

Revisionary Superheroes and Speculative Romance: Disidentificatory Tactics of South Asian  
Representation and Fandom in Western Popular Culture

By

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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes how creators deploy nuanced and inherently political tactics to represent and maintain a presence for South Asian subjectivities in Western popular culture. I borrow the term “tactics” from Micheal de Certeau’s theorization of the idea as “styles of social exchange, technical invention, and moral resistance” (106) that are capable of insinuating into sociopolitical hegemonic systems that support and sustain imperialism and neoliberalism. In order to “trick the order” (de Certeau 106), the authors/creators (and, in some cases, the fictional characters and the fandoms) go through tactical disidentificatory processes which can be understood as “a partial disavowal of [a] cultural form that works to restructure [the power structure] from within” (28) as José Esteban Muñoz describes. The disidentificatory politics of popular culture, its subgenres (superhero comics and historical romance), and the tactical inclusion of South Asian representation by the creators of the works are the primary areas of analysis. Chapter One studies Marvel Cinematic Universe’s *Ms. Marvel*, the story of a Pakistani-American teenage superhero. The second chapter continues the discussion by analyzing the Disney+ adaptation of the comic. The chapters on *Ms. Marvel* argue that the characterization of the superhero proposes a revisionary understanding of the term superhero, unlike the one currently deriving from white, patriarchal societal values. Chapter Three analyses Netflix’s show *Bridgerton*’s second season and its story of two British-Indian sisters living in a mixed-race upper class in Regency-era Britain. This chapter advocates for the speculative tendencies of the romance show and establishes the disidentification as practiced by Brown characters and the fandoms. Ultimately, this thesis contends that disidentificatory tactics used in Western popular culture lend theoretical scaffolding for praxis, which is vital for our analysis of art in a neoliberal society still dominated by structures of whiteness.

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സ്നേഹത്തിൽ കുതിർക്കപ്പെട്ടതിന്റെ ഓർമ്മയും, തുറന്ന് വെച്ച കഥഭരണിയിലെ ഉപ്പിലിട്ട മലയാളവും; തർജ്ജമ ചെയ്ത റഷ്യനും ജാപ്പനീസും ഇംഗ്ലീഷും കടിക്കാൻ തന്ന് ഊട്ടിയ ചോറുരുളയും ഈ മഞ്ഞു നാട്ടിൽ എന്റെ പാമേയം ആയിരുന്നു. ഇനി അങ്ങോട്ടുള്ള യാത്രയിലും.

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## Introduction

South Asian representation in Western popular culture is rooted in the history of imperialism, colonialism, and the influence of neoliberalism.<sup>1</sup> These sociopolitical forces converge in the manufacturing of representation of South Asian subjectivities in ways that make the negotiations between an orientalist understanding of the culture of people of colour and the real and material possibilities of representations in Western popular culture difficult. Many examples of this are available on social media since popular culture has considerable significance in online discussions, while those discussions can influence the development of popular cultural texts. A 2024 tweet about the second season of *Bridgerton* caught my attention and shaped my approach to the topic of this thesis in fundamental ways.

The popular Netflix show *Bridgerton* features Black and Asian protagonists in its adaptation of Julia Quinn's popular romance novels set in Regency-era England. The show garnered attention for its inclusion of people of colour in roles that were originally written by Quinn as white characters. The adaptation has Simone Ashley, who is a British actor of Indian descent, playing the character Kate Sharma, the romantic lead of the second season of the show. In a TikTok video shared by X (formerly known as Twitter) user @ZendaysDriving, a bookshelf with Julia Quinn's books is displayed in a bookstore. On the shelf, there are multiple

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<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism was introduced as an economic and political strategy in the decades following World War II. Since then, as many critics like Henry Giroux, Aihwa Ong, and Wendy Brown have suggested, the economic modality of neoliberalism has spread into many realms of human life. As Helen Jun rightly argues, "more than just an economic program, neoliberalism presents the ideal conditions for global capitalism as the prerequisite for human freedom and liberation, making capitalist economic principles the basis for utopic social abstractions. Formed in opposition to Keynesian economic theory, the key tenets of neoliberalism are deregulation, privatization, and the dismantling of social services" (125). In addition to Jun's definitions, there are many accepted understandings and working definitions of neoliberalism. For the purpose of the analysis of the works in this thesis, I have referred to Mitchum Huels and Rachel Greenwald Smith's theoretical approach to neoliberalism and contemporary literary culture in multiple instances. Huels and Smith have argued that neoliberalism, since its introduction, has had four different stages in which the ideology exerted influence, and they categorized it as—"economic, political, sociocultural, and ontological." This observation emphasizes that neoliberalism "becomes what we are, a mode of existence defined by individual self-responsibility, entrepreneurial action, and the maximization of human capital" (9). This sociocultural logic of neoliberalism was central to my analysis of the works and the characters.

copies of *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (the source for the adaption of the second season of the show), which have a still shot from the show with Simone Ashley and Jonathan Bailey on the cover. The original video starts with the person recording saying, "They did my girl dirty," and proceeds to show the 20% price reduction stickers stuck on the book covers. Unlike the other Julia Quinn books displayed on the same shelf, *The Viscount Who Loved Me* has stickers covering Simone Ashley's face completely. Quoting the video, @ZendaysDriving wrote, "From excluding Simone in interviews, to portraying her as an animal on ads, to covering her face in book covers. *Bridgerton* and their stans will never beat the racist allegations." The racebending employed in the portrayal of the characters in the show has been a point of discussion ever since the release of its first season, and it continues to be an important talking point. While this sticker incident may look isolated, and it is not entirely the fandom's responsibility to distill the racial injustices from representation as the tweet suggests, there are certainly some bigger questions surrounding the example that are worth pondering. How are the power vectors of imperialism and neoliberalism situated in this conversation of representation? Why is it that POC, despite being a part of the Western social fabric in instrumental ways, have found it difficult to attain fair representation in the Western popular media?

The racially unjust ways through which the West systemically arranged the lives and cultures of POC in preferred angles that fit the expectations and interest of the imperial societies are a much discussed topic.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the years, this reorientation or arrangement has been influenced by the politics of a neoliberal world economy and free market. The imperial history of the UK and the US, the considerable influence colonialism has imparted on the Global

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<sup>2</sup> Some examples for this include, Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, Edward W Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Helen Jun's *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America*, and Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*.

South, the audience's expectations towards Western popular culture, and the effect of neoliberal policies in the production of popular art are other factors that demand critical consideration when analyzing the connection between the two popular genres this thesis investigates. The primary texts this thesis focuses on are *Ms. Marvel*—the Marvel Cinematic Universe comic and the televised adaptation—which is the story of a Pakistani-American teenage superhero, and the second season of *Bridgerton*, a historical romance show featuring South Asian romantic leads. To understand the discourses around Western popular culture and South Asian representation within it, we first require an analysis of the framework of popular culture itself and its relationship to identity and class structures.

### **Popular culture and identity formation**

The functions of twentieth- and twenty-first century popular culture, as they pertain to my thesis, have been theorized by critics with class-conscious and sociopolitical lenses, an emphasis on the word “popular,” an awareness of the wide range of media that fall under the banner of the popular, and an attention to the influence of reception on popular artforms. Michel de Certeau, in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, has made direct links between popular culture and economic structures by arguing that “popular culture, as well as the whole literature, called ‘popular’ ... present themselves essentially as ... combinatory or utilizing modes of consumption” (xv). The creative involvement of the masses in art has been historically dictated by the class they belong to, originally creating high- and low-brow divisions. Nevertheless, the democratization of popular culture and its assimilation into academic spaces have challenged this relationship between popular culture and class in interesting ways. There are examples of popular art that transgresses the boundaries of class, race, and normative gender binaries; and there are also

counterexamples that show how popular art serves the structures of power under which it operates. Therefore, de Certeau's theorization of the substratal ties between popular culture and the economy can potentially suggest that popular culture has both subversive and conservative aspects to it.

Raymond Williams's postulations of culture gained impetus from the attention de Certeau gives to the word "popular" since Williams defines culture as a "constitutive social process, creating specific and different 'ways of life'" (19). This social process is constitutive of class realities, the reflections of those realities in art, and the reception of popular art. The social process that creates the "ways of life" functions in tandem with the social economy, and therefore, the organic development of fandom acts as an ideal example of the reception of popular art that has placed itself in the centre of the conversation around cultural capital and economy. John Fiske, building on Pierre Bourdieu's metaphor of "describing culture as an economy in which people invest and accumulate capital" (Fiske 31), has compared acquired and inherited cultural capital with axes of social subordination (gender, race, class etc.). Fandom, according to Fiske, is "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (30). The potentially subversive nature of the fandom—alluding to the origins of its formation—and the consensus that popular culture has existed as an act of defiance against high culture puts forward the need for a focused analysis of the revisionary facets of popular culture still available in a neoliberal economy.

The inventiveness of artists who create works in genres of popular culture while being part of the systems of power and interacting with sociopolitical hegemonic structures has been identified by de Certeau as a "tactic" ("Practice" 106). He opines that "political, economic, and

scientific rationality has been constructed on [a] strategic model,” which causes the “operational models of popular culture” to exist in the “heart of the stronghold of the contemporary economy” (*Practice* xix). For de Certeau, the powerful institutions in society—both material and intangible—are made to function on the basis of strategic models of economic operations. He identifies the ways that this power relationship is resisted and hints at the subversive tactics performed within the realms of strategy by arguing that an “esthetics of tricks” and “an ethics of *tenacity* (countless ways of refusing to the established order, the status of law, a meaning or a fatality)” are used to “practice economic *diversion*” (“Practice” 106). The mutually necessitated relationship between popular culture and fandom (and, to an extent, the subversive potential of popular art) exists by skillfully employing these “esthetics of tricks.” This concept of tactics in the context of popular genres of literature, music, art, and visual media becomes, therefore, critical in the analysis of the products of these popular genres and the audience reception of popular genres.

Ruminating on the interventions of people of colour in popular fandoms of North America, Rukmini Pande writes, “because of their status as minorities within Western media fandoms, nonwhite fans are seen to interrupt normative operations” of dominant paradigms of cultural productions by “making themselves visible” (*Squee* 6). The tactics ingrained in the process of interruption are points of interest for me, since they render operational models of popular culture and popular art potentially subversive. In this thesis, my focus is restricted to a few years in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, but it is undeniable that the methods of operation of popular culture have been historically (and continue to be) influenced by the dominant values perpetuated by the sociopolitical, racial, economic, and imperial structures of power. In order to understand the power dynamics and the revisionary potential of popular

culture that enables artists to turn “the actual order of things” and exercise “popular tactics,” I borrow de Certeau’s observation that “order is tricked by art” (“Practice” 106). The production of tactical art, while contingent upon many sociopolitical factors, works skilfully to override the authority of the very institutions under which it operates. This subversiveness is notable from an academic standpoint, for it embodies an element of political dissidence. The politics of *tactics*—for the works under consideration—is influential in the way people of colour have found themselves in this popular culture apparatus, enabling conversations around class, race, imperialism, gender, and sexuality.

