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# "Everybody Else Gets to Be Normal":

## Using Intersectionality and *Ms. Marvel* to Challenge "Normal" Identity

Given Said's (1991) argument to resist "a single overmastering identity" (p. 17) and the fact that we now live "in this new world of cultural fluidity" (McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, & Park, 2003, p. 452), I believe it is relevant to focus on literature in the classroom that examines how youth narrate or grapple with their identities. In schools, a hegemonic approach frames identity as singular (McCarthy et al., 2003); however, as noted by Ayse Caglar (1997), there is a rising trend wherein people identify themselves in terms of "plural and fluid cultural identities" (p. 169). To bridge this gap, it is essential that "schools, universities, and educators acknowledge the multiple identities of students and the different identity 'capital' students have in each context. . . . [W]e must go beyond the racial binary in understanding students' identity construction" (Li, Lin, & Wang, 2014, p. 60).

Said (1993, 2000) has also suggested that a vigorous, deep, and complex understanding of culture and identity should inform educational practice. In this article, I argue that educators can benefit from employing an intersectionality lens as a form of literary analysis that challenges a "normal identity." I suggest that educators, administrators, policymakers, and literacy researchers utilize an intersectionality mindset to resist thinking of students and others as having "a single overmastering identity." Specifically, I demonstrate how using an intersectionality framework in analyzing a piece of literature can explicitly address differences rooted in social issues such as racism, sexism, and Islamophobia.

The young adult graphic novel *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* (2014) was created by writer Willow Wilson and comic book artist Adrian Alphona. The series stars a teenage, Muslim, Pakistani American girl from New Jersey named Kamala Khan. Kamala is not only learning how to accept multiple aspects of who she already is, but she also begins to develop superhuman powers that propel her further into her own process of identity construction. Given the way she is positioned across these identities, Kamala is the proverbial "underdog"; she is a female in a patriarchal society, a person of color in a White majority society, and a Muslim in a Christian-dominated society. In a way, *Ms. Marvel* can be seen as a "beacon for intersectionality" in that it features "a *specific sort* of outsider in terms of gender, race, religion, and nationality" in a work of literature "adaptable for consumption by audiences who do not belong to that marginalized group" (Kent, 2015, p. 524, emphasis in original). *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* brings the "just like them" and "us versus them" discourse front and center for a general audience to witness and challenge through the perspective of a minoritized and commonly discriminated against character type. More important, *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* urges readers to consider how those from marginalized backgrounds work toward achieving acceptance without assimilation.

## Review of Literature on Intersectionality

Until the 1980s, sociological scholarship regarding race, gender, and religion worked in isolation; for instance, "race relations scholarship explored race from

the perspective of *men,* [and] gender scholarship explored gender from the perspective of *white* women" (Belkhir & Barnett, 2001, p. 158, emphasis in original). Intersectionality borrows from a collection of theories and combines them to become its own new theory. In a reductionist sort of way, one can broadly claim that intersectionality began as a blend of both feminism and critical race theory, focusing on the intersections between sexism and racism in examinations of the oppression of women of color. Separately, gender-based and race-based research failed "to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations" (McCall, 2005, p. 1780). Intersectionality began as a response to "the problem with identity politics—it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 1242).

American critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality* and described it using the metaphor of a road:

> Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group . . . tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. . . . The main highway is "racism road." One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. . . . She has to deal not only with the one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 196)

Within this metaphor, there is an understanding that intersectionality deals with a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1998), that oppression is constantly changing, and that different aspects of an individual intermingle with other social issues. People should not have to be "multiply-marginalized" (Choo & Ferree, 2010), forced to choose between intragroup differences or to privilege race over gender, as all identities are lived and experienced simultaneously and continuously. Without intersectionality, in an examination of "'people of color' and 'women,' respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other" (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 1252). Intersectionality has evolved to include many other multiple forms of oppression, developing its "original foci on race, ethnicity, gender, and class to incorporate citizenship, sexuality, religion, age, and other dimensions of subordination, across many different social settings" (Bose, 2012, p. 67).

