



PERSPECTIVE

'Ms. Marvel' treats being Muslim as ordinary — and that makes it extraordinary

June 17, 2022 · 5:01 AM ET

ANIKA STEFFEN



Iman Vellani headlines *Ms. Marvel*, based on Marvel's first Muslim superhero to headline her own comic.

Marvel Studios

I am a huge Marvel fan and have cheered wholeheartedly that it finally added more superheroes from underrepresented backgrounds.

I was first in line at *Black Panther*, I held a *Shang-Chi* watch party, I shared the viral pictures of Kumail Nanjiani getting ready for *Eternals*. But I had not even thought to dream of a Pakistani Muslim superhero.





Anika Steffen

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So when *Ms. Marvel* came out, it hit me completely differently than every Marvel creation before it.

There's a line in the show where the father quotes the Quran and tells the titular heroine Kamala, "If you save one life, you save the world." Hearing those words made me tear up. What a departure from seeing South Asians and Muslims portrayed as Apu or terrorists.

That's just one example. Here are all the ways *Ms. Marvel* upends all the stereotypes about being Muslim or South Asian.

The Khans are unapologetically Muslim

The show follows Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani-American from Jersey City who spends her free time making online videos about the Avengers – and soon discovers she has powers of her own.

In the opening minutes of the first episode, we meet Kamala's brother — sporting a beard and praying. I automatically cringed, waiting for him to emerge as a villain.





Kamala Khan, portrayed by Iman Vellani, is a Pakistani American teen living in Jersey City who discovers she has powers.

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But he's not. He was praying for his sister's driving exam — just as my siblings and cousins prayed for mine.

Kamala, like every Muslim teen before her, utters *bismillah* before starting her driving exam. All the Muslim characters say *Salaam* when they greet each other. There's Islamic calligraphic art on the walls of her house. There's nothing nefarious about any of this.

Watching such *routine* interaction, with my 11-year-old daughter sitting beside me, was a joy and a balm. It was beautiful and freeing. I didn't even know the weight I was carrying of Muslim depictions in TV and movies until I felt it lifted while watching *Ms. Marvel*.

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Rifat Malik

"For too long Hollywood and the media have relied on reductive, one-dimensional monolithic characters, as well as lazy sign-posting," said Rifat Malik, who runs American Muslim Today, a non-profit news outlet that challenges the media's negative stereotypes about Muslims.

She too watched the show with her 11-year-old daughter.

"There was no mistaking her delight that a young brown girl who looked like her and shared her religious/cultural heritage was the protagonist of a major Disney production series," Malik told NPR. "I'm so pleased that she is getting the kind of affirmation that I could only have dreamed of at her age."

Kamala is just an everyday American teen

I felt seen in every bit of Kamala's teenage experience. She is more than just Pakistani and Muslim. If you swapped out the Marvel posters for 'NSYNC posters, her room was mine as a teen growing up in Michigan.

When Kamala asks to attend AvengerCon, her parents responds to her pleas by saying they trust *her* — it's everyone else they're skeptical of. In that moment, it was as if the show had beamed into the living room of my teen years and recorded my parents who had said the same thing to me many times.





Iman Vellani who plays Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, says some of the scenes hit close to home for her.

Marvel Studios

That scene also hit close to home for Iman Vellani, who plays Kamala.

"I would, like, have to ask my parents weeks in advance if I wanted to go to a party. Like, I had to get it in their brain, and then we'd have to compromise on what time I'm going to have to be picked up," she told NPR. "And it'd be, like, 'Before midnight.' I'm, like, 'The party starts at midnight.' And they're, like, 'No, if you're not coming home by 11:30, you're not going.'"

She doesn't wear a hijab

There are about 1 million Muslim women in America, according to one Pew study, and 48 percent — or half a million — don't cover their hair. The choice to veil, or not veil, is a private one.

CODE SWITCH

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And yet, putting a character in a hijab has become a sort of lazy shorthand for 'Muslim' in TV and film.

Kamala doesn't wear one. And that speaks volumes, said Malik of American Muslim Today,

"Kamala ... represents a huge number of Muslim females who don't wear a headscarf and aren't consumed by angst over their faith - nor do their white friends need to liberate them from the oppressive structural patriarchy supposedly inherent in Islam."