For the works I consider in this thesis, tactics function in a racialized context.<sup>3</sup> The economic and political context sustains in this performance of tactics, but it also entails a nuanced understanding of the formation of identity in relation to the framework and functioning of Western popular culture and its subgenres. José Esteban Muñoz, in his influential *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, has argued that for “subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny” (5), disidentification functions as a tactic of resistance that “contribute[s] to the function of a counterpublic sphere” (7). Disidentification, according to Muñoz, is “the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (25). The subversion that I mentioned earlier is supported by disidentificatory practices, where the people operating under this structure deploy tactics, but never directly opposing the power structure. Creators and fandoms of colour understand and accept that fair representation can be achieved by pulling elements from the white heteronormative structure and

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<sup>3</sup> The agents of tactics can be the characters, the creators of the characters, and/or the fandom.

reshaping/adapting/removing the facets that work for them. Therefore, the portrayal of people of colour in popular culture where a neoliberal socioeconomic system exerts influence needs to be redefined in ways acknowledging that representation actively resists yet still functions inside that system. The process of (un)making identity in a disidentificatory fashion in popular culture and the functioning of popular culture and its subgenres under the hegemonic sociopolitical structures carry the same political strain of tactics and resistance. The formation of racial and political identity under these structures for subordinated people, therefore, becomes a tactic that needs to be performed by the participants of popular culture in specific ways to ensure its prolonged ability to radicalize the field of cultural production.

Sturt Hall, remarking on the influence of hegemonic structures on popular culture and its means of subversion/diversion writes,

as popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture, so it is at the same time the scene, par excellence, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology—the circuits of power and capital. It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur. It is rooted in popular experience and available for expropriation at one and the same time. (“What is This” 258-259)

Hall’s framing of this contradiction and Muñoz’s theorization of disidentificatory practice in identity formation inform my analysis of the two works this thesis focuses on.

The creators<sup>4</sup> of the superhero comic (and the later adapted Disney+ show) *Ms. Marvel* and the Netflix show *Bridgerton* are certainly aware of the “circuits of power capital” (Hall 259), but what they have created is in many ways tactical. The popular subgenres of superhero comics and Regency romance and the centring of stories of people of colour in these works enable both entities to work “on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 11). Therefore, the creators working within the genres, the characters of colour in these works, and the fans who appropriate and transform these works engage in tactics. Hence, there is great value to be found in analyzing superhero comics and popular romance, as the study of genres and the products of the genres shed light onto the conversations around race, representation, fan culture, neoliberalism, and imperialism. This thesis is grounded in the knowledge that analyzing potential tactics that are used within a genre is central to our understanding of the production of art in a neoliberal and imperialist society.<sup>5</sup> While the racially aware and class-conscious analysis of popular culture and its subsets has been imperative in the scholarly analysis of popular art for years, this thesis pays close attention to two works that I argue are employing the politics of tactics and disidentification. Therefore, the “genre worlds” of the texts—superhero comics and historical romance—need closer introspection.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I use the plural noun creators, to acknowledge the writers and artists of the comic as well as the directors, screenwriters and other members of the crew of the show who contribute creatively to the creation of the characters. This is also true for the show *Bridgerton*. It is a usage I will be consistent at throughout this thesis.

<sup>5</sup> There are different methods of tactics deployment/agents of tactics in the works under consideration. In the *Ms. Marvel* comic and show, it is the characters and the creators who deploy tactics, while in *Bridgerton* it is the characters and the fandom.

<sup>6</sup> I challenge the categorisation of *Bridgerton* as historical romance, later in the chapter, but for the sake of this argument, it can be called historical romance. The term “genre worlds” is expanded as a theoretical approach to genre by Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins. I will be defining the term explicitly shortly.

### **Genre, tactics, and disidentification**

There are a few understandings of popular genres that take the influence of industry, audience, fandom, race, and genre capital into consideration in their formulation. Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins offer the idea of "genre worlds" with a focus on popular romances—a focus that can be extended to “popular fiction more broadly” (997) as they insist. They define a genre world as a "sector of publishing industry, a social formation, and a body of texts" (997). The framework of the genre world proposes that "it is attuned to...[the] permeable boundary between small and large publishing houses" (997). Building on Howard S. Becker’s conceptualization of genre fiction, Fletcher, Driscoll, and Wilkins describes genre world as “the collective activity that goes into the creation and circulation of genre texts, and is particularly focused on the communities, collaborations, and industrial pressures that drive and are driven by the processes of these socio-artistic formation” (998). My analysis of *Ms. Marvel* and *Bridgerton* and the respective genres is informed by the awareness of this collaboration of social and artistic formations. The recent changes in the popular romance genre in the Global North are owing to multiple factors, namely, the more inclusive representation in characterization, bigger publishing houses promoting romances, wide-reaching online streaming shows, and audience reflections shared on social media through BookTok, YouTube, and other means. These changes ask scholars to conduct a closer reflective analysis of the genre and its creative products and to consider the creative and financial choices of people in the industry who make this happen.

The involvement of fandom in the discourse of genre has been recognized by critics such as Rukmini Pande, Lori Morimoto, and Matt Hills. Fandom functions as an extended element of the industry. It works to create a system of cultural production that evaluates the influence of the

text itself, the connection to industry, and the connection to society. It is quite common among fan communities to rewrite /reiterate/reproduce/emphasize the story's basic plot (either through fan fiction or art or by means of creating something similar) by regimentation according to the level of acceptance in the fan community. They are undoubtedly involved in this process of cultural reproduction and are more attuned to the needs of the community. This expansive approach to genre is crucial in the evolution and even the reconceptualization of a genre that has always been closely associated with whiteness and other fields of cultural production which have been deemed superior because of the capitalist and imperialist influence of the Global North. Helen Young's observation about the fantasy genre in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* is useful when thinking through the whiteness of popular genres. She argues that "using a genre convention which inscribes whiteness into a creative work or imagined world is as much about race as rejecting or subverting the same convention" (6). Although Young deliberates on the fantasy genre, the arguments can be applied to popular fiction more generally in an imperial and neoliberal world.

The racially conscious development of the science fiction genre is mapped in André M. Carrington's analysis of Blackness within speculative literature. He argues that theorizing the Blackness in the genre is "instrumental to the rapprochement between critical approaches to Blackness and speculative fiction" (28). Creators and fans are actively involved in the process of navigating representation and genre to come to a point of agreement where they both discern the best methods for the deployment of tactics. The yield from the combination of informed representation and genre can be anything from the establishment of disidentification as an accessible identity-making process for marginalized people, to tweaking genre convention in a way that makes racebending in popular shows economically profitable, or to the creation of a

Pakistani-American teenager as the next big American superhero. The representational politics in genre tend to work inside the neoliberal logic, sometimes profiting from it, sometimes resisting it. My choice of bringing these two works together was intentional as they represent South Asian womanhood and diaspora in two parts of the world, in two different eras. One party's roots are in Pakistan, an easily locatable (and targeted) cultural identity, time period, and geographical location, while the other is portrayed with very ambiguous points of reference, nevertheless belonging to India, a century before the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

Applying genre world convention into the analysis makes it clear that the genre texts of popular fiction "function transnationally" (Fletcher et al. 1006). The transnational purview of *Ms. Marvel* and *Bridgerton* is not an accident; rather, it is the most obvious mode of action for the creators of the works, which would allow their characters to attempt subversion. The whiteness of the romance genre and the neoliberal values of the Marvel Cinematic Universe are held in parallel and in defiance to the racebending of the characters and the characterization of a revisionary superhero. Carrington, by closely analyzing the tactics both *inside* (characterization, deliberate plot decisions, employment of tactics) and *outside* of the genre (market economy, production and consumption of art that is subversive), asserts that "*genre* never denotes a medium-specific mode of analysis" but rather it "refers to the ways in which meaning making takes place on" and across media. He insists that "genre is not a property intrinsic to a text ... but a condition *and a product* of interpretation" (7). The meanings of the texts I consider are made and remade by the creators and fandom in this neoliberal economy where popular culture can be both subversive and conservative at the same time.

Saidiya Hartman's approach to archival ethnography has deeply informed this thesis. She forges a path through the archives, considering the stories as a form of reparation by reproducing

lives of enslaved people who were systematically not included in the documentation of history, or when they were, were wronged. Her goal, as she lays out in “Venus in Two Acts,” is to “redres[s] the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved” (3). The extension of the tendency of the era of slavery is still present in the neoliberal world order where people are reduced to the capitalist yield from their labour. The imperialist logic manifests through different socioeconomic methods and retains its quality of being unimaginably cruel. When the North American conception of a superhero is revised or when people of colour find a place in Georgian romance (a part of the history that existed but was systemically removed and forgotten), an act of redressing occurs. Therefore, negotiating the nuances of cultural production through genre, and specifically two works that make space for both identification and disidentification, then becomes a process of “advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities) in fashioning a narrative” (Hartman 11).

Hartman’s practices are intricately connected to the material history of North America. I borrow her critical insights and attempt to apply them to the works under consideration. I want to underline that I revere the wisdom Hartman brings in conversations around slavery. But, since the works I’m considering do not engage with slavery explicitly, I do not attempt to extract parts of her argument and apply them to my findings. Rather, I’m informed by Hartman’s understanding of the capitalist interests that made slavery legal, and I follow that piece of information in a neoliberal economic context. In this thesis, I also do not go into the possibilities that would open up if I were to consider the material history associated with the works, but that is in itself a project that is worth paying attention to. Hartman uses the term *critical fabulation* to

describe her writing practice where she “strain[s] against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and at the same time, enact[s] the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration” (11). The analogical similarity between this writing practice, the history of politics of superhero comics, and the characterization of the revisionary superhero Ms. Marvel is remarkably strong and the principle that forms the foundations of these factors is quite complementary. Similarly, the relationship between white heteronormative culture and the romance genre is contested with the racebending casting in *Bridgerton*.

The employment of tactics for the genre and the characterization of Ms. Marvel as a Pakistani-American teenage superhero from the MCU is similar to the racial inclusion in *Bridgerton* for these works operate within the hegemonic strategies of the dominant social, economic, and racial structures of North America without taking over in their entirety, as argued by de Certeau. The involvement of the fandom and their semiotic reproductions play a role in accentuating the tactics used within the genre by democratizing readership. The observations I have made about the tactics of the genres and the works discussed in this thesis visibly exist on the peripheries of the practice of critical fabulation because the arduous task of obtaining reparations that Hartman is proposing has not been achieved through the works. The creators of *Bridgerton* and *Ms. Marvel* may not have intended to do that. Nevertheless, it is a start, and a promising one at that.

## **Chapter breakdown**

Chapter One, “‘Kicking butt in giant wedge heels’: Kamala Khan’s Anti-neoliberal Revisionary Superhero Activism in *Ms. Marvel*,” begins the thesis by examining how the

characterization of a Pakistani-American teenage superhero in a post-9/11 United States of America functions as revisionary superhero. While presented by the Marvel Cinematic Universe, I argue that the comic and the show have political interests lying elsewhere. To be able to place Kamala Khan as the new and upcoming superhero of the MCU, the creators of both the comic and the show had to “displace the received or authorised account” (Hartman 11) of the accepted characterization of North American superheroes, which habitually centres on whiteness, imperialism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy.

Chapter Two, ““Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field’: Post-colonialism, Fandom, and the Cultural Iconography of Kamala Khan in Disney+’s *Ms. Marvel*” builds on the analysis of the character and forms a response to the much-discussed racial questions pertaining to Kamala Khan in both the comic and the adaptation. This chapter moves to the Disney+ television miniseries adaptation of the comic as it considerably changes the plot by adding new superhuman abilities to Kamala Khan, introducing new characters, and including the sociopolitical context of the partition of India and Pakistan before the countries gained independence. I argue that similar to the revisionary nature of the superhero in the comics, the introduction of a new milieu and characters provides the show’s creators with a way to escape the trope of personal trauma—a trope that significantly influences the characterization of traditional superheroes.

