like a man’s and there is a prominent white scar over one side of her face, a deviation from the often unblemished Muslimah character designs. Kahina also represents the mysterious woman archetype as almost nothing is known about her personal life. Readers only know that she is seeking vengeance for the murder of her family, but details about the circumstances are still unknown. Kahina is perhaps one of the more positive and less stereotyped portrayals of Muslim women prior to the events of 9/11. Unfortunately, her last appearance was in 2009, where she was explicitly portrayed as a villain.

**Selma Tolon**

Selma Tolon, a minor Justice League character, was a Turkish medical relief doctor who made her first appearance in *JLA Annual* in 2000. She discovered Merlin’s spell book and Sultan Suleiman’s scimitar while working for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement during an earthquake. She used these tools to defend Turkey as the superheroine Janissary, acting as a role model for Muslim women in her country.

While it is questionable that her weapon of choice is a scimitar, a Middle Eastern stereotype, it does have historical basis in Selma’s case. The scimitar itself dates back to the Ottoman Empire, but a weapon like the kilij would have been more accurate considering its popularity in Turkish Islamic armies as well as it being a regional variation that is specific to Turkey and Egypt. Selma is modestly dressed as a civilian, wearing practical clothes and a hard hat as a relief worker. While she chooses not to cover her hair, her superhero uniform includes a hijab and niqab. Her moniker is a nod to the elite

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7 The ability to move and shape metal and metallic objects  
8 One-handed, curved sabre used by the Turkic people and related Central Asian cultures
soldiers of the Ottoman Empire who were known for their complete loyalty, and were considered the first modern standing army in Europe. She has not made an appearance in DC publications since 2006.

**Sala Nisaba**

Sala Nisaba is an odd example of Muslimah portrayal. She is first introduced as a Tunisian archaeologist and professor of Middle Eastern studies in *Green Lantern* in 2000, but is later revealed to be a half-alien hybrid descended from Ishtar, the ancient Mesopotamian goddess. The writers chose not to touch upon any political statements in the few appearances that she made in the year of her debut, possibly due to the fact that she is part alien. Her superhero outfit is also extremely revealing, consisting of little more than a metal bra, loincloth, and a hooded mask. This may be intended to be a reflection on how Tunisian women historically have been afforded more equal rights in many aspects of life (i.e. dress, human rights, politics) in comparison to other North African and Middle Eastern countries. However, this does not explain the extent to which Sala is scantily clad and her character design comes off as yet another product of white male-dominated Orientalism. It becomes apparent that Sala’s appearance is heavily influenced by modern Western ideals of “female equality,” which is hypocritically used to justify the half-nakedness of female characters’ design, particularly when it comes to “exotic” or “foreign” women. Both these terms are coded for female characters of colour, many of whom are fetishized in depictions created by white men (Navarro, 2010, p. 95). Sala is drawn wearing a bikini while her face and head are covered. This not only makes for an impractical costume, but it also serves to present Sala as a faceless female body, clearly designed for male consumption.

**Recent Representation in DC Comics**

In recent years, reboots like *New 52* and *Rebirth* have introduced a number of Muslim women as supporting characters to the DC universe. *Aquaman* introduced Iranian hijabi sisters, Sayeh and Kahina the Seer in 2012, the latter possessing precognitive abilities and a scimitar. The sisters are not given any last names, but it can be assumed that they have different surnames given that Kahina is married. The differences in Islamic dress are subtle, but apparent between the sisters with Kahina completely covering her hair and wearing a niqab in battle while Sayeh wraps her hijab in a way that leaves her crown and part of her hair uncovered, which is a traditional style for Iranian women. Unfortunately, the writers still touched upon white saviour tropes by having Kahina beg for Aquaman, a white man, to come to her aid before she is murdered. 2012 also brought Sira Baz to *Green Lantern*, a Lebanese-American hijabi and the exasperated older sister of Simon Baz, the first Muslim Green Lantern. Her role was initially limited to wife and mother, but recent issues delve into her practicality in the face of conflict and her friendship with the new Green Lantern, Jessica Cruz.

