Reconstructing The Concept of Superhero in *Ms. Marvel* TV Series: First Female Moslem Superhero's Journey

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Abstrak

Marvel Studios adalah waralaba paling sukses dalam hal film superhero, daftar pahlawan super mereka yang mewakili "yang terbaik dari umat manusia" terus bertambah, namun ketika harus menunjukkan betapa beragamnya umat manusia sebenarnya mereka belum melakukan yang terbaik, setidaknya sampai mereka merilis Ms. Marvel. Seri Ms Marvel menunjukkan kebangkitan Kamala Khan, pahlawan super remaja Muslim Amerika-Pakistan pertama di tengah peran yang biasanya didominasi laki-laki, hal yang kurang dari biasanya ini mengilhami terciptanya penelitian ini yang bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana mendekonstruksi dan merekonstruksi pahlawan super perempuan Muslim dalam tempat-tempat minoritas. Dalam penelitian ini, peneliti menggunakan pendekatan dekonstruksi dalam menganalisis Ms. Marvel (2022) sebagai sumber data yang mengarah pada bentuk-bentuk dekonstruksi dan rekonstruksi konsep superhero perempuan Muslim. Penelitian ini menemukan adanya bentuk-bentuk upaya untuk mendekonstruksi konsep superhero perempuan Muslim dalam Ms. Marvel terhadap isu supremasi kulit putih dan imigran Muslim, karena tokoh utama serial tersebut mengambil sudut pandang seorang perempuan Muslim yang merupakan minoritas di Amerika. Upaya mendekonstruksi konsep superhero perempuan muslim ini merupakan upaya untuk meruntuhkan konsep superhero klasik yang berhasil didekonstruksi oleh Kamala sendiri. Namun ada dualisme karena posisi Kamala sebagai perempuan muslimah, ia tidak sepenuhnya bebas karena masih terbelenggu oleh sistem budaya patriarki. Terjadinya ambivalensi dalam upaya dekonstruksi ini akhirnya menekankan konsep sebelumnya. Tujuan mendekonstruksi seri ini adalah untuk membangun kembali konsep superhero Muslim Kamala Khan. Kamala berhasil menjadi superhero berkat kerja kerasnya, meski harus menghadapi tugas yang sulit.
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Kata Kunci: Dekonstruksi, *Superhero*, Perempuan Muslim.

Abstract

Marvel Studios is the most successful franchise when it comes to superhero movies, their list of superheroes that represents "the best of humankind" goes on and on, however when it comes to showing how diverse humanity actually is they have not done their best, at least until their take on Ms. Marvel. Ms Marvel series shows the rise of Kamala Khan, the first American-Pakistani Muslim teenage superheroes amidst the typically male dominated roles, this less than usual take inspire the creation of this research that aims to examine how to deconstruct and reconstruct Muslim female superheroes in Muslim minority places. In this study, researchers used a deconstruction approach in analyzing Ms. Marvel (2022) as source that leads to forms of deconstruction and reconstruction of the Muslim female superhero concept. This research found there are forms of efforts to deconstruct the Muslim female superhero concept in Ms. Marvel of the issue of white supremacists and immigrant Muslims, because the main character of the series takes the point of view of a Muslim woman who is a minority in America. The effort to deconstruct the concept of a Muslim female superhero is an attempt to undermine the concept of a classic superhero, which Kamala herself has succeeded in deconstructing. However, there is a dualism as in Kamala's position as a Muslim woman, she is not completely free because she is still shackled by the patriarchal cultural system. The existence of ambivalence in this deconstruction effort eventually highlights the previous concept. The aim of deconstructing this series is to rebuild Kamala Khan's Muslim superhero concept. Kamala managed to become a superhero thanks to her hard work, even though she had to face difficult tasks.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Superhero, Muslim Woman.

