



## **The Change is Here, and the Change is Her: Pakistani American Representation in the Disney+ series *Ms. Marvel***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Ms. Marvel (2022) from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), adapted from the Marvel Comics series of the same name, follows a Muslim Pakistani American teenager from Jersey City who adores her hero, Captain Marvel. This paper engages with intersectionality of Kamala Khan's representation in Ms. Marvel through the lens of her multiple intersecting identities: as a Pakistani American, a Muslim, a teenage girl, and a superhero. We utilized José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification (1999) and bell hooks' critical feminist lens (i.e., her ideas of the dysmorphic body and the deconstruction of women as parts) to do a critical analysis of the six episodes. We found three changes from her comic book origins to the new superhero found in the Disney+ series: Kamala's powers, her character growth, and her identity as a Pakistani American teenager. The study discusses the intersectionality of Kamala's unique relationships on screen with her family, subverting typical cultural cues and gender roles, and her conformity and subversion of identity as a Muslim Pakistani American. While creating her new identity as a superheroine, all of which highlight the lived experiences of marginalized communities.*

**Keywords:** Ms. Marvel, Disney+ series, Pakistani American teenager

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Superheroes are dominating our screens in theaters and on streaming sites, where seven of the 11 top-grossing films of 2017 were superhero movies based on comic book characters (Bowden, 2018). The New York Times calls it Hollywood's Comic Book Age and argues that with the trending global obsession with superhero movies, and with ongoing worldwide fascination of superhero movies, they have become the "most consumed stories in human history" (Bowden, 2018, p. 3). Films reflect the social values of the time they are made in. The same can be found in the changing status of women and evolving ideas about masculinity, religion, race, and crime in the last decade of Hollywood.

The Disney+ series *Ms. Marvel* depicts the first Muslim Superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), adapted from the Marvel Comics series (2014-2015) of the same name. The series follows a Pakistani American teenager named Kamala Khan (Iman Vellani), from Jersey City, who obsessively idealizes MCU fellow character Captain Marvel, to the point where Kamala is perceived by her family and community as someone with difficulties separating fantasy and reality. The series delves into the family and social life of Kamala Khan as a Pakistani Muslim teenager, where it touches on the ancestral history; struggles of her parents as immigrants from Pakistan to the United States (U.S.); and her grandparents and mother (as a child), as they migrated from India to Pakistan due to the partition of India in 1947, that defined the lives and relationships of four generations of immigrant women in Kamala Khan's family. Kamala's identity as a Muslim Pakistani American and as Gen Z serves as markers of her multifaceted identity and have changed from the comic book to the on-screen adaptation (e.g. her identity shifting from a millennial to Gen Z to be more relatable to the younger audience and to express the difficulties of dual identities in today's American society). These changes shifted the focus from her millennial identity to her role as a teenager in a Muslim Pakistani American household and community.

With the addition of *Ms. Marvel* to the MCU lineup, the production team behind *Ms. Marvel* includes extensive involvement of Pakistanis, Pakistani Americans, and people from the broader South Asian-American community. Sharmeen Obaid Chinnoy, an Academy Award-winning Pakistani director and documentary filmmaker, and Meera Menon, an Indian-American director, directed two episodes each. The writing team includes Bisha K. Ali as the head writer, along with writers Sabir Pirzada and Fatimah Asghar, both of South Asian origin. Ali also serves as executive producer, along with Sana Amanat, the editor of the *Ms. Marvel* comic series who is also a consultant. Joined by a star-studded cast, Kamala Khan's introduction on television serves as a celebration of difference and is a love letter to the re-imagined character and her Pakistani American family. The diverse production team in the creation of the *Ms. Marvel* series contributes to greater

authentic and inclusive storytelling, empowers underrepresented communities, and helps foster a greater appreciation for diversity and cultural complexity in the media landscape.

In an interview reported in the Washington Post, Amanat emphasizes that Kamala Khan's character was inspired by her own experiences as a Pakistani American girl growing up in New Jersey. Amanat asserted that there is no explicit political agenda behind Kamala's creation; rather, Kamala's popularity lies in the fact that her story is relatable to the immigrant experience and resonates with a diverse population of readers who can relate with the life of an immigrant household (Cavna, 2016).

However, we argue the modifications from the comics to the television series offers new perspectives on cultural representation while weaving together the intersectionality of migration, heritage, and modern diasporic experiences. These new perspectives are created through three main changes: the renovation of her physical powers and her origins, her character growth, and a new narrative which focuses on her Pakistani American, Generation Z (Gen Z) identity. This paper is influenced by the two co-authors' positionality. Author one is a Pakistani Muslim mother and academic, who grew up in Pakistan in a household where her grandparents directly witnessed and were impacted by the 1947 partition of the subcontinent by the British. The partition of British India founded two separate countries, Pakistan and India, forcing the mass migration of Muslims and Hindus across the newly formed borders. The partition serves as a major story arc in the latter half of the television series. Author two is a White Queer American critical scholar whose research focuses on intersectionality of identity in media and the cultural impact of the American mythos of superheroes. As Marvel fans, we bring our identities to this research to examine how *Ms. Marvel* represents both the Pakistani American identity and Kamala's navigation through her teenage years and as a superhero entering today's hostile world.

