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"Embiggening" Your Audience Base: Canadian Muslim Fan Discourses of American Muslim Superheroes

Safiyya Hosein
Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada

Abstract:

This article discusses an audience study on young adult Canadian Muslim participatory fans of Muslim superheroes. It first examines Islamophobia in Canada such as the Quebec Mosque shooting and niqab bans in Canada before providing a background on three Muslim superheroines discussed in the audience study: Sooraya Qadir (*Dust*), Monet St. Croix (*M*), and Kamala Khan (*Ms. Marvel*), who is arguably the most important Muslim superhero of our time because of her character development and her series success. The article then proceeds to discuss some of the answers of respondents in the audience study before analyzing their responses through affect theory. Ultimately, this article acknowledges that while Muslim superheroes may provide a shelter to Muslim consumers of popular culture who are affected by the negative portrayals of Muslims during the War on Terror, it concludes that Muslim superhero representation ALSO assuaged white guilt during the War on Terror.

***Keywords*:** Muslim superheroes; Muslim audiences; Canadian fandoms; Islamophobia; affect theory

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Sometime in the year 2002 – one year into the War on Terror – Marvel Comics introduced a niqabi superheroine for their *X-Men* title named Sooraya Qadir, codenamed Dust. Her representation was outright Orientalist, a term defined by Edward Said as "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny, and so on" (Said, 1979, p. 2-3). In keeping with this definition, Dust was outfitted in a form-fitting abaya with coquettish eyes peeking out of a veil (Said, 1979, p. 190). Furthermore, her superpower rendered her fully naked while she flayed her opponents alive with lethal sand particles. Since then, several other Muslim superheroes have been added to the American superhero legion, with the most successful of them – *Ms. Marvel's* Kamala Khan – who aired in her own series on Disney+ in June 2022.

While these superheroes are American, they are indeed relevant to Canadian Muslim identity considering Canada's role in the War on Terror with its invasion of Afghanistan; and the effects it has produced in Canada which resulted in heightened Islamophobia – an issue that has been prevalent in many Western countries. Another reason why Muslim superheroes are of significance to Canadian Muslims is because the Pakistani Canadian actress, Iman Vellani, was cast in the role of Kamala Khan – a fact that was greeted with much fanfare in Canada (Glasner, 2020). Furthermore, American comic books and superhero films are enjoyed by Canadians overall. (Glasner, 2020) This article discusses an audience study conducted of Canadian Muslim participatory fan perspectives on the Muslim superhero typology. It discusses the affective reactions that it has produced amongst Canadian Muslims and examines how the Muslim superhero typology bolsters ideas about Western exceptionalism by contributing to a hierarchy of Muslim lives where Muslim female lives are treated as more worthy than Muslim male ones.

Canada's Role in the Global War on Terror

The War on Terror extends beyond American policies when we consider Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan. One of the Canadian government official responses to the war came with its refusal to intervene on behalf of the Canadian-Pakistani teen, Omar Khadr, while he was tortured and imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay. Canada has also had its own violent brushes with white nationalism and Islamophobia which stems from the stigmatization of Muslims, a direct result of the War on Terror. In 2017, a shooting took place in a mosque in the suburb of Sainte-Foy, Quebec City which resulted in the murder of six worshippers. Despite being described as "one of the deadliest mass shootings in Canadian history" (Montpetit, 2019), Quebec's highest court reduced the sentence of the shooter, Alexandre Bissonnette. In its ruling, it called the original sentence of Bissonnette being eligible for parole after forty years as "cruel and unusual", "degrading" and "absurd" (BBC, 2020). The Canadian scholar, Sherene Razack noted the shooter's white nationalism by pointing out that Bissonnette's "Facebook page showed him to be inspired by President Trump." (Razack, 2018, p.171) She also pointed out that the shooting occurred shortly after the United States issued a travel-ban against Muslim-majority countries (Razack, 2018, p.171).