Chapter Three, “Disidentification, Representation, and Imperialism: Reading Netflix’s *Bridgerton* as Speculative Romance,” examines the whiteness of the Romance genre and reads it against the second season of the show *Bridgerton*. I closely observe the racebending in the show to suggest that the perceived notion that the show belongs to historical romance is contestable, for it exhibits the characteristics of what I call a *speculative* romance. Scrutinizing the imperial

history of Britain in the show with critical perspectives borrowed from Sara Ahmed, Muñoz, and Hartman, I contend that, while racebending is purported to be a central attraction of the show, the creators ineluctably discuss the Brownness of the Sharma sisters in the private realm and confine it to the imperial tendencies of the romance genre tradition.

I conclude the thesis by analyzing the similarities and differences between the two works and note that this study of South Asian representation in North American popular culture is important for two reasons: one, the neoliberal and imperialist machinery is questioned and resisted tactically every day. Sometimes, it is by individuals tweeting in response to their favourite show, and, sometimes, it is by the licensed transgression of the artist. I think it is important that we remind ourselves of this fact every now and then to hold on to the semblance of hope in a seemingly dark world. Reason number two developed in relation to my positionality. I'm a South Indian, Malayali, cis woman who, after immigrating to Canada for higher education in English, found herself questioning everything she knew about class, race, and life. My lived experience as a Marxist-Leninist has always shaped my approach toward life and the way I understand the texts I encounter. In order for people like me to dissect the cultural reproductions and cultural economy associated with works like *Ms. Marvel* and *Bridgerton* and to negotiate a space within popular culture, there needs to be careful, informed, and respectful artistic recreations of lives similar to mine or the ones I've known growing up. My identity plays a crucial role in how I understand art, but that bias is central to the existence of every being. The disidentificatory tactics that are at the core of these works, the characters, and the conversations emerging from that disidentification owe a lot to their skilfully constructed identities in a hegemonic social system that dominates the Western psyche. To make these conversations

happen, I need to have access to a variety of stories, lives, and subjectivities. *Ms. Marvel* and *Bridgerton* offer that in many ways, despite their flaws.

## Chapter One

### **“Kicking butt in giant wedge heels”: Kamala Khan’s anti-neoliberal superhero activism in**

#### *Ms. Marvel.*

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)—producer of mass-market culture and promoter of neoliberalism—has been creating superhero characters that engage with the values of the company and the political history of the United States for years now. Monica Flegel and Judith Leggatt, in *Superhero Culture Wars: Politics, Marketing, and Social Justice in Marvel Comics*, analyze the intricate relationship between capitalism, consumption, and fan culture by examining the history of the MCU as a corporate entity and participant in American neoliberalism. They argue that the relationship between the MCU and their creative choices are influenced by the economy. A class-conscious lens is crucial in understanding any MCU superhero, for most of them spend their non-superhero persona among the masses. Some hide their superhuman abilities, and some don't. Either way, these interactions—both superhero and non-superhero—have in common that the economy of the respective timeline these characters belong to fundamentally decides their behaviour and sometimes even constructs their superhero abilities.

There are a few examples of the MCU's beloved superheroes that I will be referring to frequently to establish the relationship between the capitalist logics of the popular culture industry and superhero characters. The non-superhero persona of Iron Man is a “good” billionaire, quintessentially capitalist, standing in favour of individualism and philanthropy, and served with a side of dry humour. Many Marvel superheroes share all or some of these values; Captain America is another example—his costume is stars and stripes, inspired by the American flag. The continued love for and widening readership of these characters poses questions about the influence North American popular culture has and the attention it has enjoyed—both

domestically and globally. It is apparent that a world order that favours capitalism and imperialism allows America to access a greater deal of creative authority in popular culture compared to other countries. This global appeal of North American popular culture permits children in India to wear Spiderman's costume without sharing any of the sociocultural or political history with the character. With the expansion of social media and the persistence of the capitalist logic, Western popular culture has significantly contributed to globalization.

While we have known all these facts for a long while, there needs to be a closer inspection into the relationship between labour, economy, and the cultural history of white neutrality that has insisted on racial and class divisions by portraying the socio-political space marked as objectively white. The patriotic and neoliberal politics of the characters, therefore, translate as the natural political position the United States of America would assume. The acceptance gained by the superhero characters, in places like the Global South, inadvertently implies an acceptance of white neutrality. Through the well-known popular culture characters, whiteness assumes a racially superior position. Therefore, characters beyond this description become the Other.

The hyper-patriotic, consumerist image of America has only intensified over the years, and that material reality translates into art. Many consumers are nostalgic for a "great America" that never existed. The MCU's creative decisions have been in favour of this politics fuelled by capitalist logic. It has been influenced by the expansion of the neoliberal economic policies from the late 1970s to a sociocultural way of life that puts "individual self-responsibility, entrepreneurial action, and the maximization of human capital" (9) first. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith's analysis of "the four phases of neoliberalism" (8) can function as a structure for analyzing literary choices made by corporations. Huels and Smith introduce the

economic, political, sociocultural, and ontological phases to map the historical expansion of neoliberalism into the global cultural sphere. It is interesting to analyse *Ms. Marvel* following their argument that the sociocultural phase subjects "literature and other forms of art, alongside community, education, romance, entertainment, health, technology, law, and nature, to a rigorous economic calculus committed to efficient profit maximization" (Huels and Smith 8). Ms. Marvel's famous predecessors can be observed to be following this economic calculation. I enjoy watching and reading the stories of Iron Man and Captain America but recognize that the superhuman abilities of these individuals needs to be more nuanced. These characters represent the neoliberal tenets of privatization and the considerations of human labour as dispensable and as the mere source for generating capital. Helen Jun in *Race for Citizenship* points out this as an "often repeated Americanness" (125) and argues that "neoliberalism presents the ideal conditions for global capitalism as the prerequisite for human freedom and liberation, making capitalist economic principles the basis for utopic social abstractions" which "points to a particular kind of reorientation to and naturalized resentment of the state that is constituted by a neoliberal social order" (125). Therefore, recognizing that the characterizations are tied to the material labour history of the country is essential in better understanding the creative choices of the MCU.

The focus of this chapter, G. Willow Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* (2014-2016), edited by Sana Amanat,<sup>7</sup> was released in a post-9/11 United States of America to a readership where the stories

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<sup>7</sup> Since the racial identities of the characters are discussed in detail in this thesis, it is also important to acknowledge the racial identity of the creators of the works since it has influenced its creation. A White Muslim, Wilson in an interview, stresses "That there was no margin for error because [Ms. Marvel] was going to be under such close scrutiny and I think it was very important for me—and I know it was for Sana [Amanat] and Adrian [Alphona] as well—for the series to feel very authentic. Something that felt very authentic [about the Pakistani-American Muslim experience] and I think we would not have been able to get there if there were not two Muslim women involved. I think it could not have happened in the way it happened without Sana." Along with Sana Amanat, a Pakistani-American Muslim, Wilson is able to create a Muslim identity for their character that is well rounded and consciously political. The artists involved in the creation of *Ms. Marvel* include Ian Herring, Takeshi Miyazawa, Nico Leon, Jow Caramagna, Cliff Chiang, David Lopez, Justin Ponsor, Jamie McKelvie, Matthew Wilson, Kris Anka, Elmo Bondoc, Jacob Wyatt, and Marguerite Sauvage.

of Iron Man and Captain America are loved and idolized.<sup>8</sup> Following Stuart Hall's insistence on "cultural identities [as] points of identification" ("Cultural Identity" 72), much of the existing scholarship on *Ms. Marvel* demonstrates the significance of the portrayal of the cultural and religious identity of the character in the MCU. Kamala Khan's exploration of the question of cultural assimilation (Kent); the "disidentification" that allows her to carve out a space for marginalized individuals (Landis 63); her transnational identity that arises from "a dynamic oscillation between a location in the American literary ecology and an orientation to globalised form of Islamic culture" (Mahmutovic 1), and her character's representation of "a departure from the majority of Muslim comics characters who are cast as villains, terrorists, and mad scientists" (Arjana xxv) have all been well explored. Scholarly analysis of Kamala's status as a Marvel fan that "puts her in a subordinate position to the established heroes, thus reassuring older fans that Kamala is not a threat" (Flegel and Leggatt 78) and her "violent girlhood" (Fabricius 910) that represents her as both "a figure of independent Muslima empowerment, and a reaction to stereotypes of Muslims" (Baldanzi and Rashid x-xi) have offered racial and religious intersectional lenses that closely look at the characterisation of Ms. Marvel. I will consider these analyses in more detail in my study of the characterization of Kamala in the Disney+ show in the next chapter.

However, there is a surprising gap in scholarly analysis of *Ms. Marvel* (the comic) that I seek to address by reading the comic and the Disney+ TV adaptation (in the second chapter) through an intersectional race and class-conscious lens to see how Kamala Khan's

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8 "The aftermath transformed the attacks of 11 September 2001 into something more than a mere historical event: the impact of 9/11 came to be experienced as the kind of epochal singularity that resulted in a sense of historical rupture. In the decade that followed, the term "post-9/11" became a form of shorthand for an indicator of a politics, an ideology, and a Western culture that has redefined itself in terms of geopolitical power and identity. As this new form of cultural and political discourse took shape, American popular culture saw the emergence of narratives and genres that reflected these shifts" (Hassler-Forest 3).

characterisation is in conversation with the neoliberal representation of race and class. Sarah Gibbons, in “‘I don’t exactly have quiet, pretty powers’: Flexibility and Alterity in *Ms. Marvel*,” has provided invaluable insight into Kamala’s powers by analysing them in the social context of neoliberal ideals that commodify individuals. She argues that the comic “uses Kamala’s nonconforming body, which changes shape from panel to panel and sometimes extends beyond their confines, as a means of exploring social, political, and economic issues” (452). By closely looking at Kamala’s nonconforming body, she identifies that the superhero’s “body becomes a place where the forces of neoliberalism are negotiated, and Kamala’s freaked and Othered flexible body becomes a symbol of resistance to conformity” (460). Like Gibbons, I’m interested in the characterisation of Kamala as a superhero fighting neoliberal ideals of human capital and privatization. I read Kamala as a revisionary superhero who slays villains that represent neoliberal politics, while being part of the MCU. I contend that *Ms. Marvel* is purposefully written as anti-neoliberal and her placement in the MCU is a critical exercise in resistance from the inside—as she is written as attempting to rebuild the system from within. The tactics employed by Wilson and the creators of the comic and the show deserve special critical focus since the “tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place” (de Certeau xix) without taking over the implied neoliberal politics of the MCU. *Ms. Marvel*’s class, race, and religion add to her unique positioning as a revisionary superhero who is also part of the Avengers.