1. INTRODUCTION

Popular fiction stories are a part of popular literature, which is understood to have different genres based on reader preferences (Ramadhanty, 2020:78). The different genres featured range from those attractive to children, such as fantasy adventure and superheroes, to those attractive to adults, such as mystery, young adult, and

romance. One of the story genres that will be discussed in this study is superhero. Superhero stories are written from the perspective of the hero, who serves as the protagonist and is widely adored (Hourihan, 1997:39). Superheroes are those who are willing to risk their life to defend others up to and including their own nation through using incredible abilities gained not just by magic but also through contemporary science. If hero refers to a male and heroine refers to a woman, the sex identification of the hero is also distinguished.

The majority of the super hero figures shown are always masculine men who have submissive relationships with female characters. Even in superhero stories, there is a dualism between men and women that stresses that males are the norm as human beings, but women are not (Hourihan, 1997:68). This indicates men's dominance and supremacy in terms of status in society. Superheroes with masculine males who dominate Western culture are a societal stereotype. Because of the popularity of this superhero in the United States, it is not unexpected that most superheroes in Western society have white skin color.

The popularity of superheroes has grown beyond comic books and into the mass media, including films and television programs based on superhero stories. The majority of the super hero figures shown are always masculine men who have submissive relationships with female characters. Even in superhero stories, there is a dualism between men and women that stresses that males are the norm as human beings, but women are not (Hourihan, 1997:68). This indicates men's dominance and supremacy in terms of status in society. Superheroes with masculine males who dominate Western culture are a societal stereotype. It is different if presenting female superheroes is not always appreciated in bringing about societal change and returns to displaying masculine superhero attributes (Sunarto & Safira, 2022:621).

Along with the emergence of new versions of super hero stories, it is probable that each figure represents a specific place. Superheroes are a common subject of stereotypes against several ethnic groups, including Muslims, in American popular culture. Muslim culture is often stereotyped as being unwelcoming, aggressive toward outsiders, and backward. People have assumed that Muslims have always acted violently as a result of this. Muslims have always been side characters or antagonists to the story's main protagonists. Considering that the Muslim population in America has a long history of violence, the 9/11 tragedy, or the terrorist attack of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, is the most unforgettable for the American people. As a consequence, the American people increasingly see Muslims as terrorists, increasing Islamophobia.

The emergence of Muslim superheroes would improve outsiders' perceptions of Muslims by dispelling prejudices formed in American popular culture (Paramita, 2015:6). There is a development from superhero stories with earlier conventional concepts with the emergence of Muslim superheroes. Margery Hourihan mentions in her book, Deconstructing the Hero, that there are several superhero concepts that are mostly applied in the story, such as structure and storyline, hero characters, hero rivals, and female characters who support heroes. including white race, dominant male gender, also dominated by western culture, a young age, a high position in society, always having relationships with women being seen as subordinate, and strength being a priority in superhero stories.

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of Muslim women in the media and literature, which has helped to dispel assumptions about repressed Muslims. Including the TV series that will be the object of this research study is *Ms. Marvel* TV Series Season 1 produced by Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). This series first aired on June 8 2022 with collaboration with Disney+ platform. Unlike most superheroes in the MCU, Kamala Khan, the main character of this series is American-Pakistan descent Muslim teenager girl.

Ms. Marvel has different standard superhero concepts whose meanings may be interpreted using deconstruction theory. The metaphysics is there to break down the general features in philosophy history, not just from Plato and Hegel, in Derrida philosophy, which affirms the elements of positive is in Derrida philosophy (Derrida, 1976). This series is successful in examining the concept of a hero, yet there are certain ambivalences or gaps in the deconstruction. In deconstructing the concepts of heroism, there are many points of ambivalence that implicitly highlight the typical superhero concept that exists in heroic stories in general. The purpose of this deconstruction of heroism is to reconstruct a different perspective on heroism and create a new identity. Female Muslim superheroes become a source of motivation for immigrants, particularly Muslim women, to keep fighting for their identity. Through Kamala Khan's representation of *Ms. Marvel*, it is demonstrated that Muslim women may become heroes and role models for minorities in American culture.