We provide an extensive literature review to establish a scholarly foundation, which we organized into three sections. The first part is the context of the cultural background of Kamala, in which we describe the Pakistani identity and differentiate from the Pakistani American identity. In the second section, we explore the portrayal of Pakistanis in American media. Finally, the literature review ends with a discussion on the current studies that examine *Ms. Marvel* as a comic superheroine, as there is limited literature on the *Ms. Marvel* Disney+ series.

We then move into the theoretical framework followed by a thematic analysis and concluding with a final discussion and explain the need for future research. Throughout the paper, we highlight the significance of *Ms. Marvel* as a novel media contribution in crafting a Pakistani American identity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Context of Cultural Background**

The partition in the Marvel television series refers to historical facts that changed the subcontinent landscape forever. The end of British colonial rule in India led to one of the biggest migrations of people in history. Approximately 12 million individuals were forced to flee their homes and become refugees, while religious violence claimed the lives of between 500,000 to one million people (Mateen & Sebastian, 2022). The British left India after a 300-year rule, and the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nations based on the presence of religious and ethnic majority: India with a Hindu majority, and Pakistan with a Muslim majority, including East Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh (Dalrymple, 2015; Siddiqui, 2022). People who either stayed in Pakistan or migrated at the time of Partition are called Pakistani. Hence, Pakistani are the citizens and nationals of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistani Americans are people who live in the U.S. as permanent residents or citizens, have dual citizenship (Pakistan and U.S.) but have their origins and ancestral roots in Pakistan (Moore, 2011; Zaki, 2016; Batalova, 2024). Religion plays a central role in the lives of Pakistanis and Pakistani Americans. Despite the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Pakistan, the Pakistani American community is more religiously diverse with Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Pakistani Zoroastrians (Afzal, 2021). Religion plays a vital role in the construction of transnational identity and community for Pakistani immigrants in North America (Afzal, 2021). Pakistani Americans' religious and cultural heritage are intertwined and cannot be easily separated (Bashir & Tang, 2018). The communal identities of Pakistani Muslim Americans are shaped by how they are perceived and treated by American culture, both as South Asians and as Muslims (Moore, 2011).

### **Portrayal of Pakistanis in American Media**

The portrayal of Pakistani culture and identity in American media and entertainment has evolved and continues to change over time. At the same time there are some stereotypical ideas about Pakistanis have not changed in American media. These ideas often connect Pakistanis to terrorism, extreme beliefs, or exaggerated cultural traits (Muffuletto, 2018). A study investigating the depiction of Pakistan in the Hollywood film media found that Hollywood sees Pakistan as a terrorist and extremist country. Films depict Pakistanis as hating Americans and that they are prepared give up their lives and kill in the name of Jihad (Bilal et al., 2021). In addition, multiple studies found that Hollywood movies eternalize Islamophobic rhetoric. Hollywood films' post 9/11 has fueled anti-Muslim prejudice (Elouardaoui, 2011; Uzma Kiran et al., 2021).

While media representations of Pakistani and Muslims have historically been limited and shaped by Islamophobia and post-9/11 narratives, *Ms. Marvel* offers a fresh portrayal of a Pakistani American, highlighting their complex identities and lived experiences (Muffuletto, 2018). *Ms. Marvel* subverts negative stereotypes by portraying a Pakistani American protagonist who navigates her identity as both an American and a Muslim in a positive and nuanced way. The series showcases cultural pride, familial love, and a complex view of what it means to be a young Pakistani American woman, offering a refreshing and empowering representation. This critical analysis adds to the existing body of literature by examining how the series challenges long-standing portrayals of Pakistani culture and identity, providing a more authentic and multifaceted representation of the Pakistani American experience.

### **SCHOLARSHIP ON COMIC BOOK SUPERHEROES AND *MS. MARVEL***

Superheroes within the Marvel and DC Comic universes have been the focus of many scholars who examine how superheroes were on the rise as a popular genre in media studies and the recent turn to gender and superheroines throughout various forms of media (Brown, 2011, 2015, 2022; DeGalan, 2020; Frankel & Robbins, 2017; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Likewise, discussions on race, ethnicity, and minority populations' depiction on screen and in comic books have been circulating in scholarship in the recent decade (Brown, 2017, 2021; Gipson, 2019; Haider, 2020).