Bissonnette's case is useful in illustrating the kind of implicit bias that exists in Canadian policy when we compare the humane treatment he was shown in comparison to Khadr. Technically, the policies differed because Khadr was imprisoned and tortured by a foreign

country, while Bissonnette was tried and imprisoned in Canada. However, the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, noted that Canada violated its own Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Khadr case when explaining his government's $10.5 million payout to Khadr for this violation (CBC News, 2017). The Public Safety Minister at the time, Ralph Goodale, also acknowledged these violations. (CBC News, 2017) He also pointed out that "Those facts are not in dispute and there is no doubt about how the Supreme Court views them." He further stated that "The government of Canada offended the most basic standards." (CBC News, 2017)

Cartooning during the War on Terror is notable because of the controversy it has courted from the Danish Muhammad cartoons and the attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters in 2015 when two Muslim brothers stormed it and killed twelve people for publishing cartoons that lampooned the Prophet Muhammad (Withnall, 2015). This factored in prominently in 2020 when a French teacher was killed for teaching the cartoons under the banner of free speech (Ward, 2020). Canadians have in turn been influenced by these events as evidenced from an Angus Reid poll in 2015 where the majority of them declared their support for *Charlie Hebdo*, and the right to lampoon the Prophet Muhammad despite the systemic racism Muslims face in France (Angus Reid, 2015). Certainly, Canadians are aware of this as seen through the international coverage of France's veil (CNN Wire Staff, 2010) and burkini bans (Quinn, 2016). Canada itself has had its fair share of niqab bans with the attempts of the previous Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, to have it banned in citizenship ceremonies. The province of Quebec has also banned the niqab which was "constitutionally-challenged through the courts" (Bakht, 2020).

These events all illustrate the effect the War on Terror had in the Canadian Imagination, and how the daily lives of Canadian Muslims are still affected by domestic news and laws. In the midst of all this is the framing of Muslims in popular culture and cartooning. While Canada has had its own comics industry and its own superheroes such as Captain Canuck, American superheroes and comics are widely enjoyed by Canadians (Markstein, n.d.). This fact makes American Muslim superheroes relevant to Canadian Muslims who make up 3.2% of Canada's population (StatsCan, 2017).

Media Representations of Muslims

Most essays that discuss Muslim representation in popular culture are on televisual and cinematic portrayals of Muslims because of the popularity of those mediums. As a result, many essays analyze the terrorist depiction that is dominant in these mediums. Jack Shaheen (2001) has contributed considerable work in the area of cinematic representations of Arabs and Muslims as seen in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*; other writers, such as Evelyn Alsultany have done the same. In her book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, Alsultany (2011) discussed the terrorist stereotype of Arabs and Muslims outlining several strategies mainstream media have used in challenging the terrorist construction. These include tropes such as "humanizing the terrorist" (p. 24) and "flipping the enemy" (Alsultany, 2011, p. 23). These strategies seem redundant because of the many creative ways it continues to perpetuate such a demeaning stereotype. Alsultany (2011) points this out stating, "for all their innovations, these programs remain wedded to a script that represents Arabs and Muslims only in the context of terrorism and therefore do not effectively challenge the stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims" (p. 27).

Alsultany (2011) also discussed the good Muslim/bad Muslim binary, referring to both terrorists and the construction of the Muslim American patriot stating, "Bad Arabs and Muslims are terrorists, and their 'good' counterparts are those who help the United States government fight terrorism" (p. 28). This perspective echoes Elora Shehabuddin's (2011) outlook on Muslim representation in biographies when she stated, "the characteristics of true moderate Muslims are the following: they support democracy, gender equality, and freedom of worship; they respect diversity; they accept nonsectarian sources of law; and they oppose 'terrorism'" (Shehabuddin, 2011, p. 122). When contextualizing this to Muslim women, Shehabuddin states that "the moderate Muslim must be a woman, who is not visibly religious but rather modern and Western (read: she doesn't veil), thinks critically about Islamic texts and traditions…" (Shehabuddin, 2011, p.131). In many ways, this is representative of Muslim superheroes – most of them women and girls - who fight in the name of American values, oppose terrorism, support democracy and gender equality and respect diversity.

