

The Portrayal of Moderate Islam Representations in *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV Series

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Abstract

2022 Marvel released a TV series entitled *Ms. Marvel*, which shows Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American woman Muslim who leads as a superheroine. Lives as a minority in Jersey City, Kamala Khan shows her Muslim identity moderately conducive to bear with the society. Therefore, this research aims to describe the representation of moderate Islam in *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV series and the influence of those representations on Islam's stereotypes in the United States media. This research uses descriptive qualitative method through cultural studies approach, that is supported by Stuart Hall's representation and John Storey's ideology theories. Furthermore, with the changes of superhero motifs in *Ms. Marvel*, authors presume that this invention effected to *Ms. Marvel's* (2022) TV series popularity by transforming the negative stereotype of Islam into a positive one. The Marvel industry itself prepares minorities, especially Muslim hero performances to attract the entertainment market which is currently dominated by Muslims as the second world's most adherents. The effect of moderate Islam representations on *Ms. Marvel's* popularity is a further plan from this research. In fact, besides *Ms. Marvel*, another minority issue that is packaged as the core story of Marvel's entertainment production has become a separate marketing strategy for them. Therefore, the result of this research is that moderate Islam representations in *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV Series are portrayed in numerous forms and constructs an opposition to Islam's negative stereotypes in the United States media.

Keywords: Media, Moderate Islam, *Ms. Marvel*, Representation, Stereotypes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ms. Marvel, a superheroine character from Marvel Comics, has caught the attention not only for her powers but also for her representative of Islam. This character, first seen in 2013, has become a symbol of inclusivity and recognition for Muslims in Marvel Comics. Later on, the Marvel Entertainment Industry visualized the comic *Ms. Marvel* into a film with a television series model in 2022. In the globalization era along with the proliferation of the mass media, film is becoming an influential medium in shaping the public's perception of many different aspects of life, particularly religion. Films unconsciously tend to affect the audience's behaviors and perceptions about various issues (Pautz, 2014, p. 121). *Ms. Marvel* TV Series not only entertains with a compelling superhero story but also provides opportunities for viewers to imbibe Islamic values engagingly.

Moderate Islam, according to Sudarji (2020, p. 102), is a perspective or attitude that constantly attempts to adopt a middle stance between two opposing and excessive attitudes thus one of them is not dominating in other's

thoughts and attitudes. Moreover, Arture *et al.* (2009) define Moderate Islam as religious beliefs and practices that are not extreme, involving the rejection of terrorism and supporting democratic principles. Television series such as *Ms. Marvel* reflect this progression by portraying main characters practicing Islamic values in a manner that promotes peace, justice, and tolerance. For instance, the main character, Kamala Khan, is portrayed not only as a superheroine but also as a Muslim living her daily life following her religious values. *Ms. Marvel* succeeds in portraying Islam moderately by avoiding negative stereotypes and highlighting positive images of the religious faith. This creates a narrative that contributes to cross-cultural comprehension and presents an inclusive depiction of Islam.

Meanwhile for a long time in the Western cinema, the portrayal of Islam has often been marred by stereotypes, perpetuating misconceptions and oversimplifications. One recurring stereotype in Western films is the depiction of Muslims as menacing terrorists, contributing to the stigmatization of an entire religious community. Films such as *True Lies* (1994) and *Executive Decision* (1996) have often reinforced this stereotype, associating Islam with violence and extremism (Shaheen, 2009). Such portrayals not only oversimplify a diverse faith but also perpetuate harmful generalizations that can contribute to Islamophobia. Another prevalent stereotype is the portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed and submissive. Films like *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) have perpetuated the image of the helpless Muslim woman needing rescue from her own culture (Naficy, 2001). This narrow representation fails to acknowledge the agency and diversity within Muslim women's lives, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and ignoring the rich tapestry of experiences within the Muslim world. Moreover, Western films often exoticize and romanticize Muslim culture, reducing it to a superficial, picturesque backdrop. This trend, observed in films like *Aladdin* and *Sex and the City 2* (2010) can lead to a commodification of cultural elements and a superficial understanding of Islam (Shome & Hegde, 2002). The oversimplification of diverse traditions perpetuates an orientalist perspective, hindering genuine cross-cultural understanding. While these stereotypes persist, some films have made strides in presenting a more authentic and nuanced view of Islam. *The Visitor* (2007) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012) provide complex narratives that challenge prevailing stereotypes, offering more realistic depictions of Muslim characters (Naficy, 2001). Emphasizing these positive examples is crucial for fostering a more accurate understanding of Islam in Western cinema.