Most literature on *Ms. Marvel* has been limited to her comic introduction in 2014, where scholars address Kamala's racial and gender identity (Khoja-Moolji & Niccolini, 2015; Cooper-Cunningham, 2020; Ruthven, 2020). Additional scholarship has focused on her Pakistani American and Muslim identity in the comics (Aayeshah, 2018; Jackson-Preece & Bhambra, 2021; Kent, 2015; Khoja-Moolji & Niccolini, 2015; Paramita, 2019) and on her comic book powers of elongating and engorging her limbs (Gibbons, 2017; Linton, 2018). These scholars are helping to build a connection between the societal awareness of the minority groups and communities' contributions and struggles for the welfare of their community.

Our article addresses the gap in existing scholarship on *Ms. Marvel* concerning the shifted narrative focus of her identity and her changed powers from Kamala's comic book origins to the television show. These changes critically reflect a reimagining of Kamala's identity, making her more relatable while addressing the complexities of how media adaptations reshape diasporic and minority identities, addressing issues of representation, visibility, and cultural negotiation in a transnational context. Kamala's character in the TV show serves as a lens for examining the broader cultural

dynamics that influence the crafting of Pakistani American identity in popular culture.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The following theoretical frameworks enabled us to conduct a critical analysis of Disney+ *Ms. Marvel* to understand how it represents the narrative and characterization changes from the original comic debut of Ms. Marvel to the television show. Ms. Marvel serves as a space for "disidentification," where Kamala Khan navigates dominant cultural narratives to create a hybrid identity that both engages with and resists stereotypical portrayals.

José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification (1999) was used to understand Kamala's family dynamics, community relations, religious and cultural practices, and historical events such as the partition, as found in the second half of the *Ms. Marvel* television series. According to Muñoz, "disidentification" draws from a political act that goes beyond resisting dominant ideology by embracing a disempowered perspective. Muñoz's disidentification involves a complex process of engaging with and subverting existing cultural representations and norms (Arrizon, 2002).

We are also integrating bell hooks' (2015) ideas of dysmorphic body and deconstruction of women as a critical feminist lens to analyze the narrative of Kamala's powers and her growth as a character. hooks (2015) argues that the representation of black women's bodies is hypersexualized, and "in 19<sup>th</sup> century pop culture and media, representations of black female bodies were deconstructed into parts to emphasize that these bodies were expendable, and how contemporary images (even those created in black cultural production) gave a similar message" (p. 64). Because of this focus on the "other body" and its segmented reduction, we used hooks as our entry point into critiquing Kamala's comic book powers of "embiggening". Further, hooks highlights the importance of challenging the objectification of women's bodies and recognizing the inherent wholeness and agency of women's experiences (Mpofu, 2021). Kamala's journey towards embracing her powers as part of her complete identity serves as a powerful example of breaking free from the confines of patriarchal norms and reclaiming autonomy over one's own body and self (Biana, 2020).

## **METHOD**

We conducted a critical discourse analysis of the *Ms. Marvel* series by utilizing the disidentification and critical feminism frameworks. Critical analysis recognizes the significant role of sociopolitical and historical events in shaping any form of text, including comics, videos, and scripts (Allen, 2017). The critical analysis method helped us see beyond the surface level the six episodes comprising the first season of the *Ms. Marvel* series. We took each episode as a unit of analysis and split the series into two halves consisting

of distinct thematic story arcs. The first three episodes establish Kamala Khan as a Pakistani American within her community who is exploring her powers and role as Ms. Marvel. The second three episodes incorporate the painful legacy of the partition of British India that led to one of the world's bloodiest mass migrations in history. In the following section, we map out the specific changes of her characterization from her comic book debut to the television show.

## OVERVIEW OF *MS. MARVEL*'S COMIC TO TELEVISION ADAPTION

Kamala Khan's transition from comic book hero to headlining her own show is shaped by the producers and writing team behind the iconic character. In the *Ms. Marvel* comics, Kamala's coming-of-age story reflects the personal experiences, ideologies, and biases (conscious or otherwise) of Pakistani American and Muslim identity of the production and writing team (Landis, 2016, 2019). Amanat believed introducing Kamala Khan and the new Ms. Marvel would offer readers a heroic persona worthy of admiration while also offering an avenue to exploring unique narratives found in her life. The production team includes G. Willow Wilson, a White American woman who converted to Islam while in college, who has claimed that her creation of Kamala's story mirrors many of her own experiences and the duality of identity, stating in an NPR interview:

I spent a lot of time talking to colleagues and friends of mine who have grown up with those hyphenated identities, who come from immigrant backgrounds — Arab or Pakistani, South Asian, African — and sort of asking them, what was it like? What did you have to go through in high school, you know, growing up, that maybe is not as obvious to me or somebody who is not from that background? So, I feel very strongly about these things and about the need to create space in which it is okay to talk about them (“The Woman Behind Marvel's Newest Team of Heroes, 2015).

*Ms. Marvel*'s success as a comic is credited with being a female-created, female-centric story in a male-dominated genre and industry, while also encoding the creative team's experiences and identity into their work (Landis, 2016; Priego, 2016). Kamala Khan became what thousands of young comic book readers needed in the early 2010s: a strong, teenage superheroine who looked, talked, and prayed like the audience who read her stories. A hero who saved the day and was not just a footnote.

