MS. MARVEL: MARVEL'S NEW MODEL OF ISLAM'S REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract
This research aims to examine the *Ms. Marvel* (2022) film series as Marvel's new model in representing Islam throughout popular culture's advancement. Ms. Marvel, known as Kamala Khan, is the first Muslim superheroine character to have her own series at Marvel. This research investigates how the creation and development of this character reflects an invention in the representation of religion and diversity in an entertainment industry that is generally dominated by Western narratives. The research method employed a descriptive qualitative analysis utilizing a cultural studies approach to discern Islam's representation in *Ms. Marvel* (2022). Supported by representation and ideology theories, this research would not only examine the impact of Ms. Marvel's character on the general perception of Islam in popular culture but also analyze how the entertainment industry in its entirety may serve as a means to construct a more inclusive perception of religious diversity. The results of this research are intended to offer deeper insights into characters' roles such as Ms. Marvel in reimagining representations of Islam in popular culture and to contribute towards readers' comprehension of the entertainment industry's power through inclusive narratives. Therefore, *Ms. Marvel* as Marvel's new model in representing Islam may change the negative stereotypes and people's perceptions of Islam.

Keywords
Islam, *Ms. Marvel*, Popular Culture, Representation, Stereotypes.

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INTRODUCTION

Ms. Marvel (2022) film series is a live-action version of *Ms. Marvel* (2014) comic that traces the teenage journey of Kamala Khan, a Muslim girl living in Jersey City. Kamala is a superhero fan and is inspired by superheroines such as Captain Marvel. One day, Kamala finds herself possessing an extraordinary superpower, an ability to manipulate her body's shape. There is a significant distinction in this film concerning the depictions of Kamala Khan as an American Muslim who becomes the main superhero character and also, she successfully becomes the city's savior. As a new medium in embracing ethnic identity, Ms. Marvel with Kamala Khan portrays a break from tradition (Kent, 2015). In this film series, there is an invention in portraying the images, roles, and actions of Muslim characters.

Islam's depictions in Western media have emerged as an increasingly critical and complicated issue in the last several decades. Western media portrayal of Islam requires concern since it is stereotyped, restrictive, and affected by Western political and economic authority (Laboni, 2014). After the 9/11 incident, many societies have an overpowering negative perception of Muslims and Islam, regardless of the most fraught sociopolitical interactions occurring in the United States (Powell in Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). In the early 1990s, Islam's depictions in Western media were frequently associated with geopolitical issues, such as the Gulf War. Films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), *Rules of Engagement* (2000), *Submission* (2004), *Crash* (2004), Dracula *Untold* (2014), *The Eye in the Sky* (2015), and the latest Disney movie *Aladdin* (2019), typically portrayed Muslim characters as antagonists, reinforcing stereotypes about Islam's involvement with terrorism. According to Shaheen (2009), these representations can create negative perceptions of Muslims.

Popular culture has not only represented the cultural diversity of society but has also turned out to be a powerful instrument in representing a racial identity. From novels to films, popular culture has shaped perceptions and provided space for the exploration of identity issues, particularly religious and ethnic issues. As a part of popular culture, films hold the power to create messages that are captured easily by society's perception, and films' popularity proves the intense relation between film and culture in producing cultural images to the society (E.W.K & Fitratullah, 2018).

Another argument stated that before the 2000s, Western popular culture has been dominated by main characters from the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) ethnic group (Spring, 2016). Dixit (2022) and Aswad (2023) also stated that White supremacy aims to construct and sustain a social hierarchy of socio-economic and political controls. It seems that there is a disguised consensus among literary scholars that American literature evidently preserves the white male gaze, genius, and power, such those things have nothing to do with and exclude the colored-people presence in the United States (Morrison, 1993).

Despite the still-present stereotypes and clichés in certain media productions, a gradual shift towards more accurate and inclusive representations has been observed.

The period between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has seen a dynamic transformation of how Islam is represented in the Western media. Throughout this time, a striking evolution happened in the media's approach to Islam, across film, television, and news. As the changing representations that have emerged in the media pointed out by Ahmed & Matthes (2017), Islam's images in *The New York Times* news are currently represented in a more nuanced form by showing partial perspectives according to the media's idea construction of Islam.