### Comics, culture, and superhero politics

Comics,<sup>9</sup> for creators and readers, have functioned as a form of dissidence against the rigid rules of society. The word dissidence carries a political strain, which I think is useful for understanding the medium. The Pulitzer Prize winning, Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* functions as the core of political comics and comics studies because of its content and delivery. Holocaust literature is an important part of our history, and as Daniel Worden in "The Politics of Comics: Popular Modernism, Abstraction, and Experimentation" writes, *Maus* is "the first... comic to be included in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*" (60). Many consider *Maus* to be the masterpiece in comics history. These praises are rooted in recognizing the violent antisemitic oppression faced by the Jewish community and the literary resistance against it. *Maus* was not just a retelling of the lived reality of Spiegelman's father but, rather, an attempt at approaching history with empathy and collective power. He retells a version of continued resistance in the hope of a future devoid of hatred. While the political intervention of *Maus* is akin to other Holocaust literature, what the graphic novel does differently is tap into the medium's culturally regarded image as an accessible form. The abridged comics versions of Shakespeare plays that are available in children's libraries; the internet's favourite artist Good Tickle Brain,<sup>10</sup> who creates stick figure comics based on Shakespeare plays; the graphic guides introducing philosophers by Chris Horrocks; and the comic strips by Corey Mohler called Existential Comics that do the rounds on X every now and then are all examples for how the

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<sup>9</sup> Scott McCloud defines the term comics as "juxtaposed pictorial or other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (20). With the "seeds of expressionism and synaesthetics" (McCloud 209) that is embedded in the medium, comics becomes available to a wide readership.  
<sup>10</sup> The one-page summary of Romeo and Juliet is hilarious.

medium has been used in ways that are accessible to readers from every age and cultural and language background.<sup>11</sup>

The content of earlier superhero comics is also grounded in its political and historical context. For example, the first ever Superman comic, published in 1938, is influenced by the years following World War I and leading up to World War II and the fact that the creators of the comic—Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster— were from Jewish, immigrant families. Worden writes,

[The] brand of social commentary has, perhaps, more in common with the proletarian novel of the 1930s than scholars have recognized, and a wide-ranging overhaul of literary studies to incorporate comics might better situate comics as vehicles for social and political allegory, in line with other classic works of literature that address similar themes in more overtly literary modes. (Worden 63)

While destroying the enemy, superheroes also express very human emotions like anger, love, and sadness, connecting with the readership on an emotional level. Therefore, the element of dissidence in comics speaks to the common reader's everyday struggles and reflects the importance of a creative outlet for political dissent. What Flegel and Leggatt call "complicated authorship" is this very influence the readership of comics has over the medium. It is the same influence of readership and fan culture I'm interested in exploring, by studying the Pakistani-American teenager Kamala Khan and her superhero persona, Ms. Marvel.

Alan Moore's fallout with Detective Comics (DC) is a good example that establishes the relationship between readers and creators/authors of comics in a political context. Moore's politics in works like *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* are anti-capitalist and anti-fascist. In multiple interviews, he has also acknowledged his love for the comics medium, and its potential

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<sup>11</sup> "The History of Philosophy from the Perspective of Chicken Enchiladas" is a famous comic that is both funny and thought-provoking.

for great cultural influence. Flegel and Leggatt interpret Moore's political understanding of comics and write, "the comics medium provides a space to represent the desires of the powerless and the disadvantaged in society, to puncture the respectability of the wealthy, and to revel in power fantasies that redress injustice against the oppressed" (20). However, quoting Moore, Flegel and Leggatt also write that he calls to attention the "taming influence of the remunerative market" (Moore qtd. In Flegel and Leggatt 20) as observed in comics. Flegel and Leggatt, agreeing with Moore's observation, argue that the influence of the market causes comics to be absolved of its subversive potential and write that being tamed "is a common trajectory for many forms of popular culture when they are absorbed into corporate-owned mass production" (20). In all the versions and variations of the story of Superman, Clark Kent was raised in a farming community after he was sent to Earth as an alien child, and he worked as a journalist. These two elements are the foundation of Superman's identity. However, according to Moore, DC's co-option of the character caused the absorption of the character into the capitalist values of American society. He argues that Superman underwent "a moral and political makeover to become a bastion of authority, carefully trimmed of any prickly or non-conformist attitudes" (qtd. in Flegel and Leggat 21). Moore later had disagreements with DC, but his creative and political choices are telling of the potential of the medium he is so invested in. Moore's appeal for the comics medium primarily lies in the accessibility readers have to comics, compared to other forms of literature. This accessibility has allowed comics to be vehicles of political discussion, and superhero comics specifically have used superheroes in ways that represent the politics of creators and creative institutions.

### **Fe-Male, patriot pants, and neoliberalist superheroes of North America**

A consensus about superheroes among scholars in comics studies, writers, and artists comes down to essentially a few characteristics. Superheroes have complex or sometimes non-existent relationships with loved ones, especially parents; they are committed to justice as defined by the dominant ideology (Reynolds); and they are anti-egalitarian and constantly reinforce the status quo (Chiang). They are exceptional “individuals with extraordinary abilities [who] fight injustice and save humanity from villains, but are also plagued by their own demons or early trauma” (Rifkind and Christopher 7). They also “have frequently been taken to epitomize the dominant ideological discourses of their respective eras” (Arjana 158). Chris Gavalier in *Superhero Comics* expands the understanding of superheroes and the superhero comic genre by looking at the “tradition of superheroes in superhero comics” (1), while acknowledging and accepting Peter Coogan’s definition of superhero:

A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. (qtd in Gavalier 1)

This often-quoted definition of superheroes functions as a basic structure from which many other definitions have evolved, sometimes adding and sometimes removing from Coogan’s understanding.

Geoff Klock, in *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, extensively analyses the history of superhero comics theoretically to argue that the transition of superhero comics from fantasy to literature—what he calls “the revisionary superhero narrative” (3)—happens after 1980 during “third movement of superhero comics” (2). These definitions of superheroes so far apply largely to the North American male superhero characters. I hesitate to pose this as a racially uninformed understanding, but I want to point at the gaps in calibrating a universal definition for superheroes because a disturbing majority of the famous superheroes follow certain models. These critics have merely pointed out the shape of the moulds into which these superhero waxes are poured, and they happen to be tied into the socioeconomic and political conditions that frame their creation.

By offering an intersectional, class, and race-conscious approach to the understanding of superhero and superhero comics by analysing *Ms. Marvel*, I’m interested in discussing how Wilson and Amanat understood and utilized the potential of the medium and used it as a political tool. De Certeau argues that central to the operational models of popular culture are two types of everyday practices—strategies which are a function of power, and tactics, the response to the power. According to him, “political, economic and scientific rationality has been constructed on [a] strategic model” (*Practice* xix) where it becomes the “calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power ... can be isolated from an ‘environment’” (xix). Since here, strategy is power exercised by large organizations, as de Certeau mentions, tactics are ways through which this power can be subverted and resisted from within. He asserts, “a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentally, without taking over in its entirety, without being able to keep at a distance ... tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized” (xix). The way he complicates these ideas on power and social

structure are useful in thinking about *Ms. Marvel*. Wilson and Amanat were very intentional about Kamala Khan's racial and religious identity as well as her placement as an MCU fan. In an interview with *The Vulture*, Wilson talked about the decision to not have Kamala wear a headscarf "simply because the majority of American Muslim women don't cover their hair" (n.p.). Similarly, Kamala's portrayal as a superfan was a deliberate choice by the creators as her Muslim identity and her geekdom find parallels in Muslims in North America, as observed by Wilson. She identifies this as the "outsider culture" and asserts that "when you're growing up as a minority and you feel somewhat alienated from the mainstream, you're going to seek out other people who feel that way" (n.p.). Thus, Wilson intentionally steers away from the stereotypes associated with people of colour and makes it clear that "I wanted her to be fleshed out and have a real personality, rather than being a model minority" (n.p.).

The parallels between Wilson and Amanat publishing Kamala Khan's characters through the MCU and de Certeau's concepts of the structures of power, represented through strategy and tactics, thus become apparent. De Certeau's argument that popular culture effectively subverts the order of things exploited by dominating powers is relevant to understanding what Wilson and Amanat are doing with their character. By creating Kamala, a revised American superhero, the writers insert themselves and the population they represent into the popular cultural memory of North America. This exists in sharp contrast to the MCU's politics as observed through the majority of their comics, movies, and superhero characters. MCU's *strategy*, with regard to the politics of neoliberalism and patriotism as discussed, functions complementarily. *Ms. Marvel* actively vocalizes disagreements with the politics and American superhero values of the corporation as we understand it, and the character development of Kamala symbolizes the tactics of disagreement on a larger political scale. Therefore, through *Ms. Marvel*, the creators seize the

opportunity for subversion—both political and cultural—and therefore the comic functions as a political dissent against the social and corporate conditions under which it was published.

By using the term "cultural economy," John Fiske has looked at this very concept by understanding the role of capital and fandom in this conversation. His theory is useful in understanding how readers use comics as a form of resistance. According to him, fandom is "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (30). The readers engage in the semiotic textual production of fandom,<sup>12</sup> in addition to them influencing the authors.<sup>13</sup> Comics fandoms bring people from different classes and cultural backgrounds together by sharing the interests of collecting comic books and attending comic-cons. The fandom resists bourgeois or high culture while simultaneously valuing the cultural taste they share by being in the comic fandom. While it is undeniable that Wilson is influenced by the political consciousness (and resistance) that emerged from post-9/11 political turmoil, academic discourses, and her personal beliefs, the acceptance Kamala's character received says a lot about the readership. Along with the socio-political conditions, the diversity of the MCU fandom and a consensus about the need for more diverse characters expressed mainly through social media must have influenced the creators in constructing Kamala's character in a racially nuanced and culturally specific way.

This is where Moore's claim about the subversive nature of comics and Fiske's ideas of the cultural economy of fandom will be challenged. There is partial relevance to both these

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<sup>12</sup> Fan art and fan fiction.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson in an interview at Burn it All Down talks about how her intentional decision of making Ms. Marvel a superfan in the comics comes from the engagement she has had within the Marvel fandom, as a writer and a fan. She says, "We're all dreaming. [laughs] And it's nice when we can dream together. And that's really what fandom means" (n.p) when talking about the vulnerabilities of being in a fandom and how that shapes creative choices.

claims regarding Kamala's story. However, this character exists in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and shares screen and gutter spaces with both Iron Man and Captain Marvel. Any cultural significance Kamala's character has is tied to other values promoted by the MCU's white superheroes. In other words, Kamala's politics do not exist in a vacuum. The definitions of superheroes I have seen so far have many elements in common—like tension with family, identity crisis, etc. Kamala certainly possesses some or many of these characteristics but in a culturally specific way. Therefore, understanding Kamala's character involves re-interpreting the superhero definitions, and I would like to begin that by proposing that Kamala's character challenges the established definitions of superheroes in a value system influenced by American neoliberalism.

### **Ms. Marvel —A superhero reinvention in neoliberal society**

The Khan family's class positioning is not made explicit in the comics. However, there are signs to show that they belong to a middle-income family. The family resides at Grove St., New Jersey, and they seem to live comfortably. The middle-class life Kamala's family is leading is probably precarious, considering the reference point we have of Jersey City after 2020 and its economic conditions.<sup>14</sup> The first peek readers get into Kamala's house is through a five-panel page in Volume 1 *No Normal* that begins with her mother, Muneeba, calling Kamala to come downstairs and have dinner with the family. Muneeba stands at the door of Kamala's room with a ladle in her hand, making sure Kamala comes downstairs with her. Kamala's bedroom is filled with books, clothes, and a box full of miscellaneous things. From her upstairs bedroom, Kamala

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<sup>14</sup> According to a 2021 Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, in collaboration with the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey, 90% of New Jerseyans are worried about the cost of housing in the state, with 55% considering it a “very serious” problem and another 35% saying it is “somewhat serious.”

comes down to the dining table where Kamala's father, Yusuf, is reading the newspaper and Kamala's brother, Amir, is praying before dinner. Artists Sara Pichelli and Justin Ponsor spend three pages and fourteen panels with action-to-action transitions following the conversation around the dining table. This deliberately slows down the reader's speed and guides them through the conversation in the Khan household. It establishes Kamala's character as a middle-class American teenager, but also shares with the reader the politics of the comic and makes it clear that the creators will talk about Muslim identity, race, and class throughout the comic.