The authors of the comic run include Willow Wilson, Sana Amanat, and Adian Alphonso whose work, *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*, introduced Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel in the February 2014 issue. *Ms. Marvel* has since gained attention from scholars such as Kent (2015) and Priego (2016) because the success of *Ms. Marvel* as a Muslim superheroine

with Marvel Comics. Additionally, there have been many works that examined Kamala's identity as a Pakistani American Muslim superheroine, but in the context of a coming-of-age story of a young millennial girl living in Jersey City, New Jersey. Her new identity as a member of Gen Z in the show allows for a greater conversation of how her identity as girl is often overlooked or seen as one-dimensional by the older generations from within her community. These previous texts specifically examine her minority status within a predominantly White America and its predominantly White hero-listing but not how this may change her interpersonal relationships within her family and community (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020; Gibbons, 2017; Mahmutovic, 2021).

This article expands on the works of Jennifer Jackson-Preece and Manmit Bhambra's (2021) "In-between identities and cultures: Ms. Marvel and the representation of young Muslim women" found in the *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, Winona Landis's (2016) "Diasporic (dis)identification: the participatory fandom of Ms. Marvel", and Andrea Modarres's (2021) "Aamir's just a dork': Ms. Marvel's re-vision of Islam in America" as examples of Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification with a narrative involving Kamala Khan's family. This work provided us with a method of exploring her identity as a superheroine while touching on the role of partition in defining the lives and relationship between the four generations of immigrant women (i.e. Kamala Khan, Kamala's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother).

The existing literature provides several insights, including the context of the cultural background of Kamala (i.e., Pakistani identity and differentiate it with the Pakistani American), the portrayal of Pakistanis in American media, current studies that examine *Ms. Marvel* as a comic superheroine, and specific analyses of *Ms. Marvel* as a character, particularly her identity as a Pakistani American Muslim superheroine and her coming-of-age story. While this review of the literature is by no means a comprehensive list of the scholarship being produced around the MCU, it does offer insight on a gap in the literature surrounding Disney+ *Ms. Marvel*, and with it, Kamala Khan's rise from teenager to superheroine. The gap indicates the need to examine Kamala's unique relationships on screen with her family, subverting typical cultural cues and gender roles, and her conformity and subversion of identity as a Muslim Pakistani American while creating her new identity as a superheroine. Kamala's characterization in the comics focused primarily on her identity as a Millennial, with her Pakistani American identity as secondary for the narrative in terms of importance. As such, this article expands on the existing literature by focusing on certain aspects that have yet to receive attention. These characteristics include intra-family dynamics and a modest interpretation of religious practices in Kamala's home, along with the role of

the 1947 Pak-India partition in defining the lives and relationships of four generations of immigrant women in Kamala Khan's family.

In the next section, we provide an analysis of Kamala's characterization based on the show, which focuses more on her Pakistani American roots, with her Gen Z status acting more as a comedic factor within the series' plot, including two other major changes from the comics to reflect the recent times.

### **FROM MILLENNIAL TO GEN Z**

One of the more prominent shifts from comic Kamala to show Kamala is her identity change from a Millennial to a member of Generation Z. Some of the modernization of the character is in the smaller details being "dated" and thus, "updated" to be more popular culture relevant to today's society. For example, we witness one of these minor changes immediately with the opening sequence in Episode 1: *Generation Why*, where Kamala Khan is recording a voiceover for her YouTube channel, Sloth Baby Productions, with a fan re-enactment of the battle against Thanos and the role Captain Marvel played therein. This deviates from Kamala's comic fascination from writing fanfiction to the more technology-savvy lifestyle of Gen Z with video editing as her nerdy hobby (Ali et al., El Arbi & Fallah, 2022). Stepping away from Kamala's Millennial identity in the new show eliminated the need to have antagonists and villains focusing on environmental issues and could instead provide a focus on government overreach (i.e., Damage Control), racism, and prejudice against the Pakistani American and Muslim communities.

In addition, there are two major changes from the comics to reflect the recent times. The first one is the cast, such as Zoe switching from a bully to a popular girl/influencer stereotype. The second one is the changing of the "type" of villains Ms. Marvel fights (i.e., from villains representing environmental issues to the Clandestines, people Kamala shares her origin with). The following section reflects on Zoe's characterization change from "mean girl" to influencer and ally to the Muslim community.