The purpose of this research is to examine how to deconstruct and reconstruct Muslim female superheroes in Muslim minority places by using Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. However, there is a gap in previous research that does not analyze the deconstruction of the superhero concept in detail. Therefore, this study analyzes the deconstructs based on Jacques Derrida, the ambivalence in trying deconstruction, and reconstructs the

concept of Muslim female superheroes based on Margery Hourihan.

2. METHOD

The data source used in this study is based on Kamala Khan, who is the main protagonist in the series *Ms. Marvel* (2022). The writer uses watching the *Ms. Marvel* series, understanding the plot, and then taking screenshots of one of the scenes from the six episodes based on proposed question to analyze the problem. The first step is the data is taken from the subtitles contained in the series. Analyze the subtitle data from the series to help clarify each dialogue and provide reinforcement for the meaning of the analysis. Second, to investigate the data based on the gestures of each character. By taking this step to analyze each character gesture related to verbal and non-verbal components. The last step when all the data has been collected is to examine all the previous elements as a whole so as to get the final result which can reveal the new meaning contained in the series. Derrida's deconstruction is used to analyze the binary opposition the concept of superhero to Kamala's hero journey.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research aims to answer the research questions as follows: (1) How is the deconstruction of the Muslim woman superhero concept in *Ms. Marvel;* (2) What is the ambivalence in trying to deconstruct the superhero concept in *Ms. Marvel*; (3) How is the reconstruction of the Muslim superhero concept in *Ms. Marvel*. Based on the statement, the objective of this study as follows: (1) To analyze the deconstruction of the Muslim female superhero concept; (2) To find out the concept of superhero ambivalence in *Ms. Marvel*; (3) To analyze the reconstruction of the Muslim superhero concept.

3.1 Deconstruction of the Muslim female superhero concept

This paper will focus on the deconstruction by the character Kamala Khan who is a female superhero character. Appearance of *Ms. Marvel* as the first female Muslim superhero to have its own series. The series also succeeded in proving the reversal of Islamic thought in treating women as weak creatures and in need of protection. *Ms. Marvel* is an unusual superhero character in several aspects in the deconstruction of the hero concept. Thus, the writer will analyze the main character along with other figures to strengthen the data evidence in which this female hero succeeded in creating a new hierarchy regarding the concept of heroes.

3.1.1 The Issue of White Supremacy and Muslim Immigrants

The first specific is in *Ms. Marvel* since she is not a white western person who is the main character in the superhero mask tradition. Most superhero stories involve white appearance combined with a significant level of intelligence and fighting ability. A white female superhero with trademark blonde hair, similar to Captain Marvel. Since *Ms. Marvel* is a female Muslim heroine who is not white like the previous superheroes, the analysis of this series will contain several binary oppositions.

Kamala's identity as a Pakistani Muslim is important and she has brown-skinned and is considered a minority in America because she is a Muslim. As such, Kamala's brown-skinned and religious identity are both important issues in this series.

The interesting thing about this series is Kamala has a friend who is a native American named Bruno Carrelli. Apart from Bruno, there is another friend of Kamala named Nakia Bahadir. It's different from most superhero stories that use white people as male leads with non-white people as superhero companions. In western stories, white people do not necessarily become superheroes, nor are non-white people always submissive to white superheroes who make a difference. Strong evidence indicates that Kamala is not white, but a brown-skinned girl with her two best friends who are white people.

The second characteristic of *Ms. Marvel* is that she is the first Muslim female superhero to headline her own series and can communicate in three languages: English, Urdu, and Arabic. Several parts in the series reveal some Arabic being used in prayer, such as when Kamala recites the prayer before driving a car. This religious action is not typically performed by Pakistanis, but rather by Muslims in order to preserve the original language of Arabic. (Paramita, 2015:53).