There are several previous studies that the authors refer to, first is a thesis by Khairita (2017) entitled "The Representation of Muslims in *The Physician* Film". Taking Stuart Hall's representation theory and John Storey's ideology theory as approaches, Khairita discovered that in that film, Muslims are represented as highly developed, and also portrayed liberal and fanatical Muslims as opposites. The second ignition is an article entitled "Ideological Representations of Muslims in Hollywood Movie *'The Kingdom'*: A Study of Critical Discourse Analysis" by Nusrat et al. (2020). This research discusses the representation of Muslims through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by examining the film's content and text. This research found that The Kingdom movie represents Muslims as terrorists through latent ideology and language manipulation. Third, this research was provoked by Angeles' (2016) paper entitled "Philippine Muslims on Screen: From Villains to Heroes". This paper shows the changing representation of Philippine Muslims in films depending on the political situation and public perception by utilizing Stuart Hall's representation theory and the historical approach of Christian colonialism in the Philippines. The fourth previous research is Mirrlees & Ibaid's (2021) article entitled "The Virtual Killing of Muslims: Digital War Games, Islamophobia, and the Global War on Terror" which discusses digital war games that imply negative stereotypes of Islam, and support patriarchal militarism and Islamophobia. However, the difference between this research and the previous studies above is besides examining several representations of Islam in Ms. Marvel, this research also pinpoints Marvel as a new model in transforming Islam's negative stereotypes in popular culture.

The potential of films as a social power derives from their capacity to capture, intensify, and transcend currents that already exist in society in its entirety among segments of the population (Petrie & Boggs, 2018). Based on the research background and previous studies above, it can be conducted that this research aims to examine and describe the *Ms. Marvel* (2022) film series as Marvel's new model in representing Islam throughout popular culture's advancement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Popular culture contributes to the creation and interpretation of literary works. English literature cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it emerges. In this context, popular culture, which includes numerous forms of expression such as film, music and media, acts as a source of inspiration and influence for literary writers (Eagleton, 2005). In line with Punter (2013), he argued that popular culture, has

been an integral part of the development of English literature. Such as gothic literature, which reflects the anxieties and fears of the society of its time, infuses elements of popular culture to create compelling narratives.

In the context of modern British literature, the influence of popular culture can also be found in contemporary writers' works. For example, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series incorporates elements of popular culture such as mythology, folklore, and references to the real world, creating narratives that appeal to readers from different walks of life. By acknowledging the role of popular culture as an integral part of English literature, it is possible to further understanding of how literary works reflect and respond to changes in culture and society. This approach provides an opportunity for a richer analysis of the dynamic relationship between English literature and its cultural context.

One approach to popular culture research is cultural studies. Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literary works and broader cultural phenomena. Cultural studies in popular culture combine literary elements with social, political, and economic contexts to comprehend their meaning and impact on society. Cultural studies attempt to deconstruct traditional delineations between 'high' and 'low' culture and analyze the processes by which culture and power are intertwined (Barker & Jane, 2016). This approach rejects the separation between literary works that are considered high and popular culture that is recognized as low, to understand how they mutually constitute and reflect social reality. Furthermore, cultural studies aims to integrate literary analysis with a broader understanding of culture (Eagleton, 2008). Eagleton emphasized the significance of engaging social, economic, and political contexts to comprehend the production and consumption of literature.

By engaging cultural studies in literature and popular culture, the research becomes more holistic, recognizing the complexity of the relationship between literary works and the cultural context that surrounds them. This approach can help uncover hidden aspects and broaden the understanding of how literature and popular culture mutually influence and reflect society.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method to analyze Marvel's new model of Islam representation in *Ms. Marvel* (2022) film series is a descriptive qualitative with the main theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's representation and John Storey's ideology theories. The descriptive qualitative technique permits researchers to investigate and describe in detail the representation elements that emerge in a particular context. Creswell (2013) stated that the descriptive qualitative technique is a research method that emphasizes in-depth understanding and detailed description of the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, descriptive qualitative research aims to detail and provide interpretations of various aspects of the observed phenomenon.