#### **From Bully to Influencer**

We start with Zoe Zimmer (Laurel Marsden), a fellow student at Coles Academic High School who is portrayed as a bully to Kamala's friends with racist undertones. Such confrontations found in the comics included scenes, as described by Sarah Gibbons (2017):

... [T]he first issue of the series begins at the Circle Q corner store, where Kamala and her best friends Bruno and Nakia face uncomfortable questions and comments from a high school peer named Zoe. Bruno refers to Zoe as "the concern troll", for her ability to mask her criticisms of Kamala and Nakia's beliefs and values as expressions of concern for their well-being (Wilson and Alphona,

2014, 1). As the narrative opens, Zoe compliments the color of Nakia's scarf before questioning whether a man had forced her to wear it, explaining, "I'm just concerned" (Wilson and Alphona, 2014, 2). Rather than straightforwardly criticizing the practice of wearing a hijab, Zoe exhibits an ideology of western superiority, imagining that her role is to protect Nakia from Islam's purported oppression... [Kamala's] transformation takes place when she heads home from a party where Zoe had expressed surprise that she was allowed out on weekends and chided her for smelling like curry (p. 455).

While Zoe does later apologize in the comic series for her rude behavior (Wilson, 2014, p. 83), it still stands at her core of being an antagonist to Kamala at the start of the series as a sort of high school rival. On the other hand, this is eliminated from the Disney+ series with a dramatic reimaging from a bully to a "popular girl" and unlikely ally/friend by the end of the season. Instead, in Episode 2: Crushed, Zoe tries to protect Kamala's identity while interrogated by Damage control (Gritmon et al., Menon, 2022). Later in the season in Episode 6: No Normal, she also uses her social media platform as a TikTok social media influencer to bring awareness to the battle at the school against Agent Sadie Deever and the S.W.A.T. units of the United States Department of Damage Control, and the injustice faced by the Muslim community (Dunn et al., El Arbi & Fallah, 2022).

### **Fighting Djinn and the Noor Dimension**

One of the major changes to the writing behind the two *Ms. Marvel* series is placing the Clandestines, a group of exiled Djinn from the Noor Dimension, as the antagonists in the show, rather than her comic book enemies who focused on terrorizing teenagers (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020). The Clandestines attack Kamala to try to steal Aisha's (Mehwish Hayat) bangle that has the power to open the rift between the dimensions. The Clandestine, or Clan Destine in the Marvel comics, are a dysfunctional family of immortal beings born of an ordinary human named "Adam" and the Genie "Elelayth" (*Clan Destine Members, Enemies, Powers* | *Marvel*, n.d.). In *Ms. Marvel*, the Clandestines, led by Najma (Nimra Bucha) in the present day, are exiles from the *Noor* dimension. This *Noor* dimension is effectively another part of the multiverse that is hidden behind a veil of light. *Noor* literally means "light" in Arabic; however, it is often contextually used to mean Holy or Divine Light. What little we see of the Noor Dimension establishes it as a shadow realm hidden just behind the real world, an assumption borne out by the holographic projection shown by Waleed to Kamala in Episode 4: *Seeing Red* (Pirzada et al., Obaid-Chinoy, 2022).

These otherworldly beings are much more culturally significant to the story than Kamala's first comic book villain, the Inventor, who is bent on using the energies of the living teenagers as batteries to reverse the effects of

Global Warming (Gibbons, 2017). The comic series focuses heavily on the identity of Otherness as often found within millennial culture, so much so that many millennials identify as the odd generation out from older generations in terms of work ethic, upholding tradition, and as a generation of youth whom previous generations blame from global crises that were inherited (Gibbons, 2017).

While they have no direct relationship to *Ms. Marvel* in the comics, their origin from the “Djinns” allows them to be set up as a perfect foil for Kamala Khan’s *Ms. Marvel*. Being Djinn, from the *Noor* dimension, allows these people to be connected to the vast and epic Islamic mythology surrounding the Djinn, as well as explain the powers and the connection they have with Kamala and her family. What is notable about the Djinn narrative is that they differ from how they are portrayed in Islamic mythology. Within Islamic mythology, the Djinn are a rival creation to the humans. In fact, *Shaitan*, the Islamic equivalent of the devil or Satan in Judeo-Christian mythology, is explicitly identified as a Djinn who was so devout to Allah (God) that he was considered better than the angels. The only time he disobeyed Allah was after the creation of Adam, when Allah ordered all of the angels to bow down to Adam. Shaitan refused and was subsequently cursed to stay away from the grace of Allah, tasked with luring humanity away from Allah’s appointed right path. Waleed (Farhan Akhtar), leader of the Red Daggers, explains to Kamala why people view people from the Noor Dimension as Djinn in Episode 4: *Seeing Red*, stating, “The Clandestine are not like the Djinn you’ve heard about in stories or in religious texts. I mean, if Thor landed in the Himalayan mountains, he too would have been called a Djinn” (Pirzada et al. & Obaid-Chinoy, 2022, 0:20:43). By reinterpreting the Djinn, the TV series emphasizes that identity is complex and multifaceted, challenges rigid definitions and highlights the value of embracing intersectionality of identities in today’s world. Both Kamala and the Djinn share a celestial origin, yet their life choices distinguish them—Kamala choosing the path of heroism while the Djinns follow a more destructive route. While individuals may share common origins, it is their choices that define their moral compass, reinforcing the idea that identity is not just inherited but actively shaped by personal decisions, values, and actions.