Apart from Kamala's ability to speak in three languages on a daily basis, the main problem of being a Muslim in a non-Muslim nation is that people criticize Muslim women who wear the hijab based on their appearance. It indicates that the person wearing the hijab is a Muslim woman. Kamala and Nakia have to be faced with the choice to live like the lifestyle of white people or live together with fellow Muslims. So, this series focuses on the point of view of how minority people, especially Muslim immigrants, live side by side with American society. There are so many cultural imbalances experienced by the characters and Kamala herself that she has a double identity.

3.1.2 *Ms. Marvel's* Domination Protects Male Companion

In classic hero stories with a masculine male protagonist who combines with physique and strength to protect the role of women who have a relationship with the hero. However, stories with female protagonists do not

change much of the meaning of the classic hero concept. So to attract the audience or readers from the story of a hero like the female protagonist as a hero must try to behave like a male masculine hero. This is a reversal of the binary opposition to the concept of a hero that occurs in the *Ms. Marvel* series, which uses a female main character.

Often the female character in the story is someone who needs to be protected and becomes the subordinate of the male character or male hero. Female characters in superhero stories are described as following gender constructions and in accordance with the patriarchy in society, especially in the Muslim religion (Safira & Sunarto, 2022:3). With this gender and patriarchal construction, women do not have the opportunity to contribute more to their role in the story, as if they are a burden for the main character. Female superhero stories produced by Marvel present women as masculine compared to male characters. Even though female superheroes have tried to be equal to the position of masculine male superheroes, sometimes they are not appreciated as carriers of change in women. (Safira & Sunarto, 2022:3).

Kamala as a female superhero in this series has a role like the usual male heroes. Not only protecting her male friends, she is also a brave woman of the size who fends for herself. Kamala also often does physical training beforehand to make her body more flexible in combat mode. Even though she had to experience several failures to synchronize her body with her strength, she still doesn't give up and has the ambition to become a hero like her idol *Captain Marvel*. This also dismantles the issue of weak female stereotypes in stories that begin to show changes in women who are shown to be equal in position to men or masculine. (Safira & Sunarto, 2022:3).

Kamala's heroic actions didn't stop there, she also had to protect Kamran, who was being treated unfairly by the Damage Control people. Due to being attacked by them, Kamran felt himself threatened and was unable to think rationally. This description is contrary to Darwin's opinion (1999) that men tend to be aggressive, brave, mighty, and rational compared to women who tend to be emotional, timid, and fragile (Safira & Sunarto, 2022:9). Thus, a suitable description for Kamala is a description on the criteria of a man because her role is to protect and be brave.

Therefore, in women superheroes can reverse the binary opposition with male superheroes who are highly appreciated for their masculinity. By highlighting the dominance of female superheroes to state that women can live in the midst of patriarchal ideology and culture in society (Safira & Sunarto, 2022:10). It has been proven by Kamala herself that being a superhero and a Muslim woman is not supposed to be weaker than men.

3.1.3 Appearance of *Ms. Marvel* in Her Costume

Costumes become the identity of a superhero to be recognized by people because of the color, symbol of superhero identity, and the uniqueness of the costume. The first time Kamala wore a superhero costume in this series was when Kamala attended the AvengerCon event, she wore the *Captain Marvel* costume she made with Bruno. The costume did not completely resemble *Captain Marvel*'s and was too underdressed for Ammi because it is very impolite for a Muslim woman to wear clothes that are too naked. Kamala finally no longer wore the costume she made, which made her have a big fight with Ammi. Female superheroes usually have the characteristic of wearing extremely tight, underdressed, and sexual costumes to attract a male audience. This is also because of the stereotype with female superhero costumes that are required to be more feminine than male superhero costumes which tend to show a masculine side.

