



**ICNY**  
Interfaith Center of New York



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE  
HUMANITIES

**UNION**

*Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project*

# **“Good isn’t a thing you are. It’s a thing you do”: Religion, Culture, and Identity in Marvel/Disney’s *Ms. Marvel***

*Joseph Braccino, United Nations International School, New York, NY*

## **Abstract**

This unit explores religious culture and identity in the Marvel Comics and Disney iterations of the Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan) character. The unit, designed for an International Baccalaureate (IB) English Language & Literature course, explores both the original comic series and the 2022 television adaptation through the lens of the protagonist’s lived experience as a first-generation Pakistani immigrant Muslim American living in Jersey City, NJ.

Furthermore, students will have the opportunity to consider questions of authenticity and representation in their evaluation of both critical and popular reception of the series and show. Final assessments will allow students to either pursue deeper lines of inquiry into the lived Muslim or Pakistani-American experience or apply the critical lenses used throughout the unit to other cultural/religious communities in their world.

## **Course Background and Key Concepts**

This unit is designed for an IB English Language & Literature course. The course balances conventional literary analysis with a combination of media studies and linguistic work, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the function of language across various text types. According to the IB guide, students in Language & Literature focus on “the complex and dynamic nature of language and explore both its practical and aesthetic dimensions. They will explore the crucial role language plays in communication, reflecting experience and shaping the world. Through close analysis of various text types and literary forms, students will consider their own

interpretations, as well as the critical perspectives of others, to explore how such positions are shaped by cultural belief systems and to negotiate meanings for texts.” With that focus in mind, this unit is designed to explore both a literary form (comics) and a non-literary form (television) and consider how both reflect and represent a critical aspect of their world: identity.

Seven recurring concepts run throughout the two-year course (see below). For the purposes of this unit, IB Concepts of **Identity**, **Culture**, and **Representation** will guide much of the discussion and analysis of the texts. Later in the unit, issues around **Transformation** and **Perspective** will be explored through discussions on the consequences of adaptation and an exploration of critical and popular reception of the texts. Interestingly, elements of this unit reach out to other areas of the students’ IB experience, including potential links to their Theory of Knowledge course.

7 IB CONCEPTS	3 IB AREAS OF EXPLORATION
<b>Culture</b> ( <i>context</i> )	<b>Time and Space</b> ( <i>cultural and temporal context</i> )
<b>Creativity</b> ( <i>originality in construction</i> )	
<b>Communication</b> ( <i>style &amp; language</i> )	<b>Readers, Writers and Texts</b> ( <i>the interaction between the writer and the reader and in the creation of meaning</i> )
<b>Perspective</b> ( <i>views of a text</i> )	
<b>Transformation</b> ( <i>intertextuality</i> )	<b>Intertextuality: Connecting texts</b> ( <i>allusion, reference, tradition, adaptation genre, form, theory, tropes, codes etc.</i> )
<b>Representation</b> ( <i>representing “reality”</i> )	
<b>Identity</b> ( <i>creator AND audience background</i> )	

In order to engage fully with the activities in this unit, students should have a familiarity with the following skills and concepts:

- Close-reading and analysis of literary conventions (narrative structure, character, symbolism, theme, etc.).
- Terminology and conventions of the graphic narratives and comic books
- Terminology and conventions of film and television
- Distinguishing between FORMAL elements (authorial choices, literary and visual devices, genre and stylistic conventions, etc.) and CONTENT (plot, characters, narrative elements, etc.).

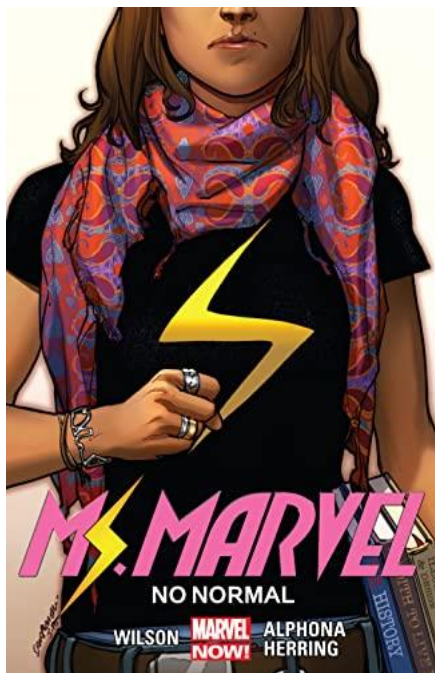
Finally, a key assessment in the course is rooted in an evaluation of the representation of a GLOBAL ISSUE in the texts studied. Considering these texts' exploration of immigration, discrimination, religious practice, education, and gender, the unit is rife with opportunity to discuss global issues in a lived context.

## Essential Questions

- How do the *Ms. Marvel* comic and subsequent series work to both reflect, complicate, and challenge tropes associated with the contemporary Muslim experience?
- How is a text transformed when adapted to another medium? What is lost and gained? How do the conventions of a particular medium result in particular narrative choices?
- To what extent are certain experiences UNIVERSAL versus CULTURALLY- SPECIFIC? How can a text be received from both a universal and culturally-specific perspective?