In the audience study conducted for this essay, which is part of a longer project on Muslim audiences of Muslim superheroes, three Muslim superheroines were discussed. They were the *X-Men*, Sooraya Qadir (Dust), Monet St. Croix (M) and *Ms. Marvel's* Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel). There were two reasons for this; first, most Muslim superheroes are female. Secondly, the study analyzed mainstream superhero comics with a long-term readership. The participants of this study were mostly female as well, and much of their discussions revolved around Muslim femininity in the one-on-one interviews I had with them. Before providing an analysis of their perspectives, it is important to discuss the Muslim superheroines featured in this study.

Sooraya Qadir (codenamed: Dust) was the first post-9/11 Muslim superhero who was introduced shortly after the American invasion of Afghanistan. As noted earlier in this essay, her representation is outright Orientalist: as a niqabi superheroine, dressed in a form-fitting abaya, and veil. Another Orientalist marker is her superpower which renders her naked in sandform and is reminiscent of harem paintings. Her debut in the *New X-Men #133* issue saw her unconscious and in the arms of a French thief who was about to sell her in a mutant slave market. This was intercepted by the former American soldier and powerful mutant superhero, Wolverine, who rescued her soon after. In reality, the scene communicated white male saviorism and thus introduced readers to a coded message about a rationalized, Western civilization "burdened" with taming a savage East. Dust was thus useful in communicating an imperialist message about the invasions of Afghanistan and later Iraq.

When reading the *New X-Men #133* issue, the foremost question for me was, "why?" Why *this* representation and why so early into the War on Terror? The best possible answer that I could come up with is a desire to domesticate the Oriental subject— an observation popularized in Gayatri Spivak's (1985) essay, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." On this, she stated:

> No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self.
>
> (Spivak, 1985, p. 253)

Dust is emblematic of the domesticated Other— a veiled and ostensibly religious subject and thus, an implied radical, but one that is domesticated for the Western consumer. Dust furthermore consolidates the post-9/11 imperialist self through establishing the white saviorism of Muslim women in Afghanistan from violent Muslim men who are bent on oppressing her.

Monet St. Croix (codenamed: M) is also a member of the *X-Men*, who is of Algerian origins but has French citizenship. While she has been a part of the Marvel universe for decades, her religious identity was not revealed as Muslim until an *X-Men* issue in 2015 entitled *The Burning World*. The volume is about an all-female team who descends on Utah's Black Rock desert during the "Burning Man" festival to fix a sinkhole that appeared under baffling circumstances. It contains significant amounts of internal dialogue from the characters, which explores the relationship between their emotions and their superpowers. Thus, the storyline seems to be an allegory about Sufism because of its themes on universal love and intimate matters related to the heart. Monet, who wears tight clothes and doesn't veil like Dust, reveals that she drinks wine in this storyline indicating that she doesn't practice Islam. The most significant aspect of the story is when her deceased mother appears to her in a dream while she is temporarily lapsed into unconsciousness. In the dream, she is helped out of this state through her Muslim mother's spirit who comes off as a woman of faith. She reminds Monet to recite the Islamic prayer, the *Fatiha*, in times of distress. After she fades out, Monet awakens with a renewed sense of strength and courage and begins to recite the *Fatiha* as she climbs her way out of the rubble she was previously buried under.

While academic literature about Monet is almost non-existent, the comic scholars, Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus (2013) briefly referenced her in their essay, "Finding a Place for a Muslimah Heroine in the Post-9/11 Marvel Universe: New X-Men's Dust". When comparing her to Dust, they stated, "Her commitment to modesty distinguishes Dust from another Marvel Muslimah superheroine, X-Factor's M (Monet St. Croix), whose tight costume with its plunging neckline draws prurient attention to her body" (Davis and Westerfelhaus, 2013, p. 802). Interestingly, a similar comment was made by a participant in this study about Monet. This commentary from Davis and Westerfelhaus was surprising because, as comic scholars, they had to have known that Monet's costume fared well when it came to female superhero costumes that are often far more sexualized. However, according to Peter Coogan (2009) in his essay, "The Definition of a Superhero," the costume was a defining trait for the superhero because it "marked the superhero off from previous hero types and helped to establish the genre" (p. 80). Monet's tight-fitting clothes drew the comparison because she was Muslim and Davis and Westerfelhaus (2013) expected a modest costume from her because of Islam's emphasis on modesty. Monet could not be expected to observe these requirements of Islam, however, because she acknowledged in the comic that explored her Muslim identity that she did not fully practice Islam. Furthermore, the observation was odd because not only is Dust's costume tight-fitting as well, but she becomes fully nude when she is in her superpower form. From this angle, Monet comes across as more modest.