As the family gathers around the dining table, sharing a rice dish, Amir and Yusuf talk about Amir's lack of job. Amir, when asked to essentially pray less and focus on finding a job, replies, "Money earned from a profession that offends Allah has no merit. I refuse to profit from **usury**...unlike **some** people" (Wilson et al., *No Normal* issue 1). This snarky remark is directed towards Yusuf, who is eating the dinner in formal attire. It is possible that he came back from work right before dinner and did not bother to change his white-collar work clothes, but it would not be a stretch to say that eating dinner together as a family for Yusuf is an event that he associates with class. A formal dinner is a part of the American dream he and Muneeba have been chasing. His reply to Amir's comment, "My job at the bank allows you to sit here at home **contemplating eternity**, beta. If you don't like it, you can- -" is telling of the ideological differences between the two (Wilson et al., *No Normal*, issue 1).

Thus, the conversation between Amir and Yusuf at the beginning of the comic establishes the family's economic condition. They are a middle-class family and pursue the American dream by adhering to the nation's portrayal of "acceptable" Muslimness which is a product of the virulent anti-Muslim racism in the US since 9/11 (Kamala not wearing hijab and Yusuf working at the bank), while respecting their roots and culture. The family, especially Amir, is religious

and embraces the religious identity. Kamala and her friend Nakia attend the sermons by Sheikh Abdulla from a nearby mosque, and they live a marginally traditional life. They are also part of the neoliberal nation-state, which, like the colonial regime of representation, positions them as the other, as part of “a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation” (“Cultural Identity” 71). Hall writes that the colonial regime “has the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’” (71), which is true in the case of the Khan family. This precarity is not alien to immigrants. They move between classes, climbing up and down the social ladder, influenced by everything from geopolitics to personal life. Neoliberalism furthers this economic and racial precarity. Kamala is not part of the bourgeoisie historiography, but she is invariably connected to it because of the social position she belongs to. Therefore, the above-mentioned *positionings* determine Kamala's and her family's cultural and economic identity.

Kamala’s family’s class positioning is also demonstrated in Volume 3 *Crushed*, further establishing how that involuntarily shapes Kamala’s choices. This volume establishes Kamala’s identity as an Inhuman, and she meets Kamran, her relative and another Inhuman. Wilson keeps the readers engaged with Kamala’s best friend Bruno (who is Italian-American) and his unspoken love for Kamala, and introduces something similar to a triangle love story. The morning after Kamala and Kamran’s meeting, Amir and Kamala wait at the bus stop; Amir is on his way to a job interview and Kamala to school with Bruno. Takeshi Miyazawa’s art and Ian Herring’s colouring signal a mood change in the scene as Coles St. is drawn in cooler shades of teal rather than its usual warm, sunlit atmosphere. As they wait for the bus, Kamran enters the scene in his flashy car. Joe Caramanga’s lettering of the noise of the car is placed in a large, bold “VROOM!” on the top of the panel, under which a surprised Kamala, unimpressed Amir, and confused Bruno are standing. The deliberate contrast employed in the characterization of

Bruno's working-class background and Kamran's access to conspicuous consumption works to create and maintain a clear class divide.

Amir and Bruno are clearly bothered by Kamran's presence but for different reasons. Their conversations mainly revolve around how Bruno likes Kamala, and Amir tells Bruno, "My parents love you Bruno. You are like their adopted *gora* nephew or something...But my parents expect Kamala to marry someone like us. Because they don't want our heritage to die out" (Wilson et al., *Crushed* issue 14). This conversation reveals a lot more than a brotherly relationship and its warmth. For Kamala's parents, an alliance with an Italian-American is unthinkable because of their class and racial positioning. Mixed-race, inter-class relationships are not unfamiliar to people of diaspora, but the relationship entails a lot more complexity than is visible to the readership.

Going back to the conversation about jobs between Amir and Yusuf, Wilson juxtaposes the images of a model minority first-generation immigrant and a representative of the first natively born generation, as well as the cultural difference felt by the two. This difference is fueled by how two generations in diaspora perceive their relationship to homeland, their economic positioning, and, most importantly, their reorientation in response to the construction of race, religion, and gender in a neoliberal context. Helen Jun analyses the emergence of the model minority myth and neoliberalism, identifying that "key neoliberal concepts such as human capital, popularized by the Chicago school in the mid-1960s are absolutely foundational to the production of the Asian American as an ideally self-enterprising, self-regulating object" (128-129). Iyko Day in *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* reiterates Jun's analysis and adds that racial stereotypes "function as complimentary aspects of the same form of racialization, in which economic efficiency is the basis for exclusion

or assimilation” (7). The underlying racialized aspects of human capital perpetuates harmful stereotypes like the model minority myth. The cultural reaction to the neoliberal requirements of becoming a model minority is rightly observed by Vijay Prashad when he argues, “don’t get involved in radical activities, desis are often told, for those are not in keeping with desi traditions. Desi traditions are imagined to be dedicated hard work and cultural conservatism” (131). As established, there are multiple characteristics of Yusuf and Muneeba that makes one read their characters as performing according to the model minority myth. In an increasingly hostile and Islamophobic society, Yusuf considers Amir’s religious affiliations to be radical. He taunts Amir by saying that “no job is good enough for his holiness” (Wilson et al., *No Normal* issue 1) during their dinner table conversation. Amir fails to adhere to the balance Yusuf and Muneeba have perfected over the years where they are not overtly Muslim enough to disturb the social fabric, but they are Muslim enough to be considered hard working and ideal model minority subjects. To them, the remote possibility of Kamala and Bruno spending their future together is unthinkable not only because they value their culture and traditions as Amir believes, but also because they will stray past the invisible rules of social relationships that are allowed to the model minority if Kamala and Bruno choose to be together.

Yusuf also prepares Amir to be part of the American neoliberal system that he is so familiar with since being part of the “homogenized labor disposition” (Day 61) in a neoliberal society is the only way model minorities can achieve economic and social assimilation. Economic assimilation is yearned for and understanding that is essential, for it explains Yusuf and Muneeba’s choice of acquiring capital—a house—in downtown Jersey City. The parallels between the economic choices made by the characters within the comic and the economic reality

of model minority families overlap in such a way that both present to the reader a model neoliberal subject.

Dan Hassler-Forest in *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* provides historical context to the neoliberal tendencies of superheroes by analysing effects of 9/11 on the characterization of superheroes. Hassler-Forest traces this relationship between the political environment and popular culture, specifically superhero fiction and points out that “over fifty high-profile Hollywood films featuring superhero characters were released in the ten years from 2002 to 2012, generating global box office revenues of more than fifteen billion dollars in that period alone” (3). By ignoring systemic privilege in the neoliberal society, superheroes (Iron Man is again a convenient example) seek to prevent class mobility in the interest of social stability. So, the pattern of ultra-patriotic, American, and usually white superheroes is maintained by an industry that functions like a free market. The superstructure of American popular culture expands to a “constitutive social process” (Williams 19) as the separation from the base (9/11) becomes nearly impossible.<sup>15</sup> The mutually necessitated relationship between the free market structure of Hollywood, the creation of superhero characters that fit into the mould of the neoliberal market and audience expectations, therefore, work in tandem with the material history

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<sup>15</sup> In Marxist theory, the constitutive relationship between society, culture, arts, etc. became based on the history of labour and economy. And therefore, as Raymond Williams puts it, culture was made “dependent, secondary, 'superstructural': a realm of 'mere' ideas, beliefs, arts, customs, determined by the basic material history” (19). Williams criticizes this Marxist intervention for theoretically focusing on material history that considered labour and economy as the base. He proposes “making cultural history material [and] overcoming the dichotomy of 'society' and 'economy' ” (19). Williams’ proposal offers me a parallel to think through the creative choices of the MCU as primarily operating within the limits of the buying powers of the traditional American readers, and therefore, reemphasizing that the values of the company are patriotic, individualistic, and capitalistic. The exercise in finding parallels between the superheroes (superstructure) and capitalism (base) should not be read as a class reductionist approach but rather an attempt at understanding the patterns of superhero behaviour and how Kamala differs from those patterns. For the MCU and Kamala, 9/11 and the neoliberal policies of America operate as the basic material history, informing the portrayal of the superhero.

of the society that is shaped by major social events. By drawing parallels between these two events, Hassler-Forest makes it clear that

fantastical narratives such as the superhero genre offer models for interpreting our own world and its history that serve to systematically de-historicize the events to which they refer. The genre provides metaphorical representations of historical conflicts as part of a battle that takes classical narrative categories as its basic components and presents catastrophe as an attractive form of spectacle to be safely consumed by passive spectators. (17)

While this analysis pertains to the superhero genre specifically, I will be analysing similar relationships the genre has with historical events in Netflix's historical romance show *Bridgerton's* second season in Chapter Three. Here, *Ms. Marvel* adheres to the principles of this system of entertainment, supported by historical events in certain ways. For example, the first ever appearance of Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel was in a Captain Marvel comic in 2013. An imperial nation, reeling from the aftermath of 9/11 and remembering the incident in a militarized and imperially charged sociopolitical atmosphere exists in the background of the comic, but it does not peek into the surface of character conflicts explicitly. What the *Ms. Marvel* team does differently, however, is the *positioning* of villains in place of traditional neoliberal superheroes. The neoliberal values of the superhero are deliberately placed onto the villain in Volume 2, *Generation Why*, as Wilson takes the side of the teenagers who represent the population who are always first affected by the capitalist social structure.

Kamala's first opponent after she gets her powers is an evil scientist called Inventor who has children in captivity. As she gets to the bottom of the issue, Kamala understands that the "innocent kids" who are captives of the Inventor are there willingly. One of the kids tells

Kamala, "Human beings produce their own **electrical fields** and tons of usable body heat. Especially teenagers, because these are the years of **maximum growth** or something--that's what the Inventor says. If we could **harness** that energy, we wouldn't need to **kill** each other over oil and fry the planet and melt the ice caps and stuff" (Wilson et al., *Generation Why* issue 10).

Kamala is surprised at this turn of events, but by bonding with the trapped kids, she defeats the Inventor. The Inventor represents the neoliberal government as his intentions are presented in a way that reads progressive, liberal and, most importantly, responsible. Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism Is There No Alternative*, defines the term capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Inventor and his disciples believe that saving the world is only possible through sacrificing themselves to which Kamala asks, "Seriously? This is the only solution? We're supposed to roll over and become **human batteries** so the adults can max out their air conditioner and credit card without worrying about the **future?**" (Wilson et al., *Generation Why* issue 10). She raises an important question that is fundamental to understanding the neoliberal economic system. The assumed responsibility falls on individuals and not on corporations or countries that actually cause the issues. As capitalism assumes monetary value to culture, economy, and even the psyche, hope is frizzled; life after capitalism becomes a dangerous illusion, and the solution reveals itself as self-sacrifice and not revolution. Neoliberalism ensures the alienation of the children from their families, school, and daily life. Gibbons has noted that "the Othered body becomes a site of negotiation of and resistance to the pressures of neoliberalism" (454). This observation gains more relevance as the teenagers become the site of economic and cultural negotiations and extractions both metaphorically and literally. Kamala eventually manages to take down the Inventor with the help

of Wolverine. In a narrative box, shortly after her interaction with Wolverine, Kamala thinks, “WHY ARE KIDS LIKE ME ALWAYS BEING DRAFTED INTO WARS WE DIDN’T START” (Wilson et al., *Generation Why* issue 8). While this is specifically about the Inventor, there is a case to be made about the racial politics of the character in the context of neoliberal America. It is also impossible not to think about the war-mongering political history of the U.S. and the racialized context of its Islamophobia which has reflected in policies both at home and overseas.

Kamala’s first “fantasy hero team-up bracket” (Wilson et al., *Generation Why* issue 6), as mentioned, is with Wolverine in the second volume *Generation Why* where she is invested in helping the children who were trapped by the inventor. To Kamala, Wolverine is the manifestation of Sheikh Abdullah’s advice, “when the student is ready, the master will appear” (Wilson et al., *Generation Why* issue 6). The usage of this advice should be understood as the creators’ way of bridging the gap between her Muslim identity and her North American superhero persona. Therefore, this relationship between these two characters, especially considering that this is Kamala’s first encounter with a celebrity MCU character, needs to be complicated. Flegel and Leggatt contemplate this character placement based on Kamala’s part in the fan culture. There are multiple moments where the readers interact with Kamala Khan, the MCU fan. One of the first things she says when she meets Wolverine is that “My Wolverine-and-Storm-in-space fanfic was the third-most upvoted story on Freaking Awesome last month!” (Wilson et al., *Generation Why* issue 6). Examining the positioning of Kamala as an MCU fan, Flegel and Leggatt contend that

Kamala’s status as fan puts her in a subordinate position to the established heroes, thus reassuring older fans that Kamala is not a threat, and that she cares about these characters

as much as they do, even if they might like to think that they would be a little cooler in such an encounter. (78)

I would like to extend this conversation by bringing back the model minority myth that I have noticed in Kamala's family, specifically the non-threatening Muslim, a trope used very commonly in popular culture, mostly posited against an accepted version of a dangerous Muslim. In this case, the choices made considered the MCU's neoliberal politics and American values, thereby creating a superhero who will be loved by a readership making political and economic choices after 9/11. By bringing Muslim identity and geekdom together, Wilson and others ensure that Kamala is placed in the MCU franchise not as a diversity hire but rather as a person with a fleshed-out identity that gets featured through her superhero persona.

When she finally defeats the Inventor, he dies, collapsing along with the robot. When Kamala is told that the Inventor died, her response is, "I just-- I thought he'd go to jail and there'd be a trial and stuff. I didn't think-- I didn't want --" (Wilson et al., *Generation Why* issue 11). The relationship between vigilante heroism and the police is an intensely explored one. However, the role that the neoliberal state plays in shaping the policies of the state and its police in this relationship is often left out.<sup>16</sup> Kamala is ostensibly only worried about *killing* someone when she says this dialogue. However, in the neoliberal system, "the closest thing we have to ruling powers now are nebulous, unaccountable interests exercising corporate responsibility" (Fisher 63). Her concern borders on the traditional superheroes' interest in maintaining the status quo. Kamala, by believing in the system that is clearly failing her and her community, briefly becomes the neoliberal subject who believes that there are no alternatives to the extractive model of capitalist politics or that the alternatives available are not viable. So, while in ways she

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<sup>16</sup> Tension between Miles Morales and his father is also the tension between a black family and the system.

reverses the traditional superhero values, she is not comfortable being the vigilante who believes that they have nothing to lose, like V from *V for Vendetta*. As Angela Davis has noted, “the prison industrial complex” (16) is an integral part of the neoliberal economy. Since Capital is at the core of both the Inventor’s and the state’s interest, her expectation of the involvement of the state, would only benefit the system.

Kamala achieves this victory over the Inventor with the help of Wolverine and slowly but surely makes a place for herself among the Avengers. The integration of Ms. Marvel into the Avengers is an important reference point when thinking about how the tactics of the character are depicted in the MCU. The second and third pages of the fifth volume, *Super Famous*, combine into one spectacular spread panel by Takeshi Miyazawa. Against a vibrant yellow background, an action-packed group of superheroes and Kamala fill up two pages by bolting towards something—probably a supervillain. From the left side of the page, Falcon (Sam Wilson), a social worker turned superhero, occupies almost one-third of the page in a close-up shot, holding a Captain America mantle. Directly above Falcon is Iron Man, the beloved Tony Stark in his full armour conversing with Kamala in usual Tony charm. When Kamala, running with embiggened fists, says, “This is my favourite part!” Stark says, “Don’t lie. The post-fight **gyro-and-fries is your favorite part**” (Wilson et al., *Super Famous* 6), which suggests how close Kamala has gotten to the Avengers. Above Kamala, flies Vision, in the character’s original green and yellow costume. Next to Vision is the Spiderman of Miles Morales, who says, “I better not read about this on FreakingAwesome.com tomorrow, is all I’m saying” (Wilson et al., *Super Famous* issue 1). The placement of Morales instead of Peter Parker, even though it is likely that both characters have existed in the same universe (ultimate and 616), is interesting to me because the friendship between the two teenagers who are affected by the racial inequality of

the system in different ways is an area worth exploring. The other two characters in the big frame are Jane Foster, the female Thor,<sup>17</sup> and Sam Alexander, a member of the Nova Corps. So, this group includes an interesting mix of superheroes; while each must serve a specific mentoring requirement to Kamala, it is not made clear how each of them help her. There is also a cameo of Captain Marvel in the same volume. What is interesting, though, is that Kamala is among the superheroes who serve the larger neoliberal narratives of superheroes (Tony, Vision, Sam) as well as those who show tendencies—while probably as not strong as Kamala—to resist the so-called narrative (Wilson, Morales, Foster), and this blend of superheroes hints to the character development of Kamala.

This spread panel, both with its placement in the comic and with its content, stands out. This panel has no direct link with the events happening in the volume, except that Kamala's integration into the Avengers increased her popularity and therefore the dangers associated with her superhero persona. The fact that Wilson and others spend time establishing Kamala's camaraderie with other superheroes is a strong indication of the politics of tactics that is ingrained in the characterization of Ms. Marvel. The strategical power yielded by the Avengers (neoliberal, imperial, and racial) is tackled cleverly by the inclusion of characters like Ms. Marvel and the Miles Morales Spiderman. Both of these characters are modeling the disidentificatory practices of the fans of colour. The integration of these two characters in the Avengers along with superheroes who carry the encoded meaning (in Muñoz's words) of whiteness and heteronormativity is therefore a tactical representational act.

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<sup>17</sup> I do not approve the name *female* Thor

*Super Famous* is remarkably eventful both in the personal and the superhero life of Kamala.<sup>18</sup> As Ms. Marvel rises in fame, she becomes aware that she is risking her ability to switch between personal and professional lives. A big billboard is placed in her neighbourhood that reads: “**YOU CAN CLEAN UP JERSEY CITY HOPE YEARS DEVELOPMENT / RELOCATION ASSOCIATION**” (Wilson et al., *Super Famous* issue 1), with a picture of Ms. Marvel looking like a Brown version of Rosie the Riveter’s “We Can Do It” poster.<sup>19</sup> While Rosie the Riveter was used as a symbol during World War II, inviting women to the workforce and encouraging patriotic propaganda in the US, Kamala becomes the poster girl of the neoliberal landscaping of Jersey City. The big bold “YOU CAN” in the poster directly refers to the values of individualism. As Helene A. Shugart in *Heavy: the Obesity Crisis in Cultural Context*, puts it succinctly, “neoliberalism ascribes virtually all responsibility for personal and social welfare to the individual, which is further articulated as crucial to individual liberty under the auspices of choice” (10). The term “can” fundamentally relates to the concept of ability, which originates from the individual. In contrast, “may” indicates authorization, typically granted by external authorities such as societal norms or institutional structures. The difference between *YOU CAN* and *YOU MAY* is not even available to the residents because the occupation, while presented as a choice responsibility of the residents, is, in its essence, a command.

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<sup>18</sup> I will focus on the personal life from the show as there are many parallels, but Bruno is in a relationship with Micheala (a classmate), and Kamala is weirdly awkward around them; Amir gets married to a woman of colour who converts to Islam, and the conversations around their relationship in the Khan household is deliberately racist and uncomfortable. This changes in the show—I’m grateful.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, a poster of Captain Marvel in the Rosie the Riveter pose is also seen in Kamala’s bedroom in the comic. In Volume One, *No Normal*, she gets scolded by her parents for sneaking out in the night to go to Zoe’s party. She is upset that her parents don’t understand her but is also concerned about her newly unlocked powers. She looks at the poster of Captain Marvel, admires her embiggening powers and thinks, “Maybe I’m finally part of something **bigger**” (Wilson et al. *No Normal* issue 2). The wordplay on “big” suggests her understanding of her positioning as a person of colour who has unveiled powers that could change the world. Captain Marvel, like Rosie the Riveter, in this scene implies the values of second-wave feminism and capitalism that quite often are the entry points for many Gen Z into feminist activism. Therefore, doing something “big” for Kamala is rooted in (vigilante) activism.

Kamala confronts one of the project managers of the “downtown revitalization project” who doesn’t know that Kamala is Ms. Marvel, only to be turned down with “Ms. Marvel is an American icon! She belongs to **everybody**” (Wilson et al., *Super Famous* issue 1). While it is natural for superheroes to be living for everyone and maintaining a private life simultaneously, it is important to notice how Wilson places this age-old discussion of to whom do superheroes belong during a conversation about changes brought to a place by a neoliberal nation-state. The word *belong* is also loaded, for it means to be the *property* of something or someone. Does Kamala belong to everyone, including HYDRA, disguised as Hope Yards Developments, or does she only belong to herself, both as a superhero and a non-superhero? Nakia is visibly upset by this sell-out of Ms. Marvel and disapproves of it by saying, “This is so **typical**. Some up- and-coming hero parks herself in a majority-minority neighborhood, makes it **cool**, and then **sells out** to the first bloodsucking developer who wants to tear it all down to make **luxury condos**” (Wilson et al., *Super Famous* issue 1). Nakia calls out what Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson have brilliantly portrayed by leaning into the dark and satirical side of superheroes by creating the comic series *The Boys*. The relationship of superheroes with media and the supes celebrities’ market penetration is both neoliberal and ultra-nationalist. This relationship is presented to the consumer as a choice to which they should make sacrifices, and the benevolent superhero (whose identity is being commodified) parking themselves in a potential economic and housing crisis does not mitigate the issue. By mentioning the majority-minority community, Nakia hints at this reality of capitalist superheroes. Ms. Marvel can neither publicise her non-superhero identity to gain empathy and resist Nakia’s inference, nor compromise her values. Eventually, what HYDRA hopes for, is a neoliberalist system where “the practical role of the government is to facilitate the market; government intervention at any level—in the form of social services, or

with respect to regulation of industry—is represented as cultivating and enabling dependence” (A. Shugart 10). The downtown revitalization, therefore, is presented as the responsibility of the residents of the neighbourhood. Kamala, in an attempt to resist the Hope Yard securities charging at Radislav, a local grocery store owner, is faced with drones attacking both her and Radislav, and she remarks, “I don’t think this is a nice, **normal** blood-sucking corporation we’re dealing with” (Wilson et al., *Super Famous* issue 1). Kamala’s resistance against the corporate co-option, as Gibbons has rightly observed, “serves as an extended metaphor for how biopower in a neoliberal age enforces precarious flexibility and exerts control over individual lives” (460).

Wilson certainly puts it across by now that Kamala’s battle, compared to other superheroes, is different. Her goals are different. She resists ideologically, unlike her counterparts who are seen fighting evil villains. This is not to claim that Kamala is a hero and a representative of the working class, resisting neoliberal nation-state policies. She is the carrier of the encoded meaning (Muñoz 31) of tactical resistance against these structures. Therefore, her racial and class positioning certainly aids in the choices her character makes. Therefore, Ms. Marvel refuses become a sell-out. She works against the revitalization projects of HYDRA, stops the spread of nanotechnology that can reprogram the brains of New Jersey residents, saves Bruno from HYDRA's forced employment, and restores human behaviour to those who were previously affected by the company's attempts at wealth congregation. A series of events, all coded as a movement against the capitalist structure, defines Ms. Marvel's interest in superhero life.

HYDRA's history as an "authoritarian-subversive paramilitary terrorist organization bent on world domination" (n.p.) is an intriguing one:

During World War II, [Johann] Schmidt separated HYDRA from Nazi Germany to start his own conquest of the world... converting from occultism to draconian anti-freedom

principles... After its defeat at the hands of Captain America in 1945 and the subsequent disappearance of Johann Schmidt, HYDRA was secretly rebuilt inside S.H.I.E.L.D. by Schmidt's top scientist Arnim Zola, who was recruited into the agency during Operation Paperclip and also formed an alliance with the Soviet Union. (n.p.)

The recurring villain of Captain America, Dr. Faustus, is one of the representatives of HYDRA who picks a fight with Ms. Marvel in *Super Famous*. The history of HYDRA has many recognizable historical contexts—like any MCU political reference—but it is comical that an organization that began in Nazi Germany partners with the Soviet Union even though USSR fought against Nazi Germany during World War II. I argue that this detail is carefully placed in the description of the organization as it throws light onto the MCU's American exceptionalist, nationalist, and neoliberal politics, which are reflected through the superheroes. When Captain America is in a fight with HYDRA's representatives, he is protecting the MCU's political values.

In the curious case of *Ms. Marvel*, however, as it has been established, the creators go down a conflicting path. The villains represent the MCU's politics, and Kamala actively tries to work against the narrative that superheroes are neoliberal. In my opinion, this creates stronger villains. Wilson is holding a mirror against society by introducing characters that are evil and exist in a recognizable social context and challenging the readers to think beyond the American exceptionalist narratives of the MCU. Elements that make a good comic villain include personal loss (Sandman), greed and bloodthirst (Thanos), and psychotic behaviour (Green Goblin), but the villainy of Wilson's characters is not about their personal flaws, they are *systemic*. Here, the catastrophe caused by the villains is not romanticised and cannot be safely consumed by passive spectators; everyone is involved in this. Therefore, Kamala's intervention in the system as a

visible racial minority is then defying the model myth of minority and revolutionizing (and challenging) the definitions of traditional superheroes.

Ms. Marvel's revisionary characterisation as the American Muslim superhero taking down neoliberal entities is certainly a big step for the creators of the MCU, as it opens new windows for them to explore superhero alternatives. The definitions of superheroes that were considered at the beginning of this chapter are carefully unpacked and substituted with subaltern positionality<sup>20</sup> in Ms. Marvel's characterization. Kamala's positioning as a fan is fundamental to the understanding of the tactics of the character. De Certeau argues for remaining within the system "which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally" (109) to describe tactics in the context of colonization, from the perspective of the colonized. Kamala, by establishing her identity as a superfan, "diverted [the system] without leaving it" (de Certeau 109). The tactic of her character is further emphasized by the disidentificatory politics that her Muslim, marginalised identity to claim space within the MCU. This move added a lot more depth to the character who exists in the context of these neoliberal structures, not in isolation unlike other white and heteronormative superheroes are purported to be.

The way forward for the MCU is to accept the changes posed by characters like Kamala Khan and Miles Morales and engage actively in relevant political conversations. The superheroes need to be portrayed not as reinstating the status quo but rather as questioning its existence. I do

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<sup>20</sup> In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak describes the subaltern as those who are "cut- off from lines of social mobility" (439). The term subaltern was first used in the context of theory by Antonio Gramsci to describe the non-elite or subordinated social groups who are subjects to the hegemony of the ruling class. This group exists within a dominant class and does not have a political space. Similarly, Spivak's subaltern always stands in an ambiguous relation to power—subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity. Spivak argued in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* that the history of the colonized is muddled with imperialism and colonialism. Voices of the colonized that surface in the discourse on subalterns often originate from the colonialists. The subaltern is perceived from the perspective of colonizers, their resistance is understood in the language of imperialism.

not think these are radical moves for the MCU. After all, Miles Morales is the son of a Black police officer, and so are many other Spider-people across the multiverse. This should be the natural course of action for the MCU, and it needs to be spearheaded by writers and creators like Wilson and Amanat, who have lived experiences, making the characters all the more valuable. This opportunity for tactical subversion is explored very persuasively in the Disney + adaptation of the comic. The nuances of the post-colonial history and the present sociopolitical condition of Pakistan and its relationship with the US increases the opportunities for real conversations around South Asian representation in Western popular culture and the involvement of affective fandom.

## Chapter Two

### **“Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field”: Postcolonialism, fandom, and the cultural iconography of Kamala Khan in Disney+’s *Ms. Marvel***

As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, the existing scholarship on Ms. Marvel’s racial identity has offered a wide-ranging analysis from her disidentificatory portrayal (Landis) to her transnational identity (Mahmutovic) in a post-9/11 America (Flegel and Leggatt). The scholarly discourse around her identity mainly draws from her comic identity, and these analyses are influenced by the comic medium itself. My analysis of Kamala’s racial and religious identity is informed by the existing scholarship on Kamala’s characterization in the comics. Kamala’s portrayal addresses the narratives of history, class, and gender constructed according to the centrality of Western history and *man*. She is not the anti-egalitarian North American superhero who maintains the status quo, but she saves people. She is a superfan as well as a superhero in the comic. However, there has not been much scholarship on the Disney+ adaptation and how the creators of the show approach her religious, subaltern, gender, and national identity.

The show introduces more conflict (both personal and political) and bends time and space through its depiction of pre- and post-Independence Pakistan. In the show, the conflict of the partition and the trauma associated with the cultural and personal memory of partition is central to its construction of the characters. My analysis of the character’s trauma is heavily influenced by Dan Hassler-Forest’s work on the “traumatized superhero.” I add to this conversation by arguing that Ms. Marvel is not a traumatized individual; yet, trauma is nevertheless very actively present, as a backdrop, a guiding force, and the ground for characterization. However, *Ms. Marvel* approaches the trauma very differently. I will demonstrate how trauma and disidentification function in the characterization of Ms. Marvel further in the chapter. Similar to

the comic, her conflicts are able to be universalized, and her personal arc is rendered in such a way that, even if one is not South Asian or a teenager, the viewer can understand her and identify with her. Therefore, the first part of this chapter will analyse her cultural identity as portrayed in the comics, and then I will move to demonstrate the significance of the changes made in the show. I will also analyse the affective fan responses of the *Ms. Marvel* fandom in the final section of the chapter as fan culture plays a significant role in our understanding of the genre.

### **Ms. Marvel's identity in the comics**

Winona Landis in “Diasporic (dis)identification the participatory fandom of *Ms. Marvel*” writes, “the reader is always aware that a young Muslim girl still exists beneath the flashy costume. Such an awareness is especially crucial for Muslim, South Asian/American, and even Asian/American readers broadly speaking, as their identities as heroes and as consumers are frequently overlooked and ignored” (37).<sup>21</sup> Kamala considers herself to be a Jersey City girl, but her cultural identity is specific since she is a part of the visible racial minority community with a name that serves as a religious signifier living in post-9/11 society where racialized and religious oppression takes form as anything from everyday interactions to policies. What visibly universalizes her, then, is her identity as an American teenager and a superfan. Readers, despite their racial identity, can identify with Kamala, the teenager. The community she represents has been historically reduced to a position from where they are represented, heard, or known in an ideologically falsifying fashion. Therefore, when thinking about the perception of the character

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<sup>21</sup> Landis borrows the theoretical framework and language of disidentification from José Esteban Muñoz, and she defines it as, “instead of merely identifying with dominant forms, bodies, and stereotypes or, conversely, disavowing or counteridentifying with them, disidentification allows marginalized individuals to adopt the dominant forms as a means of enabling critique and carving out a specific space for themselves where there was previously no such space” (Landis 35-36).

in different reading groups, at least the initial reaction to her racial and class positioning will be different. However, as mentioned, the overarching universality of teenage life makes it possible for any readership to connect with the character.

The disidentification Landis is suggesting is attributed to the transcultural public persona of Ms. Marvel that is inevitably rooted in a combination of her Pakistani lineage and American identity. Like Landis, I'm interested in exploring the constructed identity of Ms. Marvel in a hegemonic societal structure that has historically approached people like Kamala Khan unfavourably. Without dismissing the validity of Landis' arguments on disidentification, I want to redirect the attention to Muñoz's original definition of disidentification. In his words, "disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning" (31). The encoded message in the cultural context of superheroes is about whiteness, gendered binaries, and capitalism, as I have argued in Chapter One. Ms. Marvel's cultural and religious identity "exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to encounter for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (Muñoz 31). Kamala Khan's public persona does not entirely function in a neoliberal society the way Landis argues, for she does not "adopt the dominant forms [of identity] as a means of enabling critique" (Landis 36), because is it the *interpretations* of her Muslim identity that enable the critique, not the identity itself. This interpretation however, importantly "proceeds to use [encoded meaning] as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (Muñoz 31). Therefore, I argue that Ms. Marvel's representation enables readers of colour to access their political and gender agency. While the universalization of Kamala's character caters to the capitalist logic of the

comic's need to appeal to a larger group of people, the disidentificatory practice is not universalizable; it is culturally and racially specific.

Kamala also represents the conflicts and conversations of the South Asian diaspora. On the front cover of *No Normal*, a close-up drawing of Kamala by Sara Pichelli and Justin Ponsor features Kamala wearing a black t-shirt with a big yellow lightning bolt and a red and purple shawl with a Paisley design. The t-shirt represents Kamala's identity as an American teenager who is influenced by Captain Marvel, as the character wore the same costume at the beginning of her superhero career (as her superpower was shooting energy blasts from her finger). The Paisley design, also known as *buta*, is a teardrop-shaped motif that originated in Persia (now Iran) and later travelled to the Indian subcontinent and was popularized by the British during colonialization. Kamala's cultural identity as a Pakistani-American is influenced by the partition of India and the violence and bloodshed that followed partition—which is an important detail added in the adaptation.<sup>22</sup> Even though this history is not present in the comic, the juxtaposition of two cultural identities in Kamala's outfit is a deliberate choice by Willow G. Wilson and the artists. In the cover art, Kamala is seen holding three books, two of which are titled “U.S. History” and “Hadith to Live By”.<sup>23</sup> The very intentional choice of the artists to draw these two books together simultaneously challenges and accepts the constant tussle between the West and East in diasporic conversations.