## Primary Texts

- [Ms. Marvel, Volume 1: No Normal](#)



- [Ms. Marvel, Season 1 \(Disney+\)](#)



## Secondary Texts

On Islam and Pakistani-American Identity:

- [Problematic Anti-Muslim Movie Tropes | MUSLIM](#)
- [Tropes and Tall Tales: Muslims Monitoring the Media | Maira Khan Scholar Seminars | July 2021](#)
- [Enhancing Religious Literacy | Ali S. Asani](#)
- [An Introduction to Islam | Susan Douglass, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies](#)
- [Women and the American Mosque | US Mosque Study 2011](#)
- [‘Narrow-Minded and Oppressive’ or a ‘Superior Culture’? Implications of Divergent Representations of Islam for Pakistani- American Youth | Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher](#)
- [Differential Acculturation Among Pakistani American Immigrant Parents and Children](#)
- [The Religification of Pakistani-American Youth](#)

Islam in Jersey City:

- [The Islamic Center of Jersey City \(Facebook\)](#)
- [The Islamic Center of Jersey City \(Website\)](#)
- [Alhoda Islamic Center \(Website\)](#)
- [Al Tawheed Islamic Center \(Website\)](#)
- [Masjid As Salam \(Website\)](#)

On the Comic:

- [Author G. Willow Wilson talks faith and creating a Muslim superhero \(AP\)](#)
- [The Writer Behind a Muslim Marvel Superhero on Her Faith in Comics | New Yorker](#)
- [Comics writer and novelist G. Willow Wilson talks about faith, fiction and justice \(Princeton\)](#)
- [How G. Willow Wilson Defied Expectations \(and Haters\) with Marvel’s First Female, Muslim Superhero \(NJ Monthly\)](#)
- [Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine \(Feminist Media Studies\)](#)

#### On the TV Show:

- [Ms. Marvel Offers a Groundbreaking Celebration of Pakistani and Muslim Culture \(TIME\)](#)
- ['Ms. Marvel' isn't just a superhero story. It's an exploration of Pakistani-American religion and culture. \(America Magazine\)](#)
- [Islam inspires Ms. Marvel's show and comics in different ways \(Polygon\)](#)
- [Why Ms. Marvel matters so much to Muslim, South Asian fans \(The Conversation\)](#)
- [In 'Ms. Marvel', Muslim fans see a reflection of their lives \(AP\)](#)
- ['Ms. Marvel' head writer says the show is a deeply personal superhero story \(NPR\)](#)
- [Many Pakistanis dig the cultural nods on 'Ms. Marvel' but are mixed on casting \(NPR\)](#)
- [MS. MARVEL GETS MUSLIM REPRESENTATION RIGHT \(Nerdist\)](#)

#### Video:

- [The story behind Marvel's Muslim-American superheroine \(TEDx w/ G. Willow Wilson\)](#)
- [Myths, misfits & masks: Sana Amanat at TEDxTeen 2014](#)
- [What 'Ms. Marvel' Means for Muslim Representation | The Mehdi Hasan Show](#)
- [Ms. Marvel: First Muslim Superhero | Dr. Safiyah Ally](#)
- [TikTok - Salaam Nerds](#)
- [Masjid As-Salam - Jersey City - IFTAR Documentary](#)

## Unit Overview

<b>Lesson 1</b> Introduction to Unit Islam as a Lived Religion Representation Theory	<b>Lesson 2</b> <i>Ms. Marvel</i> - Her (and her Creators') Origin Story and Influences	<b>Lesson 3</b> Close-Reading Comics <i>Ms. Marvel</i> , Volume 1
<b>Lesson 4</b> <i>Ms. Marvel</i> , Episode 1 Viewing & Discussion	<b>Lesson 5</b> <i>Ms. Marvel</i> , Episode 2 Viewing & Discussion	<b>Lesson 6</b> <i>Ms. Marvel</i> , Episode 3 Viewing & Discussion
<b>Lesson 7</b> Critical Reception & Response: Focusing on "Authenticity"	<b>Lesson 8</b> Popular Reception & Response: Social Media, Fandom, and "Trolling"	<b>Lesson 9</b> Discussion: Pop Culture as Religion
<b>Lesson 10</b> Panel Discussion (Or internet exploration of Islam in Jersey City)	<b>Lesson 11</b> Final Assessment Workshop & Conferences	<b>Lesson 12</b> Final Assessment Workshop & Conferences


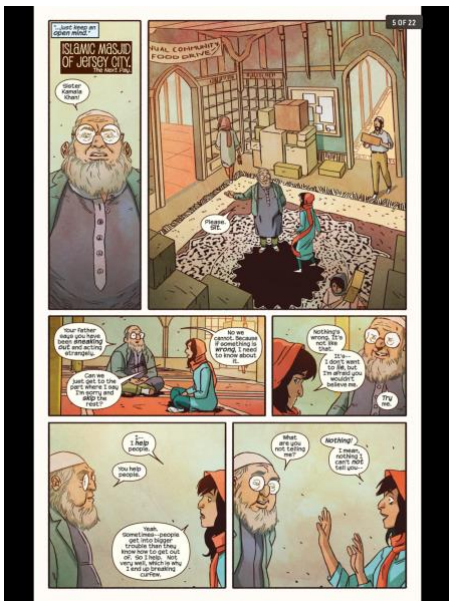

### Lesson 1

The introduction lesson will center around students' prior experience with representations of Islam. Using Ali Asani's construction of "How do you know what you know about Islam?" as an initial prompt, the discussion will focus on media tropes and sources of knowledge (and misconceptions) of Islam. This will also allow for some review and exploration of [Stuart Hall's Representation Theory](#).