Kamala is a Muslim and South Asian, where both cultures have aspects of modesty in dress and do not care whether the individual is a superhero. In Islam there is modesty in all life, not just dressing, wearing clothes that are too open are very uncomfortable (Paramita, 2015:85). Therefore, Kamala's appearance looks simple from her *Captain Marvel* costume without highlighting her curves. Also, the additional scarf around Kamala's neck combines Pakistani and American culture.

In contrast to Kamala who directly displays that she is a Muslim who does not display sexuality from Kamala's body and the way she dresses is one of modesty in Islam. Even though Kamala is a Muslim, she can become a hero like her idol without having to imitate *Captain Marvel*'s appearance.

3.2 Ambivalence in Deconstructing the Superhero Concept

However, deconstruction efforts have dualism in every aspect or have gaps in deconstruction analysis. In this discussion there are several points that have dualism when in deconstruction attempts.

3.2.1 The Patriarchal System in Religion

Introduced new super hero story, *Ms. Marvel* who is a woman and is Muslim. In hero stories, it is very rare to use Muslim characters as the main characters due to several conditions in American society that are not Muslim countries. Because Kamala comes from a Muslim family, the influence of this patriarchal system still applies to her family. In a patriarchal system where the position of a man is higher than a woman even in the family.

In the first episode, Kamala asks her parents for permission to be allowed to go to AvengerCon with Bruno. However, Ammi did not allow Kamala to go. Ammi

doesn't want Kamala to be affected by strange boys at night at AvengerCon. Kamala accuses Ammi of forbidding her from going to events because she wears a tight costume, while Abbu compares Kamala to Aamir because she thinks Kamala cannot carry out normal teenage activities at home. Even though Kamala has become a Muslim female superhero who has managed to get out of stereotyped meanings, it turns out that she is trapped in a patriarchal system in a South Asian family.

The influence of patriarchal culture in South Asia and the Islamic religion continues in the mosque partition which separates the places for women and men. Kamala and Nakia complain that the women's place is in stark contrast to the men's place, which they guarantee is more pristine.

Due to the position of the women's place behind the men's place, Kamala and Nakia protested that they could not see Sheikh Abdullah clearly. It was as if the partition created a barrier between men and women, by limiting the ability of the female audience to see the sheikh and limited participation in lectures. In other words, to protect women with different partitions and entrances actually places women behind the men's side (Paramita, 2015:101).

Therefore, Kamala wanted to show that Islamic teachings respect equality between men and women which has been upheld by American society. The patriarchal system is an issue that still exists in a society that upholds male domination.

3.2.2 Bruno's Intelligence

Kamala as the main character of the hero has a best friend and hero companion. Bruno's role is not only as Kamala's friend, but as Kamala's companion when she performs heroic actions. Apart from accompanying Kamala, Bruno is tasked with conducting research and seeking information regarding the origin of Kamala's powers. This is what makes the dualism of white supremacy in this series. Initially, this series used non-white or brown main characters and Muslims. The point of this series that should highlight how the issue of white supremacy in this superhero story is actually emphasized by Bruno's intelligence.

The characters Kamala and Bruno are introduced each with their own strengths. Bruno, who really likes research to create innovative goods, while Kamala was introduced as a young girl who has a high desire to know without knowing the risks.

Bruno's success in getting this scholarship illustrates that white domination is from the side of intelligence. Bruno's ambition is not only in the academic field, but he is interested in continuing to do research on Kamala until he gets the answer he wants.

Furthermore, Bruno's intelligence to always be Kamala's companion by creating many useful tools for Kamala. This also indirectly shows that white people have high intelligence in all things. Even though Bruno wasn't a hero, he was just a friend of Kamala. Because Bruno's intelligence makes him the perfect male companion for Kamala. This relationship also aims to strengthen that white people have power over science and one day Bruno can also lead.