Doing an intersectionality analysis is important in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* because it allows readers to better understand the ways in which Muslim American women are specifically marginalized in our society today. Expanding on this understanding, educators and other educational practitioners can utilize intersectionality to examine their own lives and those of their students to better improve their practice.

## Methods

Before I delve into a description of my interpretive process, it is crucial to acknowledge the difficulty in conceptualizing a set methodology for intersectionality. The aims and objectives of intersectionality cannot "be realized only through a full-fledged grand theory or a standardized methodology" (Crenshaw, 2011, as cited in Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 789). Intersectionality resists the impulse to have a formal methodology because, as a fluid interpretative framework, it thrives on the reality of tensions existing between categories. Intersectionality is best conceived as a way of thinking "about the problem of sameness and difference in its relation to power" (p. 795).

That being said, I was able to apply intersectionality as a tool to analyze the "dynamics of power" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795) through a process that was heavily iterative. Prior to analysis, because "intersectionality's insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating considerations of gender, race, and other axes of power" (p. 787), I first read the text and identified language and visuals in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* that were emotionally or politically charged in regards to race, gender, and religion. I flagged scenes signifying racist, sexist, and/or religious microaggressions and then coded for instances of the intersectional categories of race, gender, and religion. I collected and categorized these codes to later analyze for their implications through an intersectionality lens.

After multiple readings and grappling repeatedly with certain scenes or visuals, my understandings and analysis evolved as layers were added to the identities of Muslim American women in the graphic novel. Given the specific time and place in which the text is set, I also interrogated and added the social and historical contexts to the analysis. For instance, the social context of this graphic novel's setting is impor-

tant given the fact that it is taking place during a time when American society's anti-Muslim sentiments are prevalent in a post 9/11 era. To apply an intersectional analysis, I considered answers to the following guiding questions:

- What issues of difference or sameness are being displayed in the text or visual?
- How do the issues of difference/sameness interact with each other?
- In what ways does power affect the issues of difference/sameness?
- In what ways do political, social, or historical contexts interact with the issues of difference/sameness?

Engaging in multiple readings and viewings of the text and images provided more insights with each added layer, making this intersectional work iterative. To better display this cognitive work, an example of how I categorized and began analysis can be seen in Appendix A. These methods and questions are not meant to be prescriptive but rather a starting point for conceptualizing how to use intersectionality as a literary analysis.

## Intersectionality Analysis of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*

In this next section, I examine the identities and narratives of Muslim American women in the graphic novel through an intersectional framework as analyzed through the multiple lenses of race, gender, and religion. First, I situate the categories semi-separately and then follow with a more holistic intersectional analysis.

### Gender

The intersectionality framework best serves the understanding of Muslim women's personal oppression by exploring the intersecting factors of gender and religion. In speaking about the veiled Muslim female, the graphic novel represents Islamophobia and the single narrative of the oppressed Muslim female. Observe the scene in Figure 1. Zoe (a classmate of Nakia and Kamala) says, "Your headscarf is so *pretty,* Kiki. I love that color. But I mean . . . nobody *pressured* you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to, like, *honor kill* you? I'm just *concerned*" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Zoe's language reveals a hierarchy of power based on race, gender, and religion. Zoe condescendingly compliments the headscarf of Nakia (Kamala's friend) by calling it "pretty." According to Patricia Collins (2000), "Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blonde, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other" (p. 89). Here, Zoe refers to Nakia as pretty, but in doing so, positions herself as the true decider of what counts as pretty, since she is the epitome of "blue eyed, blonde" American beauty.