As mentioned before, this research is then supported by two approaches, the first is Stuart Hall's representation theory. The representation theory that was developed by

Stuart Hall is an essential foundation in determining the media's power to shape and create meaning in society. Hall (1997) conceptualizes that representation is not a straightforward reflection of reality, but a social construction mediated by signs and symbols. Focusing on mass media, Hall's theory highlights the complexity of conveying meaning and the way it is perceived by audiences. Hall emphasizes the role of power and ideology in the representation process. Media makers which often have vested interests, assert their power to construct specific narratives and meanings. Ideology, as a particular worldview, takes a prominent role in shaping the media's messages.

Furthermore, this research employs John Storey's ideology theory to set a critical basis for analyzing an ideology's way of constructing and permeating meaning in culture. Storey (2018) draws attention to ideology's role as a structured set of ideas and values that affect the way people perceive the world. Through this approach, ideological theory opens up space to comprehend how certain interests and values are reflected in media and cultural representations.

Ms. Marvel (2022) film series and other Muslim characters in Marvel are the data sample of this research regarding the diverse representations in popular culture. Data collection in this research was conducted through the documentation technique, which involved analyzing the episodes of *Ms. Marvel*. The documented data consisted of cinematography and story development that were relevant to Marvel's new model of Islam's representation. Narrative analysis entails deciphering the story structure and plot to understand how these elements interact and construct narrative momentum (Mandler, 2014). There was also a focus on the character's development, internal conflicts, and the way the character is connected to cultural and religious aspects. Thus, this technique helps to identify conflict peaks, character changes, and other key events that shape the storyline.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Film is the result of a modern collaboration that combines literature and media. Film brings narrative elements to life through visualization, thus making it the most preferred literary alternative by most readers and/or viewers. However, the primary function of literature is to amuse the reader or viewer (Zamzami et al., 2023). Disparate from novels and poetry, film delivers a literary work concretely through audio-visual, not abstractly through symbols or words (Petrie & Boggs, 2018).

One film for this research is *Ms. Marvel*, a film series that released in 2022 marked a momentous move in Muslim representation in the entertainment industry. Based on a Marvel comics character named Kamala Khan, the series introduced viewers to an American Muslim teenager with superpowers. Series creators, Bisha K. Ali and G. Willow Wilson along with the production team, delicately constructed a narrative that portrays Kamala's life as a superheroine that also represents her religious and cultural identity. According to Andreassen (2019), *Ms. Marvel* was initially a female spin-off of a hegemonic masculine identity - a white, heterosexual, male hero written and drawn by

white men. *Ms. Marvel* series has had an illustrious transformation, crossing several incarnations and bringing a new authenticity to the Marvel superhero universe.

Early in the *Ms. Marvel* production in 1977, Carol Danvers was taking on the Ms. Marvel superhero identity in "Ms. Marvel #1". She was a military pilot and intelligence agent who acquired superpowers after being irradiated from an alien experiment. Carol Danvers is an icon of the gender equality revolution in popular culture, through her character as Marvel's first superheroine, she proved to society that women are equally capable of exerting their best to bring a better world (Colon, 2013).

In this film series, Kamala Khan is performed by actress Iman Vellani, and her depiction represents a more realistic and complex image of a Muslim teenager. The casting selection that fits the character's background, alongside the thoughtful screenwriting, creates a more authentic representation that both Muslim and non-Muslim viewers can identify with. Moreover, this film series not only focuses on Kamala Khan's superpower, but also explores her internal conflicts as a teenager attempting to navigate her dual identity as a Muslim and as a superheroine. This reflects an undertaking to extend the representation of Muslim characters beyond the stereotypes that frequently appear in Western media. By embracing the new *Ms. Marvel* against the conventional standards of superheroes, American society is beginning to transform the sentiments against it, and is starting to adapt the idea that Muslim immigrants are part of their society (Paramita, 2019).