Kamala Khan is a Pakistani-American Muslim superhero who is the only one with her own series: the widely popular *Ms. Marvel* series. Written by the American Muslim convert, G. Willow Wilson, and edited by the Pakistani-American Muslim editor, Sana Amanat, *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* debuted at #1 in comic book sales on the month it was released (Diamond Comics,

October 2014). The early volumes in the series are NYT bestsellers and the first issue is Marvel's best-selling digital comic of all time (Wilson, 2016). She has been so successful that she is currently debuted in her own TV series on Disney+ and she will eventually transition to movies (Hood, 2019). Such a transition would only increase the character's exposure and star power, making Kamala Khan the most important of all American Muslim superheroes on the market right now.

The first volume of *Ms. Marvel* sees Kamala coming into contact with a supernatural mist that transforms her into a superhero. On this momentous occasion, the superheroes Carol Danvers (the previous Ms. Marvel), Captain America, and Ironman descend from above in an ethereal stance and officially pass on the Ms. Marvel mantle to her. Urdu poetry is recited in the background in the midst of all this, and the translation is of a Sufi poem by Amir Khusro, "The Yellow Mustard is Blooming." Connecting this particular panel— which mirrors the Raphael painting, "The Transfiguration"— to Sufism only confirms the event's mystical quality by intentionally enhancing Kamala's experience to Islam (Gibbons, 2018). Kamala transforms soon after into Ms. Marvel by turning into a scantily-clad blonde predecessor. Later on, she learns how to transform into her own version of Ms. Marvel. Kamala chooses a burkini as her costume and gains confidence while charting her own path as a Muslim superhero. Coming from a South Asian Muslim background, Kamala sometimes wears typical South Asian clothes like shalwar kameezzes, dupattas, and kurtis. However, she is mostly outfitted in jeans and a top. The comic also contains Urdu, and we see Kamala attend mosque and have close relationships with her family and hijabi best friend, Nakia. The mosque, along with Muslim festivals like Eid-ul-Adha, is featured at different times throughout the series, making a robust connection between Kamala and Islam.

Sheila S. Khoja-Moolji and Alyssa D. Niccolini (2015) explored the eponymous first volume of *Ms.Marvel* in their article, *Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Femininities*, where they analyzed Kamala's desire to be "normal" in a roundabout confession to her predecessor, Carol Danvers, alongside Captain America and Iron Man on the fateful night Danvers passed on the Ms. Marvel mantle to her. Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2015) discussed this representation of normalcy as secularism masked as an invisible representation of white and Christian, stating:

> First, we explore the production of what counts as normal in Ms. Marvel and note that even as the comic series seeks to emphasize the American-ness of its Muslim, first-generation American-Pakistani superhero, it implicitly retains the normal as being white, middle-class, and Christian. (p. 24)

They also mentioned the *Ms. Marvel* creator, G. Willow Wilson's, desire to normalize Muslim identities. Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2015) noted:

> Although the creator's stated goal is to normalize Muslim identities in the United States and not to reduce Kamala to her Muslimness, the protagonist is repeatedly marked as the other against a blank, white American cast of characters, unhindered by cultural artifacts and religion (though, as we will show, implicitly Christian). (p. 28)

It is worth pointing out that the participants in this study who discussed Kamala's representation, described her as relatable and normal, and they considered themselves the same. Thus, I would argue that their concept of relatability had more to do with identifying with an intersectional Muslim representation in popular culture, specifically, with Kamala's representation as a teenage Muslim girl who is a child of immigrants and immersed in her combined ancestral and American cultures.

In her essay, "What is a Female Superhero?," Jennifer K. Stuller (2013) discussed three traits that creators used to distinguish female superhero identity from male ones. These are collaboration, love, and mentorship. To some extent, I saw these traits manifest with these superheroines. The first of these traits, *collaboration*, is contextualized as being in opposition to the "lone wolf model" of crime-fighting that male superheroes have been keen to adopt (p. 20). This was concretely exhibited in the volume that revealed Monet's Muslim identity because it explored the dynamics of an all-female superhero team. Since Dust is a part of the *X-Men* team, she often works in collaboration with other superheroes. And while Kamala is part of the *Avengers* team, she is often depicted as collaborating with her friends and family to rescue others. The second trait, *love*, is often a motivator amongst all three superheroines. Again, this was concretely explored in the volume with Monet because the superheroine team exhibited care for each other as they worked their way out of their predicament. The love of Monet's mother was also a huge factor in her determination to survive. Because Dust is a tokenized character, there has not been much content exploring these traits, but in a *New X-Men: Hellions* issue, she is able to see her mother in a refugee camp and tries – unsuccessfully – to get her out of it. Love has been a motivator on numerous occasions for Kamala to save the world in an attempt to keep her loved ones out of harm's way. The third trait, *mentorship*, isn't explored as thoroughly in their storylines, but these superheroines have certainly been mentored by the senior members of their superhero groups.

Muslim Representation: A Perspective from Muslim Female Audience Members

Throughout the data analysis process for this study, it became apparent that negative stereotyping in the media was a subject that young adult Muslims were hyper-vigilant. Many stated the following:

> *"You'll either get a very thick accent and you know like a very stereotypical Pakistani person or an Indian person kind of thing."* (Shayla)

> *"I feel like, in general, Muslims are portrayed as being extremists and they're also portrayed as being unable to adapt or not willing to."* (Naila)

> *"Muslim women are seen as voiceless, they're speechless, they're always silenced… she's always catering to her husband. She never leaves. She's always confined to the house."* (Amirah)

> *"Yeah, definitely Muslim men are portrayed as really strict, right? They're the people who are the leaders of the household kind of thing. Daughters, sons, everyone's afraid of the dad the most 'cause I feel like they're portrayed like bad. I'm trying to still think where Muslim men are portrayed. Like, I can't even of any.."* (Khadijah)

It was through this lens that many participants in this study approached the Muslim superhero typology. They regarded it as some form of a cultural breakthrough, much in the same way that *The Cosby Show* was regarded by Black audience members (Jhally & Lewis, 2003). They did not once question the irony of having Muslim superheroes fight in the name of American values while the United States and other Western countries like Canada were engaged in imperialistic wars in the Islamic world. Yet it is not a stretch to consider how the Muslim superhero promotes Western exceptionalism. It is also not unfounded to question the prioritization of Muslim female superheroes over Muslim male ones when one considers the high number of male superheroes in American superhero comic books (Cocca, 2016). Considering that the torture of Muslim men has been a regular practice in the War on Terror, it would be much more difficult to promote Western exceptionalism with a male Muslim superhero like the tokenized *Green Lantern* male Muslim superhero, Simon Baz, who was shipped to an offshore penal colony for torture before he became the Green Lantern (Johns, 2012). Instead, participants focused on the respite the decidedly positive Muslim superhero representation offered. At times, they even credited these heroes as combatting negative Muslim stereotypes. Take for instance the comments made by Shayla—one of the participants.

> " . .*You save the world. You are working for good. All of that, which you don't see Muslim characters doing very often or at all. So, I think as a concept, it's a very important concept, especially in this day and age where you have people looking at Muslim char[sic]—Muslim people—not characters but real life as the villains and the danger that the West is facing to have superheroes who are fighting for good and not for the bad people, you know? It's very important and to normalize that kind of thing. I think it's a very important effort*." (Shayla)

It became clear to me that participant perspectives of the Muslim superhero were influenced by the more common negative representations of Muslims in popular culture. Thus, I considered their reactions to be affective responses, especially because of how important it was for them to find Muslim characters that were relatable.