There are many forms of discrimination occurring in this one scene, all of which attack Nakia's identity. Nakia is seen here wearing a hijab (head covering scarf, or veil). From Zoe's point of view, the hijab connotes a stricter and more violent version of Islam, hence the simplistic and reductive assumption about Nakia's purpose for wearing a hijab. First, Zoe, knowing that Nakia prefers not to go by her "'Amreeki'[1] nickname" (p. 1), purposely ignores her cultural and given name to remind her of the American dominant culture. Second, the word "pressured" implies a lack of agency among Muslim women and therefore suggests that only Islamic women are purposely oppressed. Again, the veil is used as a signifier of female


**Figure 1.** Zoe remarks on Nakia's religious practices (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 2). ©MARVEL

oppression (Bilge, 2010; Mahmood, 2005; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008). Third, Zoe is the embodiment of how the West stereotypes Muslim women. The patriarchy and violence against Muslim women are used repeatedly in the West to essentialize, stereotype, and disseminate anti-Islamic sentiments. Mahmood (2005) states that "Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression" (p. 7).

Bilge (2010) argues that Western thinking equates "the Muslim veil with women's oppression by Islamic patriarchy. . . . It argues that veiled women are either coerced to wear the veil or develop a false consciousness; in both cases they are *devoid of agency*" (p. 14, emphasis in original). Attempting to refute the stereotype that Zoe is propagating, Nakia contradicts Zoe by revealing that her father actually wants her to remove the hijab. Incredulous, Zoe dismisses her with a "Really? Wow, cultures are so *interesting*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Nakia's point of view is not even considered: "What veiled women have to say about their veiling is irrelevant and cannot change the meaning of the veil, since they are alienated and unwittingly adopt the views of their oppressors" (Bilge, 2010, p. 15). Nakia is not given a chance to speak up against Zoe, representative of the dominant group. Before Nakia has a chance to defend her beliefs and customs, Zoe leaves without any inclination to hear further explanation, as seen in the panel that follows this scene.

Furthermore, Zoe maintains the same attitude of White feminists or Orientalist feminists in that she believes that veiled Muslim women need to be "saved" by the West (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008). When Zoe says, "I'm just *concerned,"* she positions herself as a type of White savior who is graciously yet condescendingly looking out for a Muslim girl—a designation she perceives as helpless and oppressed. Staunaes (2003) argues that "social categories do not count only for the others, the non-powerful and the non-privileged: they also count as conditions for the more privileged and powerful people" (p. 105). Zoe, being non-Muslim, has more power than Nakia; she is in a position of privilege and power and is "concerned" for her "othered" peer. Not only is Nakia othered because of her religious practices, but because of her gender, as well. She is specifically a female Muslim, one who is presumed to be weak, without agency, and worse, a willing participant in her own oppression. The authors, Wilson and Alphona, deliberately include a protagonist facing these multi-layered subjugations to display the various forms of oppression that *American* society perpetuates for women of color.

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**Religion**

The idea of religious difference is also taken up in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*. As a Muslim living in post-9/11 America, Kamala exists in a world environment that carries anti-Islamic sentiments. Zoe says to Kamala at a party: "I thought you weren't allowed to hang out with us *heathens* on the weekends! I thought you were, like, *locked up!"* (p. 9, emphasis in original). This comment, coming from Kamala's White counterpart, is an example of Orientalism (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008) in that it propagates Eurocentric intolerance. Even prior to the infamous terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, Said in 1980 remarked on Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as "crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world, presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression" (para. 11).

Zoe expresses negative attitudes towards Muslim culture in the emphasized features of her speech—"heathens" and "locked up" (p. 9)—and in her conflation of Muslim life with hostility and female oppression. Zoe first uses verbal irony and sarcasm by saying "us *heathens*" to position how Muslims might view non-Muslims. By sarcastically using a derogatory term in reference to herself, Zoe characterizes Muslims as the aggressors and fanatics. Reducing the language further to its minimal elements, Zoe maintains the dichotomous "you" versus "us" dialogue. As Said (1980) confirms: "Islam has always been seen as belonging to the Orient, its particular fate within the general structure of Orientalism has been to be looked at with a very special hostility and fear" (para. 5). Zoe represents the oppressors as portrayed through her own hostility and fear.