The prevalence of stereotypes in Western films depicting Islam underscores the importance of critical media literacy and the need for more authentic portrayals. By deconstructing these stereotypes, filmmakers can contribute to a more inclusive narrative that reflects the complexity and diversity within the Muslim world. Recognizing the impact of cinema on shaping societal perceptions, it is imperative to advocate for responsible

storytelling that promotes cultural understanding rather than perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

Hence, issues of race and discrimination have also been a discussion topic for most societies, especially in the entertainment sphere. The attitude shown by a character in a literary work regarding differences in race, religion, and ethnicity will greatly affect the audience's satisfaction level. Basically, entertainment is defined as something that can divert the soul in a fun way, so that in the end it is limited by the amount of duration shown (Vogel, 2015, p. 589). The United States is known for its massive entertainment production, not least with the placement of the main characters by colored skin people, different ethnicities, various religions, and unexpectedly unusual sexual orientations. Marvel movies that represent these cultural differences are *Black Panther* (2017) with a black main character Chadwick Boseman, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) the main character being played by a Chinese actor, *Moon Knight* (2022) which presents characters with disabilities, and most recently is *Ms. Marvel* (2022) represents both brown people and Muslims.

America sets several terms and conditions in its appearance before making those differences became one of the entertainment industry's marketing strategies. Erigha (2015, p. 78) stated that the originators of American popular culture are almost entirely white men, while stories by women and racial/ethnic minorities have a significantly lesser presence in the cultural canon. The main character in all American films is always shown as a white man with masculine power, then ethnically, Anglo Saxon is the main reference for producers to attract people and the most crucial is the religion issues, where Judeo-Christian or Protestant is more ogled than other religions (Kaufmann & Ballatore, 2019, p. 1154). These terms are known by the acronyms WASP: White, Anglo Saxon, and Protestant. Initially, Wielink (2017, p. 97) assumed that the term WASP was coined by the Canadian suffrage movement which appealed to racial, gender, and religious ideals, infused with strong patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric to unite with Canada's 'imagined community'.

There are several similar studies, first is "Debunking Marvel Comics' First Pakistani-American Born Muslim Female Superhero: Reading Religion, Race and Gender in *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan)" by Smit & Chetty (2018). Even though the exact object of this research is the comic version, the topic of analysis was still similar, providing a critique of the intersection between religion, race, and gender in contemporary comic books. The theoretical approach used in this study is 'social constructionism' with the plot or scene as the primary data.

The second previous research which became the reference material is objected a popular literature entitled "The Thriller Formula of Plot in *Don't Breathe* Film by Fede Alvarez" by Salsabila and Assidiqi (2019). Through the structuralism method, this research described the Thriller genre formula in *Don't Breathe* film. The object of analysis in this film is its plot, in which they used 40 plots as data. The results of their research found that the Thriller genre

formulas in the film were shown by complicated stories, plot twists that often occur, violence, story emphasis on action and conflict, the protagonist triumphs over crime, survival, and suspense.

Third, this research has the same provocation as Keating's (2020) report about the paper talk by Jennifer Trudeau and David Thomson entitled "The Economic Impact of Racism in the Entertainment Industry". The report explained how entertainment companies are taking advantage by making the issue of racism and stereotypes the main face. According to her, entertainment companies do not equalize issues of racial and cultural representation and are only concerned with film project revenues.

The last, this research was provoked by Indrawati's article entitled (2021) "Critical Discourse Analysis on Representation of Racism and Solidarity in Adidas's Tweets". By including Adidas' twelve tweets as data, she analyzed the representation of racism and solidarity as the discourse themes. Through the Critical Discourse Analysis method, this research shows that the declarative statement and humanitarian as the themes aiming against racism, spreading solidarity, and supporting the minorities.