### **THE MARVELOUS POWERS OF MS. MARVEL**

Gibbons (2017) has already discussed at length how in the comic, the Otherness and the literal, and metaphorical, flexibility of *Ms. Marvel*’s superpowers allow her to break away from the gendered standards of society, by stretching and engorging her fists and other limbs to fight crime. However, with the Disney+ debut of *Ms. Marvel* changing her powers from “embiggen” to “hard light,” the social and cultural context for why she was given these powers in the comic and why they were replaced for this newest adaptation

of the superheroine needs further academic scrutiny. Therefore, we begin with feminist scholar Kent (2015), who explored how Kamala's comic book presence was about assimilation to American culture and being an American hero post-9/11. Kent (2015) critiques how in the first comic book Kamala, with the use of her powers, shifts into a mirror image of Captain Marvel, also known as Carol Danvers, who went by the moniker Ms. Marvel. As Kamala previously expressed that she wants to be like her childhood hero:

Kamala's powers are an externalization of Kamala's inner conflict: if only she could change herself, then she would be happy and fit in. However, she soon realizes that in order to fit in, she would have to compromise her own identity. This crucial development in Kamala's character resonates with issues of assimilation and arguably represents an embrace of her "otherness" (Kent, 2015, p. 525).

Priego (2016) claimed that when bestowed with powers in the comic, the imagery is aligned with Christian iconography, with Captain Marvel's open palmed hands appearing before Kamala, reminiscent of Raphael's (1520) *The Transfiguration* or Titian's (1518) *Assumption of the Virgin*. This image of Captain Marvel greeting Kamala in a vision mirrors the placement of subjects and composition of the paintings, thus the superheroine's presence in the comic, "Metamorphosis part one of five", *Ms Marvel #1* is presented as Judeo-Christian iconography inspired (Priego, 2016; Wilson et al., 2014) the floating gilded Urdu words "*Sakal Bun Phool Rahi Sarson*" ("The yellow mustard is blooming in every field") from a poem by the famous thirteenth-century Sufi poet Amir Khusro, instead furthering the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of the superhero genre (Priego, 2016). Thus, Ms. Marvel's original powers were trying to mimic, whether subconsciously or otherwise, the looks of others; in this case, the white, blonde, blue-eyed Captain Marvel (Gibbons, 2017).

On the other hand, in the TV show, her powers are retconned from flexibility, shapeshifting, and augmentation to light manipulation, which she dubs "hard light". Hard light is the construct, or physical manifestation, of energy from the *Noor* dimension, which she can access as a power from within her soul/body via Aisha's bangle. Kamala uses this power to create a protective body armor around herself, shielding her body and navigating through surroundings while remaining unharmed. Hard light manifests in the form of curved body forcefields that serve as a symbol of defense and protection, acting as both a symbolic and literal shield. The use of these constructs demonstrates Kamala's role as a defender, someone who actively safeguards herself and others. Traditional notions of acceptance often require marginalized individuals to conform to dominant norms and structures, leading to the suppression of their individuality and the reinforcement of oppressive power dynamics. However, Kamala's ability to shield herself and others challenges this notion of assimilation. Rather than conforming to fit in,

her ability to create body armor allows her to assert her presence and protect her own identity. This protective act can be viewed as a form of resistance within a larger society that disregards and erases the experiences of marginalized individuals. Furthermore, Kamala uses hard light to mimic an elongation of her limbs and fists, reminiscent of her comic book origins. However, this is not a physical distortion of her body and her “Otherness”, but rather a perceived shapeshifting ability as a consequence of manipulating the Noor energies.

Kamala's power can also be understood through the lens of disidentification. Disidentification involves navigating and resisting dominant norms and representations, while simultaneously creating alternative forms of identity and belonging (Muñoz, 1999). Kamala's ability to create a protective shield can be seen as a disidentification act, as she constructs a barrier that not only safeguards herself but also those around her. Kamala's powers disrupt the expectations and stereotypes imposed upon her as a marginalized individual, carving out her own space and asserting her agency. It allows her to resist assimilation into oppressive structures while simultaneously creating an alternative form of protection and identity. By embodying the role of a defender and challenging societal expectations, Kamala showcases the power of marginalized individuals to shape their own narratives and assert their existence in the face of adversity.

