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1. What Makes the Muslim Ms. Marvel Awesome: She's Just Like Everyone

[What Makes the Muslim Ms. Marvel Awesome: She's Just Like Everyone](#)

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Body

Ms. Marvel, the Marvel superhero comic that debuted last month, has gotten a ton of media coverage because of what makes it unique. Mainstream superheroes are almost all white and almost all guys, and women of color virtually never carry their own titles. Even the X-Men's Storm, a widely recognized and popular character, hasn't ever headlined an ongoing series. So the fact that the new Ms. Marvel is a young Muslim girl named Kamala Khan is, for superhero comics at least, a long-awaited and much-welcome innovation.

The great thing about Ms. Marvel, though, is not how unusual it is, but how familiar. The second issue came out this week, and as the story goes on, its only becoming more apparent that Kamala's narrative fits neatly into traditional superhero narratives. Like many a Peter Parker-esque nerd before her, Kamala is out of place and uncomfortable. Her parents don't let her go to parties, and her acquaintances make clueless/mean-spirited comments about her background ("Nobody's going to, like, honor kill you? I'm just concerned."). The first scene of the first comic shows Kamala sniffing a bacon sandwich that she can't eat because of her family's dietary restrictions wanting but not quite able to do that thing everybody else does: eat American. She's the unpopular kid, and then she gets superpowers so she can be admired by all those who rejected her. Thus, its an empowerment fantasy.

Its also an assimilation fantasy, but that fact isn't a quirk or a variation. It's just how superhero empowerment fantasies have always worked. Most of the original, iconic superheroes were created by Jews, and the ethnic subtext isn't very hard to understand. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Clark Kent is practically a stereotype Jewish caricature a skinny, bespectacled nerd, constantly emasculated by Lois, until he ducks into a closet and emerges as the Hitler-fighting, quintessentially American Aryan Superman. The same is true of the skinny, bespectacled, poor, and ridiculed Peter Parker. The X-Men are often read as a metaphor for the civil-rights movement, but especially early on, the series seems to resonate much more directly with Jewish experiences of hiding difference or assimilating than with the African-American freedom struggle. In one particularly poignant scene in the first X-Men comic, we see [Angel wearing an elaborate restraining belt](#) to keep his wings flat to his back so no one will know he's different. Perhaps while they were creating that scene, Stanley Lieber and Jacob Kurtzberg thought for a second about their pseudonyms, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, which perhaps pinched a little bit on occasion as well. Ms. Marvel is well aware of this history which is why, in the comic, superheroes are portrayed explicitly as offering a means to assimilation. A big part of Kamala's connection with American culture is her connection with superheroes. She writes Avengers fan fiction (much to her mother's confusion) and idolizes the superhero Ms. Marvel. The mysterious forces that grant her powers aren't gods (as with Billy Batson/Captain Marvel) but rather the Avengers (or some force taking the form of the Avengers), who appear out of a strange mist to grant her desires. And when she transforms into Ms. Marvel, it's the iconic Ms. Marvel she transforms into, complete with ridiculous thigh-baring outfit, blonde hair, and white skin.

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Siegel, Shuster, Lee and Kirby rarely, if ever, directly questioned the logic of assimilation indeed, they were so committed to assimilation that their characters could only be surreptitiously Jewish. Peter Parker and Superman, despite the clear Jewish signaling, were both established within the narrative as Christian. The Thing has long been read as Jewish, but his ethnicity was only revealed [definitively in 2002](#) 40 years after his creation.

Writer G. Willow Wilson (herself a Muslim convert) is much less coy and in part as a result, she's able to think through some of the disadvantages of coyness. Becoming blonde and Caucasian doesn't make Kamala happy or glamorous. Instead, rendered in Adrian Alphona's cartoony pencils, she looks goofy and spindly and out of shape. "It's almost like a reflex, like a fake smile," she thinks of her transformation. Being a superhero is a way to fit in, but stretching yourself or going blonde or taking off your pants to fit in doesn't necessarily fix everything. As Kamala says,

Being someone else isn't liberating. It's exhausting.

I always thought that if I had amazing hair, if I could pull off great boots, if I could fly that would make me happy. But the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch and the leotard is giving me an epic wedgie.

Superheroic assimilation is also complicated by the fact that, for Kamala (as implicitly for the X-Men, or for that Kryptonian immigrant Superman) one's heritage is hard to separate from one's strength. Kamala finds the courage to use her newfound, not-quite-under control powers to save another girl after she remembers a passage from the Quran: "Whoever saves one person, it is as if he has saved all of mankind." She may look like Ms. Marvel on the outside, but that's just a costume. What's inside is Kamala, and part of who Kamala is, is her family, her religion, and her ethnicity.

Ms. Marvel is part of her too, though. As Kamala tells her mystic superhero benefactors, "I'm from Jersey City, not Karachi!" She adds, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know who I'm supposed to be." It's fitting, then, that her power is shapeshifting; she takes on the appearance of Ms. Marvel because she can take on the appearance of anything, like Plastic Man. She can shrink and stretch and bend; she rescues a girl from drowning by stretching her hand until it can act like a giant shovel, scooping up the thrashing girl and a big wad of lake mud as well.

You could see this power as a kind of metaphorical curse, reflecting Kamala's uncertainty; she doesn't know who she is, so she's anyone or anything. I don't think that's quite what it signifies, though. Changing shape doesn't mean that Kamala erases her ethnicity, nor, in the way of Superman, that she is forever split between nebbish and overman. Rather, in Ms. Marvel, shape-changing seems to suggest that flexibility is a strength. Kamala is a superhero because she's both Muslim and American at once. Her power is to be many things, and to change without losing herself.

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