From the incitement of the previous studies above, with employing representation and ideology theories from cultural studies, this research has a gap in which the representation of religion in popular culture media today is portrayed positively against the old stereotypes. Therefore, it can be concluded that the statement problem of this research is how is moderate Islam represented in *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV Series and how does that TV series influence on Islam's stereotypes in the United States media? However, this research will utilize decriptive qualitative method and cultural studies approach through Stuart Hall's representation and John Storey's ideology theories in analyzing the *Ms. Marvel* TV Series as the primary data of this research.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses cultural studies theory aiming at how characters from different ethnic groups, genders, or social classes are represented in films, and what impact they may have on society's perceptions. The cultural studies approach emphasizes understanding the 'production, distribution, consumption and meaning of culture' (Hall, 1997). Additionally, as a derivative of cultural studies theory, this research also uses Stuart Hall's representation theory approach that intersects with the production of popular culture. Hall (1997, p. 17) defined representation as a connection between ideas and language that constructs it possible to refer to a 'realistic' world of objects, people, or events, or to a 'fictional' world of objects, people, and events. He also added that in representation theory, there are at least three approaches. First, the reflective approach assumes that meaning exists in real-world objects, people, ideas, or events. And language acts like a mirror that reflects the true meaning

that already exists in the world. Second, the intentional approach to the meaning of expressions argues the opposite. It is believed that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes a unique meaning on the world through language. Third, the constructionist approach recognizes that neither the object itself nor the individual language user can determine the meaning of language (Hall, 1997, pp. 24-25). For this research, the authors employ the constructionist approach in analyzing how is moderate Islam represented in *Ms. Marvel* TV series.

Representation in popular culture comes along with meaning and ideology, hence John Storey's ideology theory is employed to further support this research. Ideology, according to Storey (2018), can be considered as a system of ideas or convictions that support or justify power inequalities in the society. In the popular culture context, ideology can impact how a social group or class is represented and interpreted in media, entertainment, and other cultural products.

Through cultural studies approach within the theory of representation and ideology, it can be hypothesized that *Ms. Marvel* represents Islam moderately and transforms negative stereotypes of Islam into positives in Western media, especially the United States media. Therefore, this research conduct *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV Series as the primary data, then for the secondary data required in this research are several scenes and dialogues of *Ms. Marvel* that were collected through documentation and literary criticism techniques.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ms. Marvel (2022) is an American television mini-series based on Marvel Comics written by G. Willow Wilson and produced by Bisha Ali for the Disney+ streaming service and starring Kamala Khan (Iman Vellani) as the superheroine, Ms. Marvel. The story follows Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Avengers fangirl who faces an intense journey in finding a supportive environment and uncovers her superpowers (Killian, 2023, p. 112).

Ms. Marvel first appeared in *Marvel Super-Heroes* Vol. 13 (March 1968), it was created by Chris Claremont as well as other superheroes, she was an American, White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant (Wilson & Alphonso, 2013). As Hosein (2019, p. 57) stated that since the beginning, *Ms. Marvel* has been presented as the blonde-haired and blue-eyed Carol Danvers, who is now recognized as Captain Marvel in 2019's movies, *Captain Marvel* and *Avengers: Endgame*. Nevertheless, in 2014, Wilson transformed *Ms. Marvel*'s identity into a Muslim Pakistani-American. The *New Yorker* (in Hosein, 2022) reported that Wilson and her co-author Sana Amanat knew they had high hopes for *Ms. Marvel* as a groundbreaking Muslim superhero, "Traditional Muslims might want her to be more modest, and secular Muslims might want her to be less so."

Ms. Marvel TV Series represents an attitude of religious moderation as Kamala Khan's attempt to adapt to Jersey City's society. Therefore, moderate Islam is a view or attitude that continually tries to take a middle position from two opposite and excessive attitudes so that one of them does not dominate one's thoughts and attitudes. (Abdurrohman, 2018, p. 36). Whereas in West, Islamic moderation is perceived as an adaptability, a willingness to cooperate or compromise, and uphold the norms and procedures implemented in Western countries (Somer & Schwedler in Islam & Khatun, 2016, pp. 70-71).