3.3 Reconstruction the Concept of Superhero in *Ms. Marvel*

After deconstruction attempts were made in the *Ms. Marvel*, there is an ambivalence in the deconstruction efforts being made. This series dismantles the existence of the previous classic superhero concept through aspects of the hero's gender, the hero's masculinity, and how the Muslim hero dresses. Behind the ambivalence of deconstruction efforts, there are results to reconstruct the hero concept in the *Ms. Marvel* as the first Muslim female hero.

The hero concept built by Kamala Khan is that she succeeds in becoming a hero according to her own wishes without having to be someone else. Kamala also manages to reverse some of the classic superhero concepts in the story. She proved that being a Muslim woman is not weak, but can be compared with men. Being a Muslim in American culture is also not an obstacle to wanting to be a hero, because a hero is someone who wants to save people and is willing to sacrifice himself. There is nothing wrong with a Muslim woman being a hero in American society.

Apart from Kamala being able to succeed in becoming a Muslim female hero, she has a hero companion. For Kamala herself, she has a friendly relationship with Bruno as a companion to help her on her way. The role of women in hero stories is not always a complement to the hero's masculinity requirements. Kamala's brave attitude does not hesitate to protect several of her male friends from danger and Kamala is ready to become their shield. So, there is courage from Kamala towards her friends.

The following deconstructed hero concepts are having costumes that are different from female superheroes in general. This is also because of the stereotype with female superhero costumes that are required to be more feminine than male superhero costumes which tend to show a masculine side. In contrast to Kamala, who directly shows that she is a Muslim, she is not supposed to have a costume like female superheroes in general. Because of Islamic teachings, wearing a costume that is too open indicates impolite dress.

So, with the existence of concepts that have been successfully dismantled or reversed by Kamala, it brings

added value as the first Muslim female hero. Because it doesn't always use the classic hero concept, it's considered the best to be a hero. *Ms. Marvel* finally shows the quality of a hero, not just white, male, and has a high social caste. Kamala Khan as *Ms. Marvel* showed that the quality of being a hero doesn't need to follow the classic concept of a hero and must be herself.

CONCLUSION

In this research, the writer analyzes the main character in *Ms. Marvel* by Bisha K. Ali. The creator of the *Ms. Marvel* television series, who was successful in deconstructing these classic hero concepts, even went to represent South Asian and Muslim culture. This series tries to reconstruct the superhero concept in order to be new and unique. Based on the research questions and the results of the research in the previous chapter regarding the deconstruction analysis of the Muslim female superhero concept, conclusions can be drawn.

Attempts are being made to deconstruct the Muslim female superhero concept in *Ms. Marvel* of the issue of white racists and immigration Muslims. Because the series' main character takes the perspective of a Muslim woman who is a minority in America. Then Kamala shows her control to defend her partner, which is a case of binary opposition, in which a male superhero protects a female character. As for Kamala, as a hero, it is her responsibility to defend her friends and family. The look or costumes worn by superheroes as their distinct personalities are the last attempt to deconstruct the concept of a Muslim female superhero. Because Kamala is Muslim, her costume is simple and does not show her curves.

There is a duality in deconstruction that the writer may analyze. As a Muslim woman, Kamala is not entirely free since she is still bound by the patriarchal system of culture that still exists in South Asia. The impact of this Islamic interpretation of the patriarchal system on South Asian culture, according to Nakia and Kamala, makes them wish to return to the original teachings of Islam and struggle against the patriarchal society that controls their life. Then, implicitly demonstrating white domination in the narrative by putting Bruno's intelligence over Kamala's attempts.

This series reconstructs the superhero concept, that aim of deconstruction is to recreate Kamala Khan's Muslim superhero concept. The significance of impact caused by stereotypes on white culture does not define the quality of a superhero, which requirements that heroes be part of them rather than a minority. Female superheroes are frequently overlooked since *Ms. Marvel* has the ability to create a unique female superhero concept. Has an ambition to become a superhero and get stronger in order to protect others.

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