According to Brown (2012), lighting is one of the visual instruments that adds an extra layer of meaning to the story content. Lighting in film cinematography has a crucial purpose in creating atmosphere, highlighting significant objects or characters, and directing the audience's attention. A thoughtful lighting technique can enhance the visual quality of a film and deliver a deeply emotional tone. As Hendrajat et al. (2023) stated, lighting is one of the cinematography elements that can enhance the dramatic elements in a film scene.

Figure 1. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 1, min. 02:35

The scene (Figure 1) above shows more lighting on Abbu (Kamala Khan's father) than Yusuf (her brother). Lighting in cinematography is not simply just visual aesthetics, but can also affect the overall narrative of the film. So it can be assumed that the writer and director intended to inform the audience that Yusuf was praying too solemnly and thus Abbu thought he was staying too long and advised him to pray

moderately so as to avoid starvation causing death. Therefore, it can be determined that Islam actually exhibits religious practice and daily life equally. The lighting highlighted from the right side of Abbu's character is a fill light. Fill light means filling in the shadows created by other lights and thereby lowering the frame contrast in order to set the mood (Malkiewicz, 2012).

Almost similar to lighting, coloring in film cinematography holds a central position in establishing atmosphere, portraying emotions, and directing the audience's interpretation of the story. Moreover, colors in cinematography can be employed to describe characters, communicate emotional messages, or identify certain themes. Colors have the capability to engage people on an emotional level (Brown, 2012). As the scene below (Figure 2) shows, coloring conveys a symbolization and description of character.

Figure 2. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 2, min. 26:30

The coloring in the portrayal of Kamala Khan's family house is brown, whether it's the color of the interiors, furniture, or lighting. This symbolizes the nuances of East Asia, Pakistan, and the brown color grading also indicates warmth, which is a reflection of Kamala Khan's family-oriented character. Hence, coloring can be considered as making the image reasonable (Hullfish, 2017).

Camera angles in cinematography are very influential to create a visual nuance and contribute to narrating the story more effectively. A shot at the character's eye-level is frequently used to create a connection between the audience and the character itself. As well as Kets (2018) also stated that camera angles aim to create a visual narrative that engages the audience, narrating the story in a visual way.

Figure 3. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 1, min. 05:08

In this scene, through Kamala's POV, the camera subjectively points to her schoolmates who stare sarcastically at her. This demonstrates Kamala's religious and ethnic identity struggle. Moreover, through eye-level shots, this scene brings the audience to intimately experience that Muslims consider all human beings equal and how Muslims might receive unacceptable stares back at them.

In cinematography, the setting is not merely a visual background, but also a reflection of the characters. Setting not only provides a physical context for the story but also enriches the dimensions of the characters and deepens the overall narrative. Petrie & Boggs (2018) argued that it is important to recognize that there is an interaction between the characters and what surrounds them, whether the setting functions as a character shaper or simply a reflection of it.

Figure 4. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 1, min. 14:53

In the next scene (Figure 4), many people may forget the most important thing about the setting property can support the main theme of this *Ms. Marvel* film series. In the upper right corner, there is a calligraphic inscription that inscribes the Quranic verse Surah Al-Inshirah verse six, which says "*Inna ma'al usri yusra*," which means, "Surely with difficulty there is ease." This calligraphic prop supports Ms. Marvel's main theme of the main character's difficulties as a minority in her identity struggle in the United States. The choice of location, décor, and other visual elements can hint at a character's personality, background, or any changes that occur during the story's development (Kolker, 2016).

Camera focus is not only a technical technique, but also an important tool for creating emotions, highlighting important details, and directing the viewer's gaze. Also, camera blur or unfocusing in film cinematography is an artistic technique that can bring a dramatic and compelling touch to the viewer's visual experience. Objects in a sharp focus can distract us from nearer, bigger objects in a soft focus, even if the bigger objects occupy half of the screen (Petrie & Boggs, 2018).
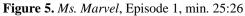
Figure 5. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 1, min. 25:26

Figure 6. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 1, min. 25:27

In these two scenes (Figure 5-6), the lighting position is demonstrated where Nakia (Kamala's friend) appears to help Kamala as if she is a savior. Besides the lighting, the low-angle shot and the blurring of the camera's focus also indicate that *Ms. Marvel* tries to convey that Muslims are unwittingly not as negative as the media stereotypes them in society. Focus blurring serves as a visual metaphor for changes in a character's feelings or outlook on life. Additionally, focus blurring imposes an element of visual subjectivity, allowing the viewer to give their own interpretation of the characters and story.