**Figure 2.** The Khans at dinner (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 5) ©MARVEL

Authors Wilson and Alphona (2014) argue not only against the veil as a signifier of an essentialized or monolithic Muslim identity, but also against other general stereotypes of Islamic identity. As seen in Figure 2, there are multiple and distinctive depictions of Muslims in this graphic novel. We meet Kamala's Turkish friend Nakia, who wears a veil; Kamala herself is Muslim but doesn't wear any traditional clothing or veil. Kamala's pious brother wears a traditional *kurta salwar*[2] with the *taqiyah*,[3] and her father wears a Western button-up shirt with a tie.

Through these diverse portrayals, the writers attempt to dispel the monolithic Muslim identity as extremist and aggressive. At the very least, the lesson to be learned here is that there is complexity within these religious identities and that individuals should not be carelessly categorized. This point can best be connected to McCall's (2005) notion of intracategorical complexity in that the graphic novel is "interested in revealing—and indeed cannot avoid—the range of diversity and difference within a group" (p. 1782). In accordance with intersectionality, an analysis that goes beyond the notion of different categories of a single identity is crucial because it emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the various layers of identities within groups and categories themselves to critically and accurately gain a deeper understanding of those we study.

Others may believe that Kamala covets her White peers for being part of a hegemonic society. However, I contend that Kamala can be better understood as resisting categorization and marginalization. When Kamala says, "Why am I stuck with the *weird holidays*? Every-body else gets to be *normal*. Why can't I?" (p. 8, emphasis in original), she means "normal" in more ways than one, which points to intersectionality being a critical lens from which to understand her point of view. "Normal" is taken up to refer not only to her racial identity but also her religious identity, since the "weird holidays" she references are Islamic religious celebrations such as Eid and Ramadan. In the United States, holidays such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated nationally while also having deep roots in Christianity. Not being part of the "normal" population and group makes Kamala feel isolated and "othered" (Said, 1978), which causes her to push back.

In Figure 3, Kamala sneaks out of her room to go to a party she is not allowed to attend. Here she defies her parents' wishes; we see her with one hand fisted, eyes closed, one leg in her room and the other out, with the thought panel stating, "Why can't I?" Metaphorically, this scene resembles Kamala's internal


**Figure 3.** Kamala sneaking out (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 8) ©MARVEL

struggle as a first-generation, Pakistani American, Muslim girl caught in a dilemma of simultaneously wanting to be part of the hegemonic society and to respect her cultural norms. This visual suggests that she is stuck between two worlds—with one leg in the house representing her Pakistani culture and upbringing, and the other leg out, signifying American culture. Having one foot in and one foot out is symbolic of the intersectional lived experiences of many first-generation individuals who feel torn between differing races, genders, and religion.

## A More Holistic Analysis through Intersectionality

As Kamala experiences her first encounter with superheroine power, she hallucinates as part of her transformation (see Figure 4). Kamala sees three floating figures surrounded by clouds and white birds, suggesting a divine and spiritual tone. In the forefront is the original Captain Marvel, whose moniker Kamala later claims, flanked by Captain America to the right and Iron Man to the left. The American superheroes have their eyes closed with serene-like facial expressions, suggesting they are at peace or meditating. Captain America has his arms up and palms facing inward like a Muslim person in prayer, and Captain Marvel has one hand with the thumb and ring finger together, a common pose in Eastern culture's meditation practices. Captain Marvel's other hand is outstretched, palm facing in, again as if in Islamic prayer. Visually, there is an integration of the divine with Islamic traditions. The White characters are juxtaposed with the Islamic facial and bodily positions of prayer, giving the reader a new image of what it means to have multilayered identities.

The text further reinforces the integration of the Eastern world in that the words said by Captain Marvel are in Urdu. The wording quotes a popular and traditional Sufi poem written by Amir Khrusro, a great scholar of music and history, court poet, and widely reputed writer in Medieval India (Vatuk, 1969). The *Ms. Marvel* creators include this piece of culture for the readers in the original and in English translation. The Urdu version is presented in bigger and bolded text in contrast to the English version, as if daring the reader to engage with the Urdu text and read it word for word. The English translation is provided underneath, smaller, not bolded, and divided between the men. This symbolizes how Kamala internalizes her identities hierarchically.