In 2014, the new *Batgirl* comics introduced two more women: Nadimah Ali, a Pakistani-American hijabi who works as a college research assistant, and Munira Khairuddin, a Malay indigenous ethnic group inhabiting Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries government agent.
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who works under the codename Obscure. Nadimah is portrayed as a quick-witted fashionista who provides Batgirl with important connections while Munira works for an elite counter-terrorist squad. The latter is a rare representation of a Southeast Asian Muslimah and she was inspired by and named for real-life security analyst and terrorism scholar, Munira Mustaffa. The 2015 run of Doctor Fate introduced Akila, an Egyptian-American hijabi who is not given a last name and thus is sometimes confused with another Akila in DC Comics canon. She is introduced as an eccentric neighbour with a crush on Khalid Nassour, the new Doctor Fate.

The latest example of Muslimahs in DC Comics came in 2016 when Superwoman introduced Nadidah, an ambiguously brown middle-aged hijabi introduced as a hacker and the best news producer in Metropolis. She is presented as determined and sarcastic in her brief appearance, even joking that she was the inspiration for the hijabi character from the TV series Mr. Robot. However, these characters still occupy supporting and minor roles in comics, often disappearing soon from comics canon after their introduction. They have yet to be allowed to have main and leading roles in the DC universe.

Marvel Comics

Marvel Comics is host to some of the most notable and infamous portrayals of Muslim superheroines, from Sooraya Qadir in 2003 all the way to Kamala Khan in 2014. Many of these characters’ creators are white men and Muslimah characters in the early 2000s were rife with stereotypes and the Westernization of Islamic standards and cultures. It was a double-edged sword, as they were the only positive form of Muslimah representation that existed in comics at the time. It was not until about a decade later that creators took more care with writing and characterization, shaping what could have been two-dimensional stereotypes into something with more depth and respect.

Monica Chang

Monica Chang, a SHIELD agent best known as the Black Widow of the Ultimate Marvel Universe, is a rare portrayal of a Chinese Muslim in media. She made her debut in 2013 and is introduced wearing a skin tight, sleeveless, and low-cut bodysuit during her run as Black Widow. Her character design eventually evolved past the typical fanservice, with subsequent appearances showing her in more practical and modest uniforms prior to her reveal as Muslim in Avengers: A. I. (Pennington, 2017). She has since been made the division chief of SHIELD's A. I. division, putting her in a position of authority rarely offered to Muslim women in comics. This aspect of her character is showcased when Captain America undermines her authority by referring to her as Ms. Chang, to which Monica immediately declares, “That’s Division Chief Chang. I’m the hardcore motherfucker that’s going to save us from the machines” (Humphries, 2013a, p. 9). The comic does not shy away from addressing religion as one scene shows her praying as she wears a hijab. Monica usually chooses not to wear one, but it is not uncommon for liberal but observant Muslimahs to carry a hijab around for prayer and for entering mosques, as it is undisputed that women must cover their hair while praying. The
approach for this scene is subtle and more accurate when compared to Sooraya Qadir’s swimsuit model-posed and Western assumptions-based prayer scene in *X-Men*, especially considering that Monica’s creators are white men. However, the use of the phrase *Allahu Akbar* when saying, “there are things greater than doom” reads as transliteral, a shoehorned attempt at bilingualism (i.e. peppering English sentences with random words from different languages) (Humphries, 2013b, p. 1). It is not appropriate in this particular context and it would make more sense for Monica to say *Ya Allah* instead. This misconception seems to be common in other comics featuring Muslimah characters, including Faiza Hussain’s run in *Captain Britain and MI:13*.

**Faiza Hussain**

In 2015, the title of Captain Britain, a superhero endowed with mythical powers to uphold the laws of Britain, was passed down to Faiza Hussain, a British-Pakistani hijabi doctor who adopted the codename Excalibur. Faiza has her own mutant power: disassembling and reworking human beings, giving her the ability to heal without causing her patients any pain (Lynn, 2016b). She is portrayed as a nerdy cricket fan and a big-hearted modern Muslim woman who has been deemed worthy enough to wield Excalibur, the magical sword from Arthurian legend. This act of acceptance is symbolic of her character “being both Muslim and an integral part of British society” (Strömberg, 2011, pp. 591-592). The writers take care in ensuring that she is someone “whose religious beliefs are only one aspect of a multifaceted character,” giving her quirks and idiosyncrasies, such as referring to British secret intelligence as a “fandom” and geeking out over the prospect of vampire slaying (Lynn, 2016b). Although there is romance between her and another character, Faiza is never sexualized in-universe. She wears white non-form-fitting Western doctor’s clothes as a civilian and her superhero outfit is similarly non-revealing. As Excalibur, she is dressed in traditionally masculine knightly armour with a blue tunic bearing the Essex coat of arms and a chainmail hood that provides the same coverage as a hijab (Strömberg, 2011, p. 591).

Faiza’s parents are also presented as modern, a subversion of the stereotypical traditional immigrant Muslim parents. Mr. and Mrs. Hussain are second-generation British-Pakistani doctors and the former openly states that he is not particularly religious. Faiza is the product of a “traditional British suburban home” and even the act of Mrs. Hussain questioning a male character whether he intends to marry her daughter is turned on its head through quick wit and humour, as it is soon followed up with her stating that she finds the reactions to the question amusing (Strömberg, 2011, p. 591). The well roundedness in the portrayal of the Hussain family shows more respect towards Islam and Muslims than often afforded by typical American superhero comics.

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10 *God is great*; expression used when something good happens

11 *Oh God*
Kamala Khan

The mantle of *Ms. Marvel* was taken over by Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American Inhuman teenager with polymorph\(^\text{12}\) powers. She was created by Muslimah writers G. Willow Wilson and Sana Amanat, in a new Ms. Marvel series that debuted in 2014 and is noted for being the first Muslim character to be featured in her own award-winning solo series. Her character is a cheerful, geeky fangirl whose journey explores not only being a superhero while attending high school, but navigating her identity as both an American teenager and the daughter of immigrant parents with Pakistani Muslim values (Kent, 2015, p. 523). Kamala subverts the archetype of a Muslim character with an antagonistic relationship with religion as the audience sees her slowly learning to balance who she wants to be with the teachings of Islam. Kamala has positive experiences with her culture and religion, and it is an integral part in shaping her heroic identity. Her Muslim faith is also closely connected to her superhero costume, an altered burkini\(^\text{13}\), and it is a way of claiming the title of Ms. Marvel as her own instead of imitating Carol Danvers, her white predecessor (Pennington, 2017). This is also reflected in the cover art for a recent issue, where Kamala mimics the iconic Superman pose and is depicted ripping apart her salwar kameez\(^\text{14}\) in order to become Ms. Marvel. The comic even adds dimension to stock tropes about strict immigrant parents, portraying Kamala's relationship with her parents as a healthy one through instances like her dad explaining her name's origin and her mother expressing pride over Kamala being Ms. Marvel. It is notable that members of Kamala's family show different ways of observing their faith, with her mother and brother being more pious while her father, while observant, is more practical when it comes to his job. It is a rare depiction of the observance of Islam, with people within the same community or even family following their faith in their own ways. The well roundedness of Kamala and her family's portrayal can be attributed to the fact that her creators are both Muslim women rather than the usual white men who write for Marvel Comics.

**Representation in Ms. Marvel**

Much of the supporting cast in *Ms. Marvel* are Muslim women, which is a rarity in comics. What stands out even more is how they are all depicted in a respectful and non-stereotypical way, showcasing a wide range of personalities, attitudes, and approaches towards Islam. Kamala's best friend, Nakia Bahadir is a Turkish-American high school student who wears the hijab, but it is quickly established as a choice, stating that Nakia's father thinks that her wearing the hijab is just a phase. Kamala's mother, Disha is presented as strict, but supportive of her daughter. Recent issues have delved into the matriarchal history of Disha's family from Kamala's great-grandmother Aisha fleeing from Bombay to Karachi during the Partition of India in 1947 all the way to Disha making her own journey, immigrating

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\(^{12}\)The ability to transform and reshape the form of one's body, shape shifting  
\(^{13}\)Portmanteau of burqa and bikini, modesty swimsuit that covers the whole body except the face, hands, and feet  
\(^{14}\)Traditional outfit originating from India and Pakistan
to New Jersey from Karachi prior to Kamala’s birth.

The series is not without its problems, as the Christmas issue has Kamala treat Black people and Muslims as mutually exclusive, failing to acknowledge the existence of Black Muslims. This is later rectified through the introduction of Tyesha Hillman, an African-American convert who wears her hair in micro braids under her hijab. Her engagement to Kamala’s brother adds further intersectional layers with an extremely rare addressing of anti-blackness within the Muslim community (Lynn, 2016b). Having multiple examples of Muslim women in the same comic book and showcasing their relationships with each other goes a long way in showing that there are multiple ways to be Muslimah in comics.

**Black Muslimahs**

The first Muslims documented in American history were Black (Nessa, 2017). Historians estimate that twenty to thirty percent of the population of enslaved African people brought to North America were practicing Muslims (Nessa, 2017). However, Muslim American portrayals in comic books and other media have led to the assumption that Muslims are predominantly Middle Eastern and South Asian. There are very few portrayals of Black Muslims in mainstream comics, with the more notable ones being G. W. Bridge, an African-American convert from 2007’s *Punisher War Journal* and Josiah al hajj Saddiq, another African-American convert known as Josiah X from 2003’s *Crew* (Strömberg, 2011, p. 589). Portrayals of Black Muslimahs still remain quite rare in comic books.

**Monet St. Croix**

Perhaps the best known fictional Black Muslimah is Monet St. Croix, the mutant daughter of a Black Monacan man and an Algerian Muslim woman, who made her debut in *Uncanny X-Men*, a spinoff of the *X-Men* comics, in 1994. She is one of Marvel’s first Muslim superheroes, presented as an extremely powerful mutant with a sharp wit and personality, in addition to possessing numerous capabilities such as super strength, telepathy, flight, and invulnerability. Her inclusion in the *X-Men* makes sense when considering how Muslim populations are persecuted and discriminated against, much like how mutants are treated in *X-Men* and its various spinoffs (Dar, 2017c). Her success in *X-Men* Vol. 4, which featured an all-female *X-Men* team, has helped pave the way for women of colour-led titles (Lynn, 2016b), but ironically, Monet and her father Cartier were not originally portrayed as Black. Cartier was first introduced in *Generation X* and his ethnicity changed from white Monacan, to the biracial son of a white Monacan and his West African wife, to Black Monacan with an Algerian wife over the course of the comics (Lynn, 2016a). This retroactively changed Monet and her siblings from ambiguously brown to Afro-Algerian.

Monet’s characterization is not without its problems. She is written by white writers who assume that being Muslim and being empowered are mutually exclusive and contradictory concepts. She is often portrayed as being conflicted over balancing her bold, outspoken personality and her
“conservative, oppressive” religion (Lynn, 2016a). The portrayal of her observance to her faith is inconsistent as well. Monet reveals that she is Muslim in a 2011 issue of X-Factor, seventeen years after her debut during an anti-Muslim protest reminiscent of the 2010 Ground Zero mosque protests (Pennington, 2017). She goes on to state that ninety eight percent of Algerians are Muslim. This, in addition to the fact that she was born in Bosnia, another country that hosts a high percentage of Muslim populations, makes this reveal logical. However, Lynn (2016a) states that Monet’s character is written in a Muslim-when-convenient way. There had been no indication that she was religiously observant in any way prior to the reveal. The way she is drawn wearing an extremely low-cut outfit showing the top half of her stomach during the revelation is particularly egregious. Not only is it another case of the hypersexualization of Black women, but it also fails to take into account how Islamic dress requires all genders to dress modestly. Wearing a hijab or choosing not to wear one are both legitimate choices for Muslim women, but even liberal Muslim women do not often show so much skin. Her form-fitting, but still relatively modest outfit from her Generation X days would technically have been more appropriate in accordance to sharia law. It could be argued that Monet is simply a non-observant Muslim who, like many Muslim women in countries like Turkey, Lebanon, or the United States, chooses not to adhere to sharia law by wearing tight clothes, drinking alcohol, or having physical relationships outside of marriage. This makes sense as Muslims exist on a spectrum with their own specific attitudes, struggles, and motivations. The problem has less to do with Monet not being “Muslim enough” and more to do with the writers only touching upon her faith as a “diversity token” or as a means to address the “perceived conflict between Islam and female empowerment” (Lynn, 2016a). There is no effort to address Monet’s faith beyond mentioning that she is Muslim in the face of Islamophobic people.

Fatima and Hadiyah

Fatima and Hadiyah appeared in Boom! Box publications The Midas Flesh and Help Us! Great Warrior in 2014, a few months before Kamala Khan made her debut in Marvel Comics. Fatima is a space pilot/navigator and through eight issues, she is established as the team’s moral compass, refusing to kill any innocents aboard an enemy medical ship. Fatima is considered to be an alien because she originates from a non-Earth planet; however, she is presented as a Muslim woman who wears a hijab, abstains from alcohol, and follows āyāt16 from the Quran such as “whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind—and whoever saves one person, it is if he has saved all of mankind” (Lynn, 2016b). The audience does not know much about her backstory as the story begins in medias res, it is apparent that her character is not “boxed in by misogynistic or Islamophobic tropes” (Lynn, 2016b). Instead, the things about her that allude to her Muslim background are her bravery, ethics and bright

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15Islamic law
16Arabic for “evidences” or “signs”, verses of the Quran
personality, making Fatima a dynamic example of a Muslim heroine (Lynn, 2016b).

Meanwhile, Hadiyah is a supremely powerful and respected being who goes by the title of High Chancellor, another example of an alien Muslimah and an extremely rare portrayal of a hijabi as the absolute authority figure in-universe. She is also notable for being a hijabi with a less than traditional body type. Hijabis in comics are almost always depicted as slender, but Hadiyah is consistently drawn as fat, with a chubby face and a round body with thick, stocky limbs. It is never addressed in-universe, nor is it ever implied to be anything less than ideal in a universe where heroic beings are fat. She has the ability to project images through crystals that she summons, teleport things, and create protective shields. Despite the comic’s six-issue run, she is portrayed with a set of distinct idiosyncrasies such as having very soft hands, wearing a set of winged armour shoulder pads, freaking out in the face of demons, and popping out of a cake (Lynn, 2016b).

**Queer Muslimahs**

Contrary to Western perceptions, there are communities of queer Muslim women with recorded histories and representations dating back to the ninth century, during the precolonial days of the Islamic world (Habib, 2007, p. 31). Queer Muslimahs have yet to make an appearance in print comics, but the last few years have shown a significant increase in webcomics showcasing unique characters and storylines that would be censored or whitewashed in mainstream comics. This includes LGBT webcomics centred on characters of colour, but these publications only began featuring Muslimahs within the last decade.

**Madina Matar and Samira Tousi**

Superhero action comedy *Sharp Zero* made its debut in 2014 and in a rare example, features two queer hijabis in its main cast. Madina is a biromantic, asexual, dark-skinned Egyptian woman, specified as Sunni Muslim by the creator. She is quickly established as modern and unconventional compared to other flat and almost monolithic mainstream comic portrayals. She is a computer science major, an avid skateboarder, a bassist for a college indie rock band, and mission control for a group of superheroes. She plays matchmaker with her friends while wearing graphic shirts with her hijab, including a Black Sabbath band shirt. She hangs out in the skate park with other named hijabis and has a rivalry with another hijabi skateboarder. She is optimistic and charismatic, making hilarious faces and not shying away from expressing her romantic attraction to men and women.

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17Includes the following spectrum: lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, pansexual, genderfluid and nonbinary

18Erasure of characters of colour from media; centring white characters in narratives belonging to characters of colour; taking cultures, traditions, and imagery from people of colour and applying them to white people

19Branch of Islam; views that Muhammad did not clearly designate a successor and that the Muslim community elected the first caliph instead
Meanwhile, Samira is a Persian lesbian and is presented as a skateboarding rival and superheroine. She is Madina’s polar opposite, characterized as an alpha girl who is confident and obsessed with appearances and popularity, hiding her crush on nerdy Madina through insults and showing off. The way she is written opens up new directions in terms of characterization for Muslimahs instead of relying on stereotypical and Islamophobic tropes. It is a typical mean girl archetype, yet it is unusual simply because that is commonly associated with straight white girls. The creator also chooses not to implement the modest loser and flirty popular girl dichotomy by having both women dress in non-formfitting clothes. Samira’s superhero costume, reminiscent of the costumes of Emirati figure skater Zahra Lari, is deliberately designed not to reveal skin at all to the point where she wears a full-face metal mask. It is quickly apparent that Madina and Samira’s bold and outspoken characterizations are not treated as mutually exclusive with “oppressiveness of Islam” as Western perceptions might suggest (Lynn, 2016a). Both women readily use Arabic expressions and terminology, i.e. *Inshallah*20, *Alhamdulillah*21, and *Mashallah*22 in their everyday lives, whether practicing at the skate park or taking part in team missions. These various aspects simply make up who they are, reflecting the complexities of real-life Muslimah musicians and athletes.

Farah Sarki

Space fantasy comic Galanthus is still very new, making its debut in 2016, but it is notable for having a plus-sized, dark-skinned Black hijabi as its lead. Farah Sarki is currently only the second portrayal of a fat hijabi in comics and like Hadiyah from *Help Us! Great Warrior*, it is never addressed in-universe as many female characters, including Farah’s grandmother are drawn fat. Farah is an idealistic, teenage, unpaid factory worker who is reduced to a number and labelled a factory rat by her employers. She runs away from her abusive environment and stows away aboard a smuggling vessel where she becomes a tech assistant. Farah is presented as a daydreamer who strives to follow her late grandmother’s ideals and explore the universe outside the factory; her escape from the oppressive factory is symbolized by her beige uniform being dyed bright purple after she hides in a fruit crate. Her journey is primarily focused on adjusting to her new life on the titular ship and learning to deal with her grief over her grandmother’s death, but the creator has planned an upcoming arc where the fabric of the universe is in Farah’s hands. The saviour is an archetype that is almost never associated with hijabis in fantasy genres and it is a bold statement to display Farah front and centre on the cover of Book One.

Her characterization as an emotional girl who is not afraid to show weakness is a far cry from the strong, independent Black woman stereotype that often influences the characterization of Black

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20*God willing* or “if God wills”; commonly used to events one hopes will happen in the future  
21*Praise be to God*  
22*God has willed*; expression of joy, praise, or thankfulness
teenage girls. One panel highlights how religion provides comfort for Farah while mourning for her grandmother. The scene takes place in a temple that is reminiscent of a mosque and while she does not pray, it is where she takes the time to finally process her feelings. While it represents a fictionalized equivalent of Islam, it is a different, more nuanced interpretation of Islam not often afforded in comics. Meanwhile, Farah’s sexuality is currently undefined, but the second chapter opens with her dreaming about watching the stars with a brown girl and her attraction towards her is subtly made apparent. She blushes when her crush says that she is happy to be with her and a panel shows a close up of their hands and how Farah hesitantly reaches out to bridge the gap. It is reminiscent of a teenager experiencing a crush for the first time and that sort of same-gender attraction is an aspect that is not often explored with Muslimahs in fiction.

Other Comics

Indie comic book publications like Boom! Box have recently begun to showcase Muslim women in short-run issues that are more complex in characterization and motivation than big name publishers. Superhero comics are no longer an exclusively Western commodity, with comic book companies, in addition to independent publishers and webcomics, being established in North African and Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Kuwait during the past decade (Deeb, 2012, p. 391). These publications are quite different and less restrictive in characterization and storyline in comparison to the more stereotyped portrayals found in mainstream American comics.

Brave

Eisner-nominated Brave focuses on a white male protagonist, but it is also notable for currently being the only children’s graphic novel to feature a named hijabi on the front cover. Akilah is part of the Berrybrook Middle School paper and together with East Asian-coded best friend and fellow journalist Jenny, she uses her position to keep readers up to date with school news and shed light on social issues. She is presented as driven and socially savvy, always with her notebook and cellphone in hand, and faces many of the same challenges as typical middle school protagonists. Her falling out with Jenny greatly affects their ability to work on a joint story together and the rest of the story shows Akilah working out her differences with her best friend so that they can expose the bullying going on behind the scenes at the school art club. This sort of plotline is not generally applied to girls of colour and it can be considered revolutionary given how Muslimah characters are generally absent in graphic novels aimed at children and teens, and the few Muslimah characters featured have storylines centred around common Islamic stereotypes and their struggles against them. It is extremely rare to see a middle school hijabi, however, this particular portrayal comes at the expense of cultural identity: Akilah is never given a last name and is presented as ambiguously South Asian and/or Middle Eastern with no specific ethnicity.
Persepolis

*Persepolis* is made up of two autobiographical graphic novels that tell the story of Marjane Satrapi, an Iranian girl navigating her personal and cultural identity, first while growing up during the Islamic revolution and later after her subsequent return to Iran during the war between Iran and Iraq. Satrapi addresses political issues and oppression regarding intersections of gender, class, and religion by placing herself in the narrative, as a child in the first volume and later as an adult in the second volume (Pennington, 2017). She covers subject matter not commonly found in storylines for Muslim women such as drug addiction and sex before marriage. It is a messy and complicated journey for Satrapi, but still valid because it is her voice showing that Muslimahs do not exist as a monolith. Every Muslimah in *Persepolis* is shown to have a different relationship with religion and politics. However, the comic does bring to light some Islamic teachings that are lesser known to Western society, such as men being encouraged to be respectful and turn their gaze away from women. One memorable scene shows a teenage hijabi Satrapi being stopped by police officers while running late for class, their reasoning being that she should not run because it makes her behind move in an obscene way. Her reaction says it all: “well then don’t look at my ass” (Satrapi, 2003, p. 147).

Qahera

*Qahera*, told in a series of comic strips and published online in 2013 as a feminist webcomic in English and Maṣri, is the brainchild of Egyptian art student Deena Mohamed. She drew inspiration from “the real-life sexual harassment and white saviour ideologies that Egyptian women experience everyday” to create the eponymous hijabi sword-fighting-against-misogyny-and-Islamophobia super heroine (Pennington, 2017). Qahera is Arabic for “Cairo,” but the name is also a feminine version of qaher, which can translate to some of the following terms: “conqueror,” “vanquisher,” and “victorious” (Y, 2014). The supersonic-hearing character is a protector of Egyptian women, rescuing women who are harassed by men on the street and publicly holding harassers accountable (Pennington, 2017). Qahera is also a personification of the daily struggles against the non-intersectional feminism exhibited by white women who believe that they must “save Muslim women” from what they consider to be “the oppression of their cultures or of their clothing” (Rosenberg, 2015). It is clear that the issues of sexual harassment and white saviour ideologies are two sides of the problem presented in the comic: the policing of Muslim women.

The 99

The 99 was a Kuwaiti comic book published by Teshkeel Comics that ran from 2007 to 2014, primarily in the Middle East and the United States, with editions also produced in India and Indonesia. Creator Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa took inspiration from the basic tenets of Islam and created a team of ninety-nine Muslim superheroes, all with special abilities meant to embody the ninety-nine attributes of Allah (Strömberg, 2011, p. 573). The super-powered teenagers and young women featured showcase
a wide and nuanced range of ethnicities and Islamic dress. These characters include Samda, the eight-year-old Libyan hijabi; Widad, the Filipina relief worker; Mujiba, the Indonesian hijabi archaeologist with dyslexia; Batina, the Yemeni heroine who wears a burqa; and Musawwira, the Ghanaian private investigator who wears her hair in dreadlocks. It is notable that Al-Mutawa made a conscious choice to include “a mixture of Muslim women who wear and do not wear the hijab” without shaming one or the other for their choice, showcasing a less narrow range of Islamic feminism (Dar, 2017b). In addition, the choice to showcase women from cultures not tied to South Asia and the Middle East defies the assumption that Muslims are of a homogenous Arab ethnicity, and reflects how the majority of the world’s Muslim population reside primarily in the Asia-Pacific region (Strömberg, 2011, p. 577). These individual facets go a long way in ensuring that none the women featured in The 99 are objectified or exploited, making it more acceptable to Middle Eastern audiences than Jalila: Protector of The City of All Faiths or Aya: Princess of Darkness.

Bodies

Bodies is a murder mystery miniseries published by Vertigo Comics in 2014 that takes place in four different time periods with four different detectives in London, England. All of them are featured as main characters dealing with their own story arcs. One of these detectives is Shahara Hasan, a second-generation British-Arabic hijabi Detective Sergeant for the London Metropolitan Police in 2014 London (Pennington, 2017). She is introduced in full tactical armour at the beginning of the story, not immediately recognizable as a Muslim woman until after she takes off her headgear. This helps establish that being a hijabi and being part of a twenty-first-century police force are not contradictory. Shahara deals with Islamophobia and anti-Muslim attitudes from xenophobic protesters and one of her ongoing story arcs is balancing her faith and familial expectations with her duties and career aspirations as a detective, all in addition to navigating her identity as a British Muslim woman. One memorable scene has her literally fight against a white male suspect who tries to erase her history and identity as a British citizen. Her use of humour in the face of xenophobic harassment, her investment in her culture while openly admitting that she is not particularly devout, and the way she subverts the audience’s usual expectations of Muslim womanhood all contribute to making Shahara one of the more complex Muslim characters in comics (Pless, 2016).

The Future Of Representation

The success of Ms. Marvel has helped lay the groundwork for other female solo titles and fully fleshed out Muslimah characters. In 2017, Princeless—Raven: The Pirate Princess introduced a hijabi pirate. While currently unnamed, she articulates her choice to wear the hijab while on a ship with all women, calling out assumptions that the hijab is oppressive. Her creator is a white man, but he succeeds in writing a natural and respectful portrayal where other white male writers have failed. He does this
by taking responsibility for doing the proper research and listening to real life Muslim women during the creation of the character. This ought to be the standard that white creators need to meet in order to move away from stereotypical, homogenous representation and towards something more dynamic and reflective of the spectrum of Muslimahs. However, there is still a long way to go in representing the ever-expanding range of dynamic and powerful Muslim women in comics (Lynn, 2016b). There has yet to be an instance where two Muslim superheroines interact with each other in the same comic book universe, but several Marvel fans have been quick to point out similarities between the current Captain Britain and the current Ms. Marvel, citing their shared geekery and big-heartedness as some of the reasons for Faiza to mentor another rising Pakistani Muslim heroine like Kamala (Lynn, 2016b).

There are also many other intersections to explore with Muslimah representation, a prominent one being disability. In 2013, Silver Scorpion's Bashir Bari, a Syrian amputee turned superhero, became the first disabled Muslim character, but it was not until 2014 that The 99 introduced Mujiba, a Muslimah diagnosed with dyslexia, and she currently remains the sole example of a disabled and neuroatypical Muslimah, in comics. There are entire stories and plotlines that have yet to be explored and this is something that comic book writers and artists need to take into account in future works. However, if comic book and graphic novel portrayals keep going the way they are, there may even be a Muslimah superhero team in the near future. The fact that Muslim women can be portrayed as superheroes after thirty years of stereotypes and racist depictions bodes well for the future of Muslimah representation.
References