The intersection between representation theory and moderate Islam in *Ms. Marvel* produces several data that the author will depict in this research. Among the representation's three approaches, the constructionist approach is the one that is most connected to existing problems. The constructionist approach examines phenomena in popular culture by adjusting Saussure's semiotic theory and Foucault's discursive theory (Hall, 2020, p. 2). Campbell (2017, p. 2) also clarified that Hall determines representation as a thorny attempt of the mass media that isn't just presenting images, but also the way the mass media is involved in re-presenting images that contain multiple meanings, especially when they related to race and ethnicity. Briefly, representation is the perspective or comprehension that someone has in mind when relating an idea to a interlocutor (Hamdani & Tanto, 2023, p. 170). Moderate Islam representations in the *Ms. Marvel* TV Series can be portrayed through a constructive approach, detailed as follows:

First, after the 9/11 tragedy, the face of Islam was once used as a bad doctrine in American entertainment. One example is John Updike's controversial 2006 novel, *Terrorist*. Updike takes a wholly essentialist approach to cultural identity, including clichéd and stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims (Kriebernegg, 2011, p. 219). Said (1998) also stated: "It is a bit of an exaggeration to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as oil providers or probable terrorists as far as the United States seems to be bothered." But currently, the situation is reversed, with *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV Series –despite receiving masses of critics, Kamala Khan managed to show that a Muslim is proficient in being a superhero.

Figure 3.1 Kamala Khan wears her 'Burkini' costume
(Source: *Ms. Marvel* (2022), Episode 6, min. 35:53)



Based on Figure 3.1 above, it can be seen that Islam's portrait in the *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV series representatives are moderated and do not have any distinguishing features compared to other religions. First, Kamala Khan, an American progressive Muslim teenager, does not wear a hijab but does when praying in mosques or attending Sheikh Abdullah's lectures. Second, in her superhero costume, she combines Western and Eastern cultures, bikinis and burqas into a 'Burkini'. As the data shows below, Majumdar (2018, p. 71) considered that Kamala Khan has built a connection between unity and diversity, between established and developing countries by concerning the dress code.

According to Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2015, p. 28), the author's assured purpose is to normalize Muslim identity in the United States, not to diminish Kamala exposing her Muslimness explicitly. Despite the fact that the protagonist is frequently characterized as the other against a blank, white American, unbridled by cultural artifacts and beliefs.

Second, the portrait of moderate Islam in *Ms. Marvel* showed the Muslim community in Jersey City able to mingle with Native Americans. For example, there was no discrepancy behavior between Randy Havens, Kamala Khan's car instructor who seemed to interact normally. As well as Kamala Khan and Nakia –as minorities socialize at school. The social activity between Kamala Khan and her car instructor is an opposition act against the negative stereotype of Islam in the United States. As Bayoumi stated that (2015, p. 130) Muslim Americans have recently been seen as immigrant foreigners and have grown into continuous issues for media, researchs' topics of investigation, people's motives to take action and demonstrate, and authority policymakers' objections.

Third, in today's modern world, Islam has produced a large number of Muslim women in high roles and marks a progressive change. Wilson and Amanat want to express this through *Ms. Marvel* by turning Kamala Khan into a superhero saving the city, and their two male friends, Bruno and Kamran, are just supporting characters. It destabilizes genderism narratives that see American men as the savior and Middle East women in salvation need. Meanwhile, Kamala the Pakistani-American Muslim woman does the saving (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020, p. 21).

Figure 3.2 Nakia participates for the Mosque Board
(Source: *Ms. Marvel* (2022), Episode 2, min. 19:55)



The Figure 3.2 above then shows not merely Kamala Khan, *Ms. Marvel* presents equal rights once Nakia Bahadir is involved in the Mosque Board election. As Winterbotham and Pearson (2016, p. 23) point out regarding women's position in Islam, rather than concentrating on women simply as 'mothers only', women's parts as leaders and workers are necessitated to be encouraged and supported.

Fourth, in short, toleration means abstaining from intervening for any reason. Moreover, Galeotti (2015, p. 94) defined commonly toleration considered as a value. For tolerance to be a value and a virtue, disapproval must relate to an object that can be ethically allowed to disapprove, and on the other hand not definitively wrong. Tolerance can imply differences in ideology, religion, ethnicity, life choices, and so on.

Figure 3.3 Kamala Khan invites Bruno to Eid event
(Source: *Ms. Marvel* (2022), Episode 2, min. 22:56)



Figure 3.3 above is one of the examples that Kamala Khan and Bruno's friendship is accompanied by great tolerance owing to religious and ethnic differences. However, this is not a problem as it is acceptable to have good relations with non-Muslims. Along with Badawi's (in Shavit, 2014, p. 80) statement, as indicated in the Quran, Muslims should grow their love and friendship with non-Muslims who do not fight against Islam, act fairly, and considerate to them.