The superhero woman in the forefront, speaking Urdu, represents how Kamala sees herself as Pakistani first; then come the men, speaking English as a sub-category of her "American" self. Visually speaking, Kamala is the entire image; she is both Pakistani and American. Constructions of identity are further complicated by the fact that a Sufi poem is used. Sufism is heavily tied to Islam and aims "to direct the spiritual traveler to an experience and knowledge


**Figure 4.** Marvel heroes confer powers on Kamala (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 15). ©MARVEL

of God through an inner cleansing and purification of self" (Khalil, 2014, p. 373). Wilson and Alphona depict a scene in which Kamala is having an out of body spiritual experience, a revelation about who she is. By adding this piece of Pakistani culture and Islamic religion to the face of the White superheroes, Kamala's identity is shown to be complex and multidimensional.

Analyzing this scene as a whole calls attention to social divisions and hierarchies of power. Yuval-Davis (2006) states that "[s]ocial divisions . . . exist at the level of representation, being expressed in images and symbols, texts and ideologies" (p. 198). Based on Yuval-Davis's idea of representation and subjectivity existing in images, one would have to agree that on a basic level, the image of three White superheroes conferring or blessing a Brown girl with powers suggests that power comes from the dominant group. This portrayal is perhaps intentional by the creators of *Ms. Marvel* in that it functions to give a societal critique of how marginalized and minoritized women truly get their power—not through self-empowerment but through the culturally dominant group in power. Even if those superheroes are an imagined self, Kamala's consciousness recognizes a level of exclusion in that they are positioned above her, which also translates to the division of power between those who are White and those who are a minority, like her.

**[R]eading and questioning *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* through this particular lens can identify social issues and, in turn, create a space that disrupts hegemony.**

In further examining the positionality of the heroes, the next question could be, "Why is a White, blue-eyed, blonde woman flanked by White men?" One could argue that this is a feminist dream in that Kamala dreams of a strong and powerful woman coming first, positioned ahead of the men in a male-dominated and patriarchal society. However, interpreting this spatial symbolism is problematic in that the concept of race is ignored, thus suggesting the idea of White Feminism. Even more upsetting is that after the hallucination, Kamala herself transforms into the White, blond, blue-eyed bombshell that is the original Captain Marvel. Conversely, Lehoczky (2014) asserts the reason for Kamala's initial White transformation is that she first "has to get control of her powers, which tend to morph her without her volition into a blond clone of the original character. Kamala has to embrace her true self to banish blondness" (para. 10). Wilson and Alphona arguably attempt to reveal a process in which marginalized women go through constructing a multifaceted identity. Before Kamala can become a hero, perhaps her own hero, she must defeat this ideology of White supremacy.

## Pedagogical Implications in Practice

Considering Sipe and Brightman's (2009) argument that graphic novels have a "complex semiotic significance" (p. 68), it makes sense to acknowledge "the importance of students' developing visual literacy" (Versaci, 2008, p. 96). Educators have the potential to utilize graphic novels as "a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of single-definition school literacy curriculums" (Low, 2012, p. 375). While the more traditional inclusions of graphic novels in the classroom manifested in the form of historical nonfiction pedagogies (Kersulov, 2016; Hughes & Morrison, 2014), the scaffolding of complex content (Jacobs, 2007), and the instruction of English language learners (Chun, 2009), graphic novels have become tools "to explore [students'] memories and identities" (Kersulov, 2016, p. 69) and "[are] not merely a medium for bridging adolescent literacies and traditional curricula, but also intimately connected to issues of identity" (Simon, 2012, p. 521). In addition, graphic novels have evolved to being used to critically investigate social issues; for instance, Hughes and Morrison (2014) have used diverse graphic novels, such as the Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws series (2006–2015), with students to examine "difficult social, political, and economic issues" (p. 125), such as the colonization of indigenous and First Nations groups in Canada. Even at post-secondary levels, graphic novels can be employed to create spaces for social and critical consciousness (Carleton, 2014).