Apart from conveying the character's emotions, lighting can also function to express the relationship and conflict between characters. Equal lighting between two opposing characters creates a visual contrast that intensifies the conflict or fundamental difference between them. The use of equal lighting can also be a visual statement about the equality between the characters, despite their different characteristics or objectives. Light is to steer the viewer's focus, and darkness is to provoke their imaginations (Malkiewicz, 2012).

Figure 7. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 1, min. 26:12

Figure 7 shows that the equal lighting and eye-level shots of Bruno and Kamala reflect the equality that *Ms. Marvel* is currently attempting to represent Islam in the United States. The existence of Muslims in a Christian-dominated country, instead of being represented as an enemy, it is shown as a friend. Placing the characters in an even light, with no significant lighting difference between them sets the visual impression that both have equal value or position in the story. This confirms that cinematic art has a powerful ideological and aesthetic impact on the socio-political and cultural education of the society, the formation of public awareness, ideas and perspectives, aesthetic feelings and emotions, and the spiritual universe in general (Khaydarovna, 2022).

A bird's eye view or a top-down shot with a larger tilt angle can provide a wider view and greater context. This perspective provides an overall view of the location,

allowing the audience to see the spatial relationships between characters, objects, or other elements in the scene. Camera angles may influence the empathy involvement by impacting the viewer's stance on evaluation of the characters (Lankhuizen et al., 2022). Through this shot, *Ms. Marvel* can demonstrate social integration with gender equality, which indicates the female character's involvement in being dominant. The context is as exemplified by Shakespeare's works that show men are not always dominating women or women are not always in a subordinated position (Amri & Maylani, 2020).

Figure 8. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 3, min. 10:21

Figure 9. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 3, min. 10:22

These two data demonstrate different shots, Figure 8 shows a bird's eye-view shot that indicates *Ms. Marvel*'s author's desire for society to equalize the position of the majority and minority. Meanwhile, Figure 9 illustrates the awareness of American Muslims towards the authorities who keep mistreating them, particularly inside the mosque, where Muslims do their worship. Bird's Eye View is used to highlight a character or situation in the context of a larger space. It offers the viewer a clearer grasp of the layout and dynamics between objects or characters in the scene.

Low-angle shot is a shooting technique where the camera is positioned at a lower level or angle than the object being shot. In this case, the object or character looks dominant and well-posed, while the background often appears smaller and less prominent. This technique can be attained by positioning the camera at ground level or using a crane to get a lower angle.

Figure 10. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 6, min. 28:47

The portrayal of Kamala Khan as Marvel's first Muslim superheroine in the scene above (Figure 10) is equally presented through low-angle shots. Superheroes with their powers are commonly perceived as powerful and important through low-angle shots, which can also be observed through *Ms. Marvel*'s adoration as represented by an American-Pakistani Muslim. Also, low-angle shots are effectively utilized to produce a

dramatic effect, particularly in action or suspense scenes. Framing from a low angle automatically presents a strong character and emphasizes the character's figure (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008).

Framing in a cinematographic context refers to the arrangement of visual elements within the image area captured by the camera. It involves choosing the shooting angle, distancing the object from the camera, and how the elements are positioned within the frame. Framing is one major aspect of creating an outstanding visual composition. Choosing a frame is a matter of storytelling, but also a matter of proportion, rhythm, and perception (Brown, 2012).

Figure 11. *Ms. Marvel*, Episode 6, min. 39:08

In this data, Ms. Marvel's writer and film director emphasize the figure of Kamala Khan as a new superheroine for the society through the framing of Kamala sitting in front of the Jersey City. Framing is utilized to direct the audience's attention to the most pertinent objects or characters in the scene. By selecting the appropriate framing, the director can accentuate elements that are essential to the story's development. Framing aims to centralize people's attention by inviting them into their world to become participants (Plate, 2017).