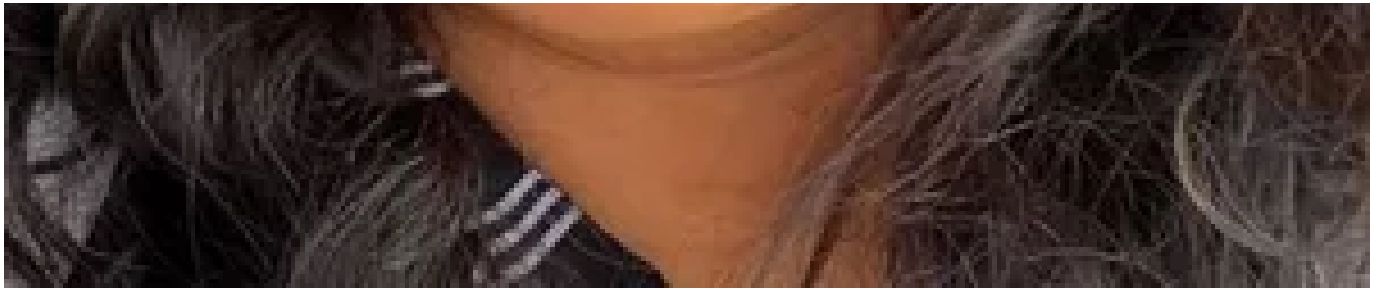
She isn't rebelling against disapproving parents

Muslims in film and television are always portrayed with such solemnity. Parents are closed-minded or controlling. Children rebel against stifling tradition.

Not so with the Khans. The show portrays the family in all its three-dimensional humanity. They speak in a mix of Urdu and English to each other and to friends (with nary a subtitle on the screen, a touch to further normalize the interaction), and every interaction is pitch-perfect.

"It was so heartening to see the humor and familial love that pervades so many Pakistani Muslim households being depicted with such warmth and levity," Rifat said.





Rifat Malik

Rifat Malik

I was especially pleased to see how the show portrays Kamala's father, Yusuf. Instead of the stereotypical stern immigrant, he's warm and kind.

My heart ached with love seeing Yusuf dressed up as the Hulk in a shalwar kameez with green face paint — to bridge the gap between what his wife finds acceptable for their daughter and what their American teen daughter wants.

I saw in him my own father, another Yusaf, a Pakistani immigrant who worked to understand and to relate to his three American daughters — and who, to this day, will text articles about cosmetics or movie stars he thinks I may like.

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I really do think this is going to kind of inspire more Muslims and South Asians to tell their story.

Iman Vellani

"I really do think this is going to kind of inspire more Muslims and South Asians to tell their story because, you know, this is one singular representation of the Muslim experience, if you will," Vellani told NPR. "And so I don't think we can represent all two billion Muslims and South Asians, but it's a start. And I think it's great that we're showing, you know, Muslims on screen having fun. "

The show's appeal is universal

The interactions of the Khans aren't relatable only to Pakistani Muslims; the themes of growing up with immigrant parents that *Ms. Marvel* explores are universal.

A Chinese-American friend texted me with great excitement to say he loved the show and how he connected with it and the family dynamic. A Mexican-American colleague said that, as someone with immigrant parents, she was "relating *hard*" to it.



G. Willow Wilson wrote the Hugo Award-winning *Ms. Marvel*
Amber French/Amber French/Courtesy of Marvel Entertainment

That's what G. Willow Wilson set out to do when she set out to remake *Ms. Marvel* as a Pakistani-American teen in the comic book.

"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 asking them, what was it like?" she told NPR in interview in 2015.

Wilson, a Muslim herself, said she dreamed up the character because she wanted to create a body of work that children of various ethnic groups could turn to "to see that they are not alone."

As my daughter sat on the couch watching the show with me, she grinned throughout and said — over and over again — how the family on the screen was "just like us."

She got to watch a brown girl superhero on screen who shares her religion — and she saw herself.

Anika Steffen is the Chief Employment Counsel for NPR. A Pakistani-American Muslim, she grew up in Michigan and now lives in the DC-area with her 11 year-old daughter.

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