Adhering to Collins's (1998, 2000) and Crenshaw's (1989, 1994) social theories of intersectionality, I argue that reading and questioning *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* through this particular lens can identify social issues and, in turn, create a space that disrupts

hegemony. Intersectionality can help reveal "how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories" (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 797). To incorporate graphic novels, identity, and literacy studies in the classroom, I suggest conceptualizing a line of questioning and activities based on the guiding questions described in the methods section. However, those looking for more explicit materials can refer to Jaffe's (2015) work on how to include *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* in their lesson planning. As an advocate for and teacher of graphic novels as a means for developing visual literacy and critical reading, Jaffe has generated her own questions and activities that, I would contend, align with an intersectionality perspective.

Specifically, under the section "Cultural Diversity, Civic Responsibilities, History, and Social Issues," Jaffe proposes a number of discussion starters and activities for using *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* to engage students on those topics. Below, I offer three of those starters and expand on how they might launch discussion and critical thinking in the classroom.

1. "Discuss why it is so difficult for Kamala and Nakia to fit in. Discuss why it is difficult for 'different' people to fit in and what your class and community might do to help others in your community belong." (Jaffe, 2015, section 9)

This prompt relates to my guiding question, "What issues of difference or sameness are being displayed in the text or visual?" A whole-class exploration of how the characters are categorized by others and how they defy simple categorization given their multiple identities might serve to support students who are having a harder time getting started. Using an intersectionality analysis can also help students understand "that there are always elements of power embedded in language, disciplinary methods, metaphors" (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 796). The guiding question, "In what ways does power affect the issues of difference/sameness?," also builds on Jaffe's prompt and urges young readers to consider difference as it relates to fitting in. Fitting in with *whom* or *what* is central to applying an intersectionality lens, as fitting in requires the acknowledgement of a dominant and hegemonic culture. By employing intersectionality here, the theory offers "a framework for contesting power and thereby linking theory to existent and emergent social and political struggles" (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 800).

2. "Discuss the similarities and differences of Muslim customs versus American and/or any other cultures or religions represented in your classroom/community/reading group." (Jaffe, 2015, section 9)

This prompt can be adapted to the text to best serve an intersectional lens by answering the second guiding question, "How do the issues of difference/sameness interact with each other?" Students can start with the "versus" model of the question inherent in Jaffe's framing and follow up with a discussion on similarities and differences of customs associated with being Muslim *and* American (or any other combination of cultures and religions). Combining two of the categories and analyzing how they interact provide a deeper and more complex understanding of the categories and their limitations.

**A whole-class exploration of how the characters are categorized by others and how they defy simple categorization given their multiple identities might serve to support students who are having a harder time getting started.**

3. "Have students share their own cultural folklore. Compare and contrast how the stories are told/written." (Jaffe, 2015, section 9)

This sort of activity relates to what other scholars, such as Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001), urge educational stakeholders to do: "We must strive for the goal of the creative fusion and vitalization of those mini-narratives that every unique individual—every student and every teacher—brings to a human encounter such as the pedagogical setting, exploring the full richness in their particularities" (p. 118). To make this prompt more focused on intersectionality, students can create their own intersectional identity maps consisting of any identity categories they feel safe to share. How they make sense of each category will reflect how they narrate their own identities. A follow-up aspect of this activity could include asking students another intersectionality guiding question: "In what ways do

political, social, or historical contexts interact with the issues of difference/sameness?" Educators might encourage students to consider this question as it relates to them personally.

This labor of delving into the multiplicities of identities with context-specific nuances matters in education and is essential in "addressing such issues as marginality, oppression, difference, identity, and representation" (Asher, 2008, p. 13). Starting with a fictional and graphic novel character such as Kamala Khan can be an innovative way to challenge students to consider others' minoritized and marginalized experiences before asking them to look into their own intersectional identities. These methods, questions, and activities are not meant to be prescriptive, but rather serve as suggestions for how intersectionality work could be employed in literacy and our lives. As Freire and Macedo (1987) would affirm, such work could be helpful in reading both the word and the world.