Kamran's (Rish Shah) destructive powers and his lack of control can also be examined through disidentification. Muñoz (1997) argues that marginalized individuals often develop alternative modes of identification as a means of resisting dominant narratives and societal expectations. Kamran's uncontrolled attacks, fueled by his emotions and trauma, can be seen as a manifestation of his disidentification with societal norms and his struggle to fit into the prescribed roles of a "proper" individual. Kamran's marginalization operates on both cultural and personal levels. As a being from the Noor Dimension, he exists between two worlds—human and supernatural—without fully belonging to either. His familial ties to the outcasted Clandestine place him at odds with both society and other marginalized groups. His relationship with his mother, characterized by both love and fear, further complicates his identity. Kamran's trauma deepens when his mother sacrifices herself to save him. In a fight with Kamala, Najma accidentally opens a rift to the Noor Dimension, which threatens to consume the universe (Asghar et al., Obaid-Chinoy, 2022). To protect Kamran, she sacrifices herself while closing the rift, and in the process, the Noor energy activates his powers. This leaves Kamran emotionally vulnerable and burdened with uncontrollable abilities he doesn't fully understand. His powers become a rebellious act, albeit unintentional, challenging the expectations placed upon him.

## THE NEW FOCUS ON MS. MARVEL AS A PAKISTANI AMERICAN SUPERHEROINE

As mentioned in the previous section, the *Ms. Marvel* comics touches on her identity of a Pakistani American teenager with the first few issues of the series more “focus[ed] on the pressure to not only be the hero, but to look the part of one” (Gibbons, 2017, p. 450). The show steps away from this notion of copying existing heroes, showcasing Kamala’s fascination with Captain Marvel as her childhood hero worthy of emulation as a heroine/persona but not as a person — essentially breaking from the blue-eyed, blonde stereotype of a superheroine while keeping her identity. Throughout the first season of *Ms. Marvel* (2022), Kamala’s journey revolves around developing and creating her own identity. Kamala’s unique individual identity formation holds particular significance as she represents a significant portion of the Pakistani American community. This theme is explored in her conversations with family and friends, as well as in the subtext of the narrative. The series uses animation and graffiti to represent Kamala’s inner thoughts that serve as a visual subtext to her identity struggle. These artistic sequences reflect her daydreams and fantasies about being a superhero. The conversations with her friends Bruno and Nakia also reflect on the struggles of negotiating her identity. Bruno represents her American side, supporting her superhero aspirations while grounding her in teenage life while Nakia represents Kamala’s cultural and religious expectations and challenges. Likewise, the details of Kamala’s jewelry, such as her pendant with her name written in Urdu, play a significant role in emphasizing her cultural identity. The connection between the Urdu letter kaaf (کاف) (the initial of her name) and its transformation into the Ms. Marvel emblem on her costume further reflects her journey of self-discovery. In Episode 6 of *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala’s signature costume and her name take on significant meaning. In a heartfelt rooftop conversation, her father shares the story behind her name. “[Y]ou sure are, and have always been, our own little Ms. Marvel” (Dunn et al., El Arbi & Fallah, 2022, 0:38:17). Yusuf (Mohan Kapoor) explains how her parents longed for a second child for years, and when she finally came into their lives, she was perfect—just as *Kamal* means “perfect” in Arabic. In Urdu, however, *Kamal* translates to “marvel,” hence the name Kamala. Ms. Marvel’s latest costume, created by her mother Muneeba (Zenobia Shroff), is inspired by traditional Pakistani attire, the shalwar kameez. This choice celebrates Kamala’s Pakistani roots and symbolizes the family support and bond between mother and daughter, emphasizing how Kamala’s cultural identity is intertwined with her superhero persona. Kamala’s journey from identity confusion to resolution is exemplified in the iconic scene of Ms. Marvel sitting atop a streetlamp, gazing across the bay — an image that mirrors the cover of comic book *Ms. Marvel* #5 (Wilson et al., 2014).

In addition to the first three episodes focusing more on Kamala's transition into Ms. Marvel, the second episode of the series titled *Crushed* touches upon the sensitive historical event of India's partition and its impact on individuals and families. At the dinner table, while talking about the lived experience of Muneeba's mother and grandmother and its impact on families, Aamir (Saagar Shaikh) says, "Every Pakistani family has a Partition Story, and none of them are good" (Gritmon et al., Menon, 2022, 0:27:29). By exploring the consequences of the partition through Aisha's character, the series touches on the intergenerational effects of historical trauma and the ways in which it shapes the experiences of subsequent generations. Muneeba's grandmother, Aisha, went missing from her family during the Partition, causing uncertainty in their lives. Throughout her life, Aisha's daughter and granddaughter heard rumors, gossip, and vague accounts suggesting that Aisha was either involved in an unacceptable act or was abducted and forced to convert religiously. The struggle of identity development and maintenance can be seen by Ms. Marvel's mother in the subtext where she is running away from all the rumors and talks about what happened to Aisha during the journey of migration and its impact on the emotional stability on Muneeba's mother. While aspects of Kamala's identity are played out in the comics, it primarily focuses on her being Muslim, rather than being Muslim Pakistani American, and there is no mention of the partition in her comic debut.