### Lessons 2-3

These lessons will focus on the comic series from 2014-2015 by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona. First, students will read and watch interviews with Wilson and editor Sana Amanat that discuss explicitly the connection between the construction of the character of Kamala Khan and her Muslim faith and Pakistani American background. Students will then read the first volume of the comic book series and consider conventional literary and graphic narrative analysis (literary features, narrative elements, characterization, etc.). There are two panels in particular (see below) that students will close-read and analyze through the lens of identity and culture that found the unit.



 <p>The cover of Ms. Marvel #1 shows Kamala Khan in her superhero suit, surrounded by other characters and a large red ribbon. The title at the top reads: "Sakal bun phoot rahi... Sakal bun phoot rahi... Jinhva phasing, tase phasing... Koyal hoing dhar dhar... aur goti khat-einagaro".</p>	 <p>Page 1 of 2 from Ms. Marvel #6. The scene is set in a mosque with a sign that says "ISLAMIC MESJID OF JERSEY CITY". A character with a beard and glasses is speaking to a group of people. The dialogue includes: "I don't mean to offend you and... I don't mean to offend you and... I don't mean to offend you and...".</p>	 <p>Page 2 of 2 from Ms. Marvel #6. The scene continues from the mosque. A character with a red headscarf is speaking to the bearded man. The dialogue includes: "I don't mean to offend you and... I don't mean to offend you and... I don't mean to offend you and...".</p>
<p>Ms. Marvel #1</p>	<p>Ms. Marvel #6 (page 1 of 2)</p>	<p>Ms. Marvel #6 (page 2 of 2)</p>

### Lessons 4-6

In the second week of lessons, students will watch and discuss the first three episodes of the television show. In addition to considering elements of adaptation, students will read secondary texts to guide debrief discussions on each episode. Depending on time, these discussions may happen via digital platforms.

1. Episode 1 - Topic of Discussion: 1st Generation Experience, Microaggressions, Religion and Identity
2. Episode 2 - Topic of Discussion: Building Community amid Surveillance and Persecution in Muslim Communities
3. Episode 3 - Topic of Discussion: Gender & Ethics in Islam

### Lessons 7-8

These lessons will focus on reception of both the comic book series and television show. First, students will read and review critical reception, focusing on “professional” critics’ response and writing on the texts as well as more academic approaches to the authenticity and implications of the text. Given the dynamic nature of social media in relation to evaluating pop media texts, a second day of discussion will focus on the development of fandom and trolling on social media platforms in response to the text.

## Lessons 9-10

These lessons will step back and discuss larger issues of lived religion and religious community in relation to both the texts and world at large. First, spinning out of David Chidester's article, students will dialogue about the burgeoning formulation of superheroes and pop culture as a religion in and of itself. Second, and this is primarily dependent on the availability of resources, students will either engage in a panel discussion with Jersey City Muslim leaders or explore Muslim institutions in Jersey City via internet resources.

## Lessons 11-12+

Students will have the opportunity to engage in planning, research sessions, guided revision sessions, and conferences regarding their final assessment.

## Final Assessments

**OPTION #1** - Inquiry Presentation - Develop a line of inquiry derived from the representation of Muslim and/or Pakistani-American identity and community in the *Ms. Marvel* comic and/or television series. Consider both FORM and CONTENT in your presentation as you cite specific examples, text evidence, and convention analysis.

- *Here, students have the option to explore some element or topic related specifically to Islam and/or the Pakistani-American identity through secondary research and, perhaps, direct first-hand experience. With that exploration in hand, students will develop a presentation linking their findings to the unit texts. For example, students could explore the history and impact of Partition and link it to episodes 4 & 5 of the series. As another example, students could research Islamic theory and scripture on "good deeds" and apply it to the comic series' refrain of "good is a thing you do". [To aid in their inquiry, I have included a wealth of academic articles and essays that students can \(and perhaps should\) use as a springboard into their own analysis.](#)*

**OPTION #2** - Comparative Paper - Develop a comparative thesis that considers the *Ms. Marvel* comic or television show alongside a work or body of work that portrays another cultural or religious identity, community, or set of media tropes. Consider both FORM and CONTENT in your paper as you cite specific examples, text evidence, and convention analysis from the two bodies of work.



- *Here, students have the opportunity to apply the class discussions around representation, religion, media tropes, and identity to a self-selected literary work or non-literary body of work. Students encounter the themes and issues around immigration, discrimination, religious lives, and community in their daily media consumption, so many will relish the opportunity to compare and contrast **how** different texts explore similar ideas.*

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, visit [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***