Ms. Marvel Representing the New Image of Islam in Popular Culture

Throughout *Ms. Marvel*, neither comics and film series, there are multiple aspects of Muslim lifestyles expressed in the narrative, creating an experience that is more inclusive and representative of society's diversity. Here are some forms of Islam's representation in *Ms. Marvel*. First, Islam's representation in *Ms. Marvel* shows Muslim identity explicitly. Kamala Khan emerged into the superhero world as a Muslim teenager in Jersey City. From her appearance wearing a hijab or headscarf to her daily activities, this series meticulously considers and represents the elements of the Muslim lifestyle, bringing her identity openly and prominently. *Ms. Marvel* pointedly opposes American and Western's idealism in post-9/11 tragedy that wearing Islamic attributes such as hijab was cynically criticized as restricting women's rights. The hijab for Muslim women in American politicians and contemporary Western feminists' perspective is widely seen as a symbol of oppression and violence committed by dehumanized Muslim men, putting it as a concern (Al Wazni, 2015).

Second, *Ms. Marvel* introduces Islamic values and ethics. This series accentuates Islamic values and ethics through Kamala Khan and her community. The religious

education, responsibility, and courage to deal with conflicts based on Islamic principles constitute a moral dimension. In Islam, religious values are important as social ethics education to shape the individual or society with a high tolerance spirit, helpfulness, advising each other in rights and forbearance, solidarity, egalitarian (equality), tolerance, respect, thereby creating a harmonious, peaceful, and supportive life (Aziz, 2019). Islamic values are connected to intangible motives, rather than focusing exclusively on concrete work outputs such as productivity or quality, and in fact, Islam regards work as a virtuous act that will be praised (Ishak & Osman, 2016).

Third, family and tradition. Representations of family and Muslim traditions are an integral part of Kamala Khan's portrayal. The relationship with her family, comprising interactions with her parents and sisters, creates a wealthy background of family values and traditions that frequently manifest in religious practices. Family-oriented heroes are rarely presented, Kamala Khan being the first human superheroine that makes her down-to-earth despite her parents' and brother's restrictions but eventually, they understand Kamala's importance to save the city and society (Majumdar, 2018). As Rusli (2020) argues, family support can provide pleasure, feeling safe, fulfillment, allows someone to enjoy emotional connection that will influence human well-being, as it relates to mental balance formation and psychological satisfaction.

Fourth, a teenager struggling for her Muslim identity. The importance of Kamala Khan's identity struggle as a Muslim teenager is highlighted in her narrative. The conflict between her American and Muslim identity, and the way she finds a balance between them, offers an insightful perspective on the challenges faced by Muslim teenagers in Western society. *Ms. Marvel* presents Kamala Khan's emotional journey in searching for her identity as a Muslim teenager, highlighting the universal experience of this process (Lewis & Lund, 2017).

Fifth, cultural diversity and social integration. This film series successfully represents Kamala Khan's cultural differences and social integration in American society. Her experiences communicating with her friends from different backgrounds explore diversity themes and encourage positive conversations about cultural differences. *Ms. Marvel* shared a positive outlook on social integration and cultural differences, conducting a way for further discussions on inclusivity. The exposure to a wealthy cultural sphere empowers the society to be more creative and adaptable in living their lives in a complicated and globally integrated culture and society (Zemaityte et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussions above, the results of this research are intended to offer deeper insights into characters' roles such as *Ms. Marvel* in reimagining representations of Islam in popular culture and to contribute towards readers' comprehension of the entertainment industry's power through inclusive narratives. Therefore, *Ms. Marvel* as Marvel's new model in representing Islam may change the negative streotypes and

people's perceptions of Islam. By considering the efforts in producing more inclusive and realistic representations, *Ms. Marvel* (2022) film series exemplifies the way the entertainment industry can be an important instrument in broadening society's perspective on diverse identities and life experiences.

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