## Conclusion

The intersectionality theoretical framework, particularly given its flexibility, can serve as a beneficial tool for literary analysis. Through "an intersectional multi-level analysis which takes into account reciprocal effects between the various levels" (Degele & Winker, 2011, p. 51), readers can gain a more complex and comprehensive understanding of unfamiliar characters. Engaging in an intersectionality reading of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* reveals that Kamala, and to some degree, her Muslim American female friend, struggle with the phenomena of self-defining as a group as opposed to defining the self against what others' definitions are. Ultimately, Kamala's experiences become about rearticulating herself on the White dominant culture's own terms and then fighting to shift the power balance, eventually challenging the White monolithic standards.

I argue that an intersectionality lens is a significant tool for reading—not only as an approach to literary analysis, but also as a way of thinking about classroom practice. Through an intersectionality analysis, we have the great potential for interpreting texts and the world around us in a profound way. Collins's (2000) "matrix of domination" and idea of looking at women of color through the multiple lenses of race and gender allow readers to evaluate the power dynamics, systems of privilege, and marginalization in the graphic novel and society. When employing "intersectional-type work, it is crucial to foreground it as a form of political critique that examines why the social world is configured the way it is and that confronts the work of power" (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 240). Intersectionality analysis can serve as a tool for educators and students to critically evaluate systems of oppression and power from multiple angles in order to better improve the lives of those from marginalized populations and acknowledge that within every student reside multiple identities.

### Endnotes

1. "Amreeki" is Hindi for "American." Also seen spelled as "Amriki."
2. Kurta salwar is a Pakistani and Indian cotton garment consisting of a long top over pants.
3. Taqiyah is a skull cap.

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## Appendix A: A Sample of the Author's Categorization and Analysis

**Example 1 (Text):**
"You thought that if you disobeyed your parents—your culture, your religion—your classmates would *accept* you. What happened instead? . . . They *laughed* at me . . . . Like, Kamala's finally seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior *brown people* and their rules to the *curb*'" (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 16, emphasis in original).

| **Race:** | **Gender:** | **Religion:** |
|---|---|---|
| • "your culture"<br>• "dumb inferior brown people"<br>• (Pakistani) | | • "your religion"<br>• (Muslim) |

**Intersectional Implications:**
- Kamala is *unacceptable* to her classmates because of her race and religion.
- This is intersectional because she is doubly oppressed. Her identity includes experiencing xenophobia for being Pakistani and Islamophobia for being Muslim *(social/political issues)*.
- Because Kamala acknowledges her imposed inferiority, she is bringing forth the "us" versus "them" discourse to the forefront *(issue of power between White supremacy and minoritized groups)*.

**Visual:**


Kamala reflecting on her identity (Wilson & Alphona, 2014, p. 8) ©MARVEL

| **Race:** | **Gender:** | **Religion:** |
|---|---|---|
| • Her mirrored self is of a lighter skin tone in comparison to the darker skin color on her hand.<br>• "Pakoras" are Indian & Pakistani food. | • "Signed out of health class": This relates to Muslim girls not being able to participate in physical education classes (Hamzeh, 2012). | • "Weird holidays" refer to Islamic traditions such as Eid and Ramadan. |

**Intersectional Implications:**
- Kamala is having a "wishful thinking" moment in that she compares herself culturally to the hegemonic culture, perhaps wishing she was White and thus included instead of excluded.
- While looking at herself in the mirror and not seeing "normal," Kamala indirectly insinuates her personhood to be the problem. "Everybody else gets to be *normal.*" If that logic was to be inverted, it would mean that she is not "normal." Therefore, her reality (like our reality) is that being Pakistani and Muslim makes one *abnormal.*
- Kamala is expressing as an "other" the injustice of her being excluded based on the forced and tacit label of "difference" centered on her race.