In the fourth episode, Kamala and Muneeba (Kamala's mother) travel back to Pakistan and the series explores the impact of trauma on Sana (Samina Ahmad), Kamala's grandmother, who lost her mother during the partition (Pirzada et al., Obaid-Chinoy, 2022). This traumatic event affects Sana's relationship with Muneeba. The series breaks apart patriarchal power structures and societal norms that perpetuate violence against women, especially during times of conflict and upheaval. It highlights how these structures often blame the victims for the circumstances they face, further marginalizing their voices and pushing them into the darkest margins of society. By shedding light on the silence and secrecy surrounding Aisha's experiences during the partition, the series challenges these power structures and brings her story back to life, giving visibility to her experiences. This serves as a powerful example of resisting and subverting the oppressive narratives that silence and erase marginalized voices.

As mentioned above, Kamala's unique individual identity formation holds particular significance as she represents a significant portion of the Pakistani American community. This subpopulation, consisting of individuals who were either born in Pakistan but immigrated at a young age or born in the United States to first-generation immigrant parents, often grapple with a sense of being a misfit, struggling to fit in with their American peers while also feeling disconnected from their Pakistani counterparts. This identity confusion is commonly referred to as "ABCD" or "American Born Confused

Desi," as mentioned by one of Kamala's cousins in Pakistan, a term Kamala dismisses (Pirzada et al., Obaid-Chinoy, 2022).

The evolution of Kamala's identity as a Pakistani American teenager and a superhero can be mapped through the changes in her costume. Initially, she dresses in a facsimile of Captain Marvel's outfit, attempting to fit in with her American peers. However, as the series progresses, she embraces her roots and acquires different elements that eventually form her signature costume. These include her great-grandmother's bangle, the blue waistcoat presented by Waleed, the lightning bolt symbol derived from her name in Urdu, and the red scarf given by Kareem (Aramis Knight). Each acquisition coincides with revelations about Kamala's origin and her connection to the Noor dimension. These symbolic pieces reflect her unlocking different aspects of her identity and ancestral ties. Waleed's gesture of giving Kamala the traditional Pakistani men's waistcoat holds profound symbolic meaning. It signifies that Kamala is welcomed and embraced as part of the Red Daggers community, with shared history and experiences. This act aligns with bell hooks' (2015) concept of *border-crossing*, inviting cultural critics to adopt a fresh perspective that transcends their limited viewpoints. It encourages a more comprehensive analysis and active engagement in the struggle as subjects, fostering empowerment and inclusivity. Waleed's words, "you should know, there is history in every thread of this fabric, so you always remember where you came from" (Pirzada et al. & Obaid-Chinoy, 2022, 0:32:11), acknowledge Kamala as an integral part of the Red Daggers and recognize their collective struggles, including those during British rule and the partition.

The culmination of Kamala's self-discovery quest occurs when her mother, Muneeba, presents her with the complete Ms. Marvel outfit before Kamala sets out to help her friends. This gesture represents acceptance and approval from her family while embodying the essence of Ms. Marvel's roots and identity (Dunn et al., El Arbi & Fallah, 2022). The final part of Kamala's self-discovery journey involves a conversation with her father Yusuf, which establishes a connection to her heritage through the interpretation of her name in Urdu (which translates to "marvel") and solidifies her identity as the superhero Ms. Marvel.

## CONCLUSION

*Ms. Marvel* (2022) not only provides an insider's view and perspective on Pakistani American and Muslim culture to the Western world, but also offers a significant source of representation for Pakistanis who have long awaited an authentic relatable portrayal. The involvement of Pakistani individuals within the production team further contributes to the originality of the presentation of Pakistani culture in the series. While the musical aspect of the series could not be extensively explored in this discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge its significant role in cultural representation. We leave an examination of the

music to be explored in a future publication. However, we do note that by incorporating classical music from the subcontinent (as part of this new focus on her identity), the series adds depth to its cultural authenticity and fosters a more immersive experience for the audience.

The changes made to Ms. Marvel's powers and identity, from embiggening to hard light and from Millennial to Gen Z, have greatly impacted the narrative of the show, as well as the characterization of Kamala Khan. By changing her powers from the physical distortion of her body to a project of her "inner light" Kamala gains a sense of agency that her previous comic book rendition was not awarded. This is an oversight that the MCU has tried to reconcile with this new narrative of multi-generational trauma from the partition and later with the dysfunctional family dynamics among the Clandestines. Finally, *Ms. Marvel* as a series fearlessly confronts the harsh realities of her people, particularly the loss of lives, honor, and families that men and women have experienced during the Pak-India partition and the brutality of British Raj.

Through the aforementioned points of departure from the comics, *Ms. Marvel* (2022) beautifully weaves together the exploration of cultural identity and heritage, leading to acceptance, and empowerment. From her debut in the comics to her new television show, Kamala Khan's journey as Ms. Marvel can resonate with individuals who navigate the complexities of their own intersectional identities, and demonstrates the significance of embracing and celebrating one's roots while forging a unique path forward.

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