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<sup>22</sup> The Disney+ television adaptation of the comic provides important historical context on the partition of India in 1947. When the British left the country after close to a decade of colonial rule, the country was divided into a Muslim-majority Pakistan and a Hindu-majority India. The violence and bloodshed that followed this division is horrifying, to say the least. This historical context is necessary to understand the conflict between Kamala's superhero and non-superhero identities and the influence the history of partition has on the former.

<sup>23</sup> The title of the third book cuts off at the margin of the comic but that reads, “Illustrations & Designs.” The allusion to the comic medium in a Stan Lee like manner is charming. Wilson and Alphonso continued to bury easter eggs throughout the first volume of the comic.

In one hand, Kamala holds two halves of her identity close to her body, while the other hand forms a fist and is held up, close to the lightning bolt print on her shirt. She is the neighbourhood superhero of Jersey City, but she is also the daughter of Muneeba and Yusuf Khan. It is this very conflict that attracts readers and viewers to the story, while it is the sheer complexity of it that makes them stay, makes them fans. Hall writes, “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (“Cultural Identity” 80). The amalgamation of various facets of Kamala’s identity is the culmination of transnational cultural transactions. This is important since Kamala “embod[ies] an acceptable level of diversification in the Marvel universe because [she] can be read as *either* culturally specific *or* universal (at least as a White or male audience constructs their ability to relate to a character as making that character “universal”), or as both simultaneously” (Flegel and Leggatt 56). Kamala can be observed from culturally locatable and transnationally ambiguous vantage points at the same time and this accessibility renders the depiction and interpretation of her identity quite flexible. As I have argued before, Kamala’s transnational ambiguity is a result of responding to MCU’s market logic, since the character has to reach a wide audience, assuring at the minimum a return of investment. In a post-9/11 society, the universality of Kamala’s lived experiences is read against a very volatile sociopolitical context that continues to actively villainize Muslim people.

An example for the influence political context has in identity formation is the Circle Q scene from *No Normal*. In an attempt to save Bruno from what Kamala thought was a robbery of Circle Q, she gets shot. When a panicked Bruno, who doesn’t know that Kamala is Ms. Marvel, attempts to call the cops, the first thing she tells Bruno after identifying herself as Kamala is, “I have to **hide**. The police-- they **can’t** know it's me. My parents will **freak**, the NSA will **wiretap**

**our mosque** or something, and then they'll sell me to **science!**" (Wilson et al., *No Normal* issue 4). In the rank of things that concern teenager Kamala if Bruno calls an ambulance, in ascending order of threat, imperialism and systemic racism are second. Above all, the constant juxtaposition of living in two different worlds—one superhero and the other teenage normalcy—is placed in relation to Kamala's mediation between her two other worlds—Pakistani and American. Using this scene, I argue that Kamala's identity as a Muslim takes precedence over her identity as a teenager. Her parents' concern is rooted in her Muslim identity coming in conflict with the model minority identity that Yusuf has created, and any exposure could potentially be hazardous, in comparison with any other white teenager getting in trouble. Kamala is aware of this. Unlike 18-year-old Peter Parker's Spiderman, she is first conceived by her racial and religious identity, not the fact that she is one of the youngest MCU superheroes.

Therefore, I would like to investigate the factors that make her "culturally specific" by exploring her "cultural identity" (Hall 72). In Stuart Hall's sense, an identity associated with nation is produced by the "*re-telling* of the past" ("Cultural Identity" 69). Kamala's involvement in the social history of fictional Jersey City includes the experience of 9/11 and the cultural, political aftermaths of it as her reactions to events in personal and superhero life are informed by this past. Kamala's cultural universality stems from her experience as a teenager navigating high school, events (or the lack thereof) in the household, and her involvement in the MCU fandom. On the other hand, her cultural specificity is her racial and religious identity. Kamala's cultural identity has gone through years of imperialist and capitalist production to become what it is right now. As her name suggests, her creation has been heavily influenced by the MCU's Captain Marvel.

The function Captain Marvel plays as a mentor and inspiration for Kamala has been contemplated by critics; these functions are to make Kamala more approachable, acceptable, and, most importantly, familiar.<sup>24</sup> Kamala is presented as a non-threatening Muslim superhero. Kamala's superpowers are bestowed upon her by Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America the night she returns from a party. On her way home, Kamala is hit by a mysterious fog (The Terrigen fog) that covers the city, and she loses consciousness. She is woken up by someone calling her *beti* (daughter) and sees Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America in front of her, reciting the Amir Khursow poem, "Sakal Bun." A poem about spring, love, and devotion, placed quite in contrast to the perceived portrayal of these three characters, reaffirms the elements of Kamala's cultural specificity. The blend of Pakistani and American values is natural for Kamala, despite the political history of her racial and religious identity. However, she is also aware of the performative nature of her superpowers. She tells Captain Marvel that "I want to be **you**. Except I would wear the classic, politically incorrect costume and kick butt in **giant wedge heels**" (Wilson et al., *No Normal* issue 1). She is aware of her positioning as an "unstable point of identification" (Hall "Cultural Identity" 72) within the discourses of history and culture.

This particular splash panel, which takes up the whole page, has drawn the attention of many critics and serves as an essential point for the comic's scholarship as well as readership. Possibly the earliest analysis of this splash panel was by Suat Tong Ng in "The Hooded

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24 Flegel and Leggat points to the "'The 'Kamala Korps,' an homage to the 'Carol Corps' in the letters columns of Captain Marvel" (64) that formed before the comic came out to showcase the mentor-mentee relationship the characters have formed in the comics. Landis, examining the panel with Captain Marvel as Rosie the Riveter in the first volume, writes, "Kamala both identifies with this dominant, canonical figure, but adapts and (re) performs it to suit her own subjectivity. Furthermore, although Kamala ostensibly receives her powers from Captain Marvel, she is not written as a mere inheritor. In fact, as depicted in issue three, Kamala actively pursues the explanation for her sudden ability to stretch and shapeshift using the internet..." (36).

Utilitarian” blog in 2014, where he points out the Christian iconography of Alphonso’s visual imagery, reading it as a

transfiguration with Moses and Elijah on both sides of a female Jesus. Iron Man has his left hand raised in a gesture which either suggests the Trinity or the giving of a benediction. Captain Marvel herself ... as the Assumption of the Virgin—right down to her flowing waist ribbon. The birds surrounding her are presumably modern day versions of the cherubs we see in Renaissance paintings. (n.p)

Sarah Gibbons agrees and adds that the Urdu poem “recalls the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of the superhero genre while gesturing toward new possibilities for the introduction of a Muslim hero” (455). This scene is also read as Kamala “embarking on a spiritual quest” (Arjana 48). Flegel and Leggat argue that “whether the combined sign systems bring the Muslim into the secular/ Christian, or mark it as different, depends on the perspective and cultural competency of the reader” (80), while Adnan Mahmutovic suggests as a transnational superhero, Kamala’s “vision does not confine itself to any one version of iconography.... The most important feature may be her realisation that an absolute assimilation to a very narrow sense of the superhero iconography—when she assumes the looks of Captain Marvel—entails a disfunctionality [sic] in that very iconography” (5). By combining popular culture and religion, Wilson masterfully creates a conversation about Kamala’s “diasporic (dis)identification” (Landis 33) as well as her place in the MCU.

As established in the previous chapter, the MCU functions as “a corporate author who is personified as a singular entity, and whose texts are linked to a specific ‘brand’” (Flegel and Leggat 22). Therefore, by placing Ironman as one of the superheroes who gives Kamala her powers, Wilson crafts a forced relationship between the daughter of middle-class immigrants and

America's capitalist and neoliberal politics that manifest in the MCU's superheroes. Kamala is bridging the gap between the neoliberal superhero narrative and her culturally specific character stereotype, which is created adjacent to her Muslim identity. As Flegel and Leggatt note, Ms. Marvel's cultural specificity puts her in a political position that is against the neoliberal institutions, while working alongside it. Therefore, the juxtaposition of Tony Stark as a mentor to Kamala is an intentional choice by the writer that initiates a conversation surrounding the racial and class differences. Kamala and Nakia's classmate Zoe is explicitly racist and Islamophobic towards them. Kamala, as a politically aware teenager, defies Zoe's racist understanding of South Asians as hyper-religious, curry-smelling people. She also identifies and resists the patriarchy in her house, and Kamala becomes a rebel from her parents' perspectives.

As mentioned, it is not an accident that Carol Danvers, alias Captain Marvel, is the reference point for the readers who are first introduced to Ms. Marvel. The fan to protégé pipeline is a much tested one in fan fiction but it is not only the namesake that draws the readers to Kamala Khan. Intentionally or not, she is placed as a *Brown* Captain Marvel. Similar to her interaction with Wolverine, "Wilson does not erase the generational divide between the characters, nor does she privilege the worldview of older fans through Kamala's admiration" (Leggatt and Flegel 79). As she tells Captain Marvel her interest in wearing Carol's old costume, it becomes clear to the readers that Kamala knows the cultural significance of the costume; she is aware of the political aspects of it, and most importantly, in this scene, she is just an American teenage girl who wants to be Captain Marvel. When she first becomes Ms. Marvel, she even gets blonde hair. To the readers, Kamala fangirling over Danvers is presented as a negotiation

between her intersectional feminism<sup>25</sup> and Carol's girl boss feminism. There are many things that set Carol apart from Kamala, but there is also an underlying correlation between the two. It lies in the different origins of the two characters. Captain Marvel's character is derived from a well-loved male counterpart, Captain America, while Kamala's Ms. Marvel exists in an isolation created by her cultural identity. The white superheroes are transcending their race by involving themselves in questions of justice and morality, while in Kamala's case, the conversation begins with her racial identity. She idolizes Danver's superhero persona, yet stumbles while trying to balance between being a superhero and a teenager from the diaspora.

In other words, the most significant idea that separates Kamala and Carol is Kamala's racial otherness. Analysing a scene from Volume 6: *Civil War*,<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Johanne Fabricius observes how Carol is "placed in an antagonistic role, as a gatekeeper of the power she has otherwise given Kamala access to" (916). Acknowledging this pattern present in young adult literature, Fabricius writes, "young adult novels set up authority figures for the protagonist to revolt against, thereby carving out a space for agency and power" (916), and, certainly, when it comes to Kamala, this conversation extends to her cultural identity. In fact, the perceived differences of Kamala compared to her peer superheroes are all concentrated on her cultural identity. This is visible in all her interactions with other superheroes, but specifically in her initial interaction with Captain Marvel, working with Wolverine, and the two-page panel in *Super Famous*. And as Flegel and Leggat notice, "any threat increased diversity might pose to

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<sup>25</sup> Kimberly Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality, since its inception, has influenced people, policies, and politics. According to Crenshaw, "an intersectional analysis argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing, that Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone, and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both" (1283). Over the course of the years, Crenshaw's analysis of the social and personal precarity of Black women has been used to acknowledge hardships faced by many women of colour—who may not share the same forms of discrimination yet encounter similar challenges.

<sup>26</sup> I will not be analysing the scene or the comic, only the relationship between Kamala and Carol.

existing comics and their [white] fans is also softened by Kamala's ongoing fannