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Girl on Fire

New Ms. Marvel adds a splash of diversity to the Marvel universe.

BY SAMANTHA BAKER



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Hunched over a counter staring at a full warming case of juicy BLT sandwiches, a girl takes a whiff of the freshly cooked bacon she cannot touch. The seemingly average teenager isn't so ordinary, though. She's a superhero – she just doesn't know it yet.

The newest Ms. Marvel is a 16-year-old Muslim-Pakistani American – Kamala Khan. The new *Ms. Marvel #1* (<http://comicstore.marvel.com/Ms-Marvel-2014/comics-series/13864>) hit comic book stands in February.

Nowadays, it's not unusual for brands like Marvel to reboot classic series, giving them a fresh face. Jeffrey Brown, a popular culture professor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, said these reboots are one of the biggest trends in the comic industry.

“I've noticed the updating of characters,” Brown said. “They're more realistic and human.”

Creating more characters means developing more diverse ones – cue Khan's entrance to the Marvel universe in *Captain Marvel #17*. This appearance by Khan did not shake up the comic book world, but rather her introduction as Ms. Marvel caused a bit of controversy.

Let it Rip

Many comments on an IGN article (<http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/02/05/ms-marvel-1-review-2?abthid=52f2a443ebf971d852000055>) praised the new Ms. Marvel #1, saying, “I agree, the whole issue was written really well, and it was enjoyable to boot” and “I absolutely loved it. Hope to see a lot more of Kamala in the future.”

While most people online expressed their support for Khan's series, there are those rare few who despise her.

Comments ranging from, “I really don't like this forced diversity thing,” on Goodreads (<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18757876-ms-marvel-1>) to “Creating a Muslim hero for the sake of 'diversity' while her faith/race is overlooked would be quite superficial,” on that same IGN article, show the apprehension of many readers.

Because of Khan's race and religion, many stereotype her character as incapable of Marvel superherodom. And many of these preemptive judgments unsurprisingly trace back to those awful events that occurred on 9/11.

"People talk about superheroes as a post-9/11 phenomenon," Brown said. "We're insecure — these characters save New York from a foreigner, an alien, a mutation, a parasite and so on. Superheroes do what couldn't be done on 9/11."

So, to have a superhero that even remotely resembles those who attacked America on 9/11 results in raised eyebrows and quick assumptions.

Sana Saeed, senior editor of *islawmix* (<http://www.islawmix.org>) and senior online editor for *The Islamic Monthly* (<http://www.theislamicmonthly.com>), believes it's important that Muslim-Americans do not fall into the routine of constantly being on the defensive, and she thinks that Khan as the new *Ms. Marvel* is definitely a progressive step in a positive direction.

"The question is how can we have Muslim characters in pop culture media without really over dramatizing or placing at the forefront their religious identity," Saeed said. "From what I've heard, the (new *Ms. Marvel*) does a good job at not sticking her religion in your face but focusing on her being a teenager. (She's) a superhero who just happens to be Muslim — that is good."



THE NEW MS. MARVEL KAMALA KHAN.

Despite this step forward, many worry it could ultimately be just a publicity stunt by Marvel.

"Every now and then, (Marvel) makes a big deal about having a minority or different race as a new hero," said Chris Wilson, comic book enthusiast and employee of Graham Crackers Comics in Wheaton, Ill., "And it's a good thing but sometimes, unfortunately, they seem to just do it as a stunt rather than keeping it going, which sucks because I don't see why we couldn't have a black Superman-type character permanently."

Breaking Stereotypes

Wilson's concern is valid, given the fact that superheroes are constantly evolving and, in some cases, dying.

"(Marvel will) bring them in, keep them around and then kill them off," Wilson said about minority characters. "Which is like the worst thing you can do."

While it's unclear what Marvel's intentions are with Khan — keep her around for years to come or kill her off in an epic duel — what is apparent is that this mega-corporation is attempting to break stereotypes and add some much needed diversity to the comic industry.

"It's a huge industry that affects everyone in American culture," Brown said. "How it depicts gender, race, religion, politics, sexuality, et cetera is really influencing people now, today."

Saeed reiterates Brown's emphasis on the importance of comic books in expanding and diversifying American culture.

"I think if you delve deeper into the comic book industry there is this long history of challenging social ideals and biases," Saeed said.

Even though Khan is a first-generation American, critics see her only as a Muslim-Pakistani misfit — a threat to American society instead of a heroine. But with each new issue of *Ms. Marvel*, Marvel proves the ignorant folks are wrong by showing them that a superhero can be anyone, no matter her race or religion.

Heroic Impact

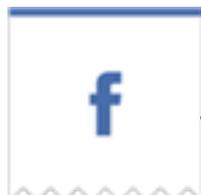
Marvel could be pulling a fast-one on us by having a short-lived future planned for Khan, or the comics-giant could be gearing up for a new wave of stories. Either way, readers are excited to watch Khan's story unfold.

"(If it is) just to get publicity, that still doesn't change the actual merit, value of the character," Saeed said. "(It) does not completely undermine (the story that was told)."

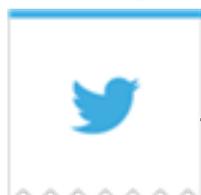
More importantly, Khan will leave a lasting impact on the comic book industry. And it's this impact by her, as well as by other superheroes, which needs to be analyzed much more closely than classic literature.

“Who gives a f–k about *Moby Dick* – not influencing lives as much as Superman and Batman,” Brown said. “How the Avengers affect people, influence us, needs to be understood much more than *Moby Dick*.”

Photos courtesy of Marvel Comics



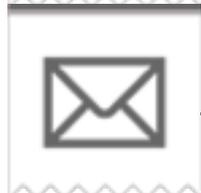
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Web-Slinging Controversy

While Kamala Khan is bringing diversity to the forefront, she's not the first non-white superhero to get widespread attention.

In August 2011, Marvel introduced African-American/Latino-mix Miles Morales as the new Spider-Man in the wake of — three-year-old spoiler alert — Peter Parker's untimely death.

Many worried that the sudden change in Spider-Man's race and ethnicity was simply a stunt, however, others, including comic book writer Stan Lee, viewed the change as a natural evolution.

Either way, Spider-Man's change in race and ethnicity caused quite a stir, particularly when it was speculated that actor Donald Glover might play him in *The Amazing Spider-Man* film reboot. Actor Andrew Garfield was cast as Peter Parker instead.

Despite how progressive certain media is, some things never change.