When exploring the concept of relatability, affect theory comes to mind, and thus for the purposes of this study, I considered relatability to be an affective experience. In *The Affect Theory Dossier*, Marta Figlerowicz (2012) described the major branches of affect theory. She described the first branch as one that "builds bridges between the humanities and biology or neuroscience" (p. 3). Another branch, she stated, "defends the therapeutic value of embracing unpleasant feelings such as shame, sadness, or loneliness" (p. 3). The third branch examines "ugly feelings" as "sources not of self-knowledge but of social critique" (p. 3). The phenomenologist and feminist scholar Sara Ahmed has incorporated some of these branches of affect theory into her work, specifically in her analyses of the value of emotions and their importance in social critique. Her essay, "Happy Objects," (2009) applies to the participants in

this study's perspectives on relatability overall. To be clear, the participants in this study never explicitly stated whether or not the characters they found relatable made them happy. However, it was clear that relatability was an important factor to them and, therefore, something they could assign positive feelings to.

Ahmed's purpose with "Happy Objects" is very clear. She stated that she wants "to consider happiness as a happening," as something that "involved intentionality" as well as "evaluation and judgment" (Ahmed, 2009, p. 29). Additionally, Ahmed (2009) explores "how happiness functions as a promise that directs us towards certain objects, which then circulate as social goods" (p. 29). In some ways, relatability directed participants to connect to some characters more than others. Ahmed (2009) stated that "to be affected by something is to evaluate that thing" (p. 31). Relatability was considered to be a measure of evaluation amongst the participants in this study because it often colored their opinions of these characters. The more relatable a character was to a participant, the more oriented they became to them.

When it came to the three Muslim superheroines discussed, relatability was the most important factor in their evaluations of each. Overall, Kamala seemed the most relatable to them, regardless of their cultural backgrounds and their levels of religiosity. Aliya, another participant, had this to say:

> "*She is so cool. I can definitely relate to her. I just loved how the whole comic was true to the culture as well, her Muslim culture, and her Pakistani culture as well. I think they mixed in very well.*" (Aliya)

Others, such as Salma, found her relatable because she was unveiled and expressed a "middle ground":

> "*I feel like she's pretty relatable. Like I feel like she's the most relatable to me 'cause she doesn't wear a hijab, 'cause she still wears modest clothes, you know? And she's like in the middle ground and that's where I feel like most of the youth in this generation is, in the middle ground."* (Salma)

Amirah, who was East African, related to her because she was "cultural":

> *"I know she still goes to the Mosque. She goes to… her Imam's like her—she still talks to her Imam or whatever. She's still cultural... goes to her Mehendis. Yeah. She's kind of like—ok, she's not like me. But like, I kind of like relate to her in some ways except for like the superhero part. . ."* (Amirah)

Perspectives on Dust were more varied, but generally she came off as the least relatable. Some appreciated her because she proved that the creators were "trying":

> *"She's interesting because like as a Muslim viewer, if I was to read that comic and if I see oh ok she starts off this [with] a niqab, she's covered. And then, as soon as she gets into her superhero mode, she has nothing on. So, it's interesting. I mean, they're trying. They're trying right now."* (Fatima)

Others were generally put off by her nudity and found it to be Eurocentric commentary on veiling:

> *"It also made me think, it's like again, the West always wants to save Muslim women from the Hijab and the Niqab. I kind of saw that. They were trying to do that in the comic. They were trying to free her from oppression through her clothing. So, as a Muslim woman, I felt a little offended."* (Aliya)

Overall, many felt that you could tell that her creators were white and that she wasn't a very "Muslim" representation because of the nudity:

> *"I could see the difference between them if the creators are white. You know how she was wearing a burka before but then after, in the Dust form, she doesn't look that Muslim?"* (Salma)

Overall, I did not hear anyone describe Dust as relatable to themselves and I suspect that this was why she seemed the least liked. Monet's representation was a combination of both perspectives, but because there's so little on her representation, participants mainly analyzed her clothing. Again, many found her relatable in some cases because she wore tighter clothes:

> *"It kind of, it makes it more relatable I guess for this generation as well because, just because you wear a headscarf doesn't mean you're the most religious person in the world. You don't have to relate to someone that wears a headscarf. You can still be religious but there may be other things that you do that are just not as explicit. So, I feel like that's what makes her a little more relatable just to me at least."* (Farah)

Some, however, found her representation to be "inconsistent" with Islam and found her inclusion unnecessary:

> *"I feel like it's kind of almost unnecessary to be that liberal I wanna say because nobody's asking every Muslim superhero to be wearing a niqab or to be dressed head to toe that resembles a niqab but at the same time, I feel like having someone who you want to represent as Muslim and have them to look like that can kind of be confusing or kind of not consistent with the whole idea of a Muslim."* (Shayla)

Others appreciated her non-religious representation because it spoke to the diversity of Muslim representation:

> "*I found her character a little interesting because it does show that there are religious orthodox Muslims but there are also secular Muslims who don't choose to follow everything. So I think it was interesting that they showed that side of Muslims as well."* (Aliya)

While Monet's clothes made up the sum of all her parts for participants because she is tokenized like Dust, she still fared better in Muslim superhero representation. This is due in large part to the volume that explored her Muslim identity.

In her essay, *Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed (2007) analyzed the film *Bend it Like Beckham* as a narrative for the promise of happiness in a multicultural society. Ahmed (2007) discussed the concept of the "melancholic migrant," whom she defines as the type of migrant who will not let go of racism and who in turn is characterized in British society as "laboring" (p. 133). Ahmed (2007) stated that "what makes this film happy might precisely be the relief it offers from the negative affects surrounding racism" (p. 132). I would argue that the same logic applies to Muslim superheroes and Islamophobia during the War on Terror. While the *Ms. Marvel* writer, G. Willow Wilson, does remarkable work in normalizing Muslim identity, that does not mean the comic cannot have the affective experience of alleviating white guilt.

Ahmed discussed white guilt in her analysis, stating that "the film might be appealing as it allows white guilt to be displaced by good feelings: you do not have to feel guilty about racism, as you can be 'uplifted' by the happiness of the story of migrant success" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 132). Perhaps that is why there are more Muslim female superheroes than male ones and why they are also prioritized and given more visibility. Considering some of the tactics used on Muslim male suspects during the War on Terror, including torture, waterboarding, and rendition, Muslim male superheroes like Simon Baz would be more complicated in alleviating white guilt. On the other hand, Muslim female superheroes can easily function as examples of "girl power." An unveiled Muslimah like Kamala and Monet can quicker be sold as a "rehabilitative image" of Muslims who have been demonized in Western popular culture with shows like *Homeland* and *24*. This "rehabilitative image" occurs with the transformation of the oppressed Muslim woman as an American superhero. Even Dust functions as rehabilitative in this scenario when we consider the sexualization she endures when she is "freed" from her veil in superhero form as a nude woman. Ahmed (2007) pointed out her interest in "how bad feelings are converted into good feelings" (p. 132). I would say that this transformation of white guilt into good feelings about American exceptionalism, which the female Muslim superhero facilitates, is an example of this conversion.

With that said, the Muslim superhero archetype also has a different affective experience— one that produces a shared happiness amongst Muslim women who evaluate it based on their abilities to relate to it. While I am not sure if happiness might be the proper term to discuss affinity experienced through Ahmed's (2010) 'closeness of association' concept, Muslim superheroes certainly provide the relief of not seeing Muslims depicted as oppressed women or oppressors of women. One may think that the empowered Muslim woman or girl has nothing to do with the oppressed one. However, if we look closer, empowered representation talks back to the oppressed Muslim woman representation; thus, it implicates their decisive oppressors, the dangerous Muslim men pervasive in the Western Imagination. Therefore, even though this study was consumed with discussions on the most visible kind of Muslim superheroes, the female ones, Muslim men, are complicit in these representations whether they are present in the text or not. Thus, while the *Ms. Marvel* series has included nuanced representations of Muslim men, the *New X-Men #133* comic that launched Dust's representation

perpetuated negative representations of them. In it, Dust is described as having fought off a group of Taliban members who tried to unveil her – an absurd idea at best when one considers that the Taliban mandated veiling. Her rescue by the white male superhero, Wolverine – who fought off the Taliban to come to her aid – only fortified representations of Muslim men as backwards, oppressive and violent.

Alsultany examines the difference in representation of Muslim women versus Muslim men. She states, "representations of the oppressed Muslim woman rely on an excess of affect - an explicit expression of outrage and sympathy—and representations of alleged terrorist men rely on the regulation of affect— a withholding of sympathy. The news media participates in policing the boundaries of feeling differently in the case of Muslim women and men in the War on Terror, resulting in a hierarchy of human life." (Alsultany, 2011, p.72). Sherene Razack (2004) discussed this hierarchy in her essay, *Imperiled Muslim women, Dangerous Muslim Men, and Civilized Europeans: Legal and Social Responses to Forced Marriages*, by pointing out how the depiction of Muslim men as oppressors of Muslim women only provided a justification for "the extraordinary measures of violence and surveillance required to discipline him and Muslim communities" (p. 130).

Certainly, popular culture depictions have played their role in this area by desensitizing audiences to the realities of torturing Muslim men. These depictions also serve as a deflection from the unlawful surveillance methods put in place to monitor predominantly peaceful Muslims in our post-9/11 world. Razack (2004) also points this out when she stated that "this kind of focus on Muslim men's violence against women serves not only to mask the violence Muslim communities experience from the outside but provides fuel for the 'War on Terror'" (p. 130). The "fuel" she refers to are the numerous times the West has intervened in the Islamic world during the War on Terror. Thus, there was convenience with promoting the "imperiled Muslim woman" and "dangerous Muslim man" (Razack, 2004, p. 131) tropes, which served as justification for these interventions while policing Muslim communities in the West.

Conclusion

With Canada's prominent role in the War on Terror, Islamophobia is a shared experience amongst Muslims throughout the West, including Canadian Muslims. Thus, any representations of Muslims in the media – even the so-called "rehabilitative" ones like the American Muslim superhero have the same function of communicating Western exceptionalism even in Canada. As shown earlier in this essay, Canada has had its numerous brushes with structural Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes. As this essay has pointed out, the representations of Muslims in televisual and cinematic mediums have been widely negative. This is possibly what gave way to the condition of possibility that led to the post-9/11 Muslim superhero construction.

Based on the perspectives of these Canadian participants, who were keenly aware of the negative representations of Muslims in fictional media, Muslim superheroes provided a sense of affective relief. However, this also led them to not question the motives of Western media in promoting the Muslim superhero typology during a time of heightened tensions between the Islamic world and the West. Furthermore, many did not question the focus on Muslim female

superheroes over male ones when in fact Muslim female superheroes were easier to alleviate white guilt. This is quite possible when one considers the fact that Muslim men have been used as subjects of torture during the War on Terror. Most importantly, the affective relief experienced by participants spoke to the commonality of the negative representations of Muslims in media, indicating how pervasive everyday Islamophobia has become during the War on Terror.

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About the Author

Safiyya Hosein is a part-time lecturer at Toronto Metropolitan University and holds a PhD in Communication and Culture. Her research focuses on Muslim superheroes and Muslim audiences. Her work is published in peer-reviewed journals like the Popular Culture Studies Journal, Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, and The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics. She is also an avid public scholar with articles published in The Conversation and many international media outlets. She has also been interviewed by the CBC, Spice Radio, Tebeosfera (Spanish publication), Thmanda (Saudi Arabian publication) and numerous podcasts. In 2017, she was selected by Vice Media Motherboard for their "Humans of the Year" series.

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