Fifth, however, the characteristics of Islam in *Ms. Marvel* is still shown with several Arabic terms, such as "*Bismillah*", "*Assalamu'alaikum*", "*Allahu Akbar*", and "*Haram-Halal*" which can be found in several scenes. But of course the United States of these terms is placed in a positive and reasonable moment. In this case, Islam has developed itself as an open-minded belief and rejected immoral stigma. Such as the utterance of takbir or "*Allahu Akbar*" at Aamiir's wedding, as it was shown in Figure 3.4 below.

Figure 3.4 Aamiir and Tyesha's wedding
(Source: *Ms. Marvel* (2022), Episode 3, min. 26:34)



Takbir utterances have been alluded to acts of terrorism several times, but according to Ghazanfari et al. (2019, p.102), takbir utterances can function according to certain contexts. In Aamir's wedding context, the function of Takbir means to celebrate achievement or success because there is the will of God that guarantees happiness at his wedding. Hence, Kamala Khan tends to express their happiness by shouting "Takbir!".

Islam's Stereotypes in the United States Media

Storey (2018) highlights the pervasive role of popular culture in constructing social realities around religion. Representations of religion can be invoked to reinforce certain powers or unsettle particular groups. He also added the way religion is represented in the media forms the public's perceptions of specific religious communities, and this can have a massive impact on society as a whole. Storey also examines how popular culture often utilizes stereotypes and vereinfachung (simplification) in representing religion.

Stereotypes are simplistic depictions of social groups that deny any kind of diversity among individual groups (ethnicities, religions, etc.) and are frequently in a negative and restrictive way (Perse, 2001, p. 166). Sutkutė (2019, p. 60) further refined that stereotypes not only represent beliefs about the individual groups' characteristics but also impart information about social roles. Based on the preceding discussion of moderate Islam representations above, the *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV Series encourages Islam's stereotypes in the United States media as no longer deemed cynical or radical, and also American Muslims are no more characterized as violent immigrants, or even worse as terrorists. Nevertheless, as networks grow in a globalized and digitally stowed, so do prospects for more voices to deliver their personal stories, construct their own images, and vocalize their own different cultural and religious backgrounds (Ross & Lester, 2011, p. 351).

Not all representations of a particular community can be effectively portrayed in films or other media. An example of unsuccessful representation is the portrayal of immigrant and minority characters in *Caché* (2005). Lykidis

(2009, p. 42) argued that instead of enjoying preferential permission to the subjectivity of immigrant or minority characters, Haneke's film presents a deficient perspective on bourgeois characters, an impact that is compounded by the ambiguity of the narrations that makes them undefinable and obfuscated.

Ms. Marvel's situation, Islam's stereotypes are successfully represented through intercultural fusion and adjustment, along with accepting and implementing the prevailing norms. The transformation of Islamic stereotypes and other minorities in the United States that the Marvel Entertainment Industry has been trying to do as a reconstruction of the audience's mentality towards the stigma of Islam also proves the involvement of all American societies without glorifying WASPs and discriminating the multiculturalism. Media arguably has appeared as a significant instrument for structuring and restructuring reality and forming mental portraits. As a result, these mental portraits influence and are influenced by the actual realities (Eijaz, 2018, p. 27).

4. CONCLUSION

The discussion above, it can be concluded that moderate Islam representations in *Ms. Marvel* (2022) TV Series are portrayed in numerous forms and of course constructs an opposition to Islam's negative stereotypes in the United States media. Through Hall's constructionist approach, it can be achieved that in *Ms. Marvel* there are four forms of moderate Islam representations. There are portraying Islam in non-contrasting ways, equalizing female characters in important roles, tolerating multiculturalism friendship, and shifting the stigma on Islam becomes an open-minded belief. The religious moderation shown by Kamala Khan and her Muslim community, as the researcher's presumption, was designed by Wilson and Amanat to increase popularity. This is because based on the current Marvel fans are dominated by Asian and Middle Eastern who are predominantly Muslim.

However, this research has the disadvantage of only analyzing through Hall's constructionist approach -combining Saussure's semiotic and Foucault's discursive theories, which was supposed to be supported by cinematographic analysis considering the object of this research is a film.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

As main contributor, AH conceived and designed the analysis, collected the data, contributed data or analysis tools, performed the analysis, and wrote the paper. As the supervisors, LA and HA supervised and redirected the project, the main conceptual ideas, the theory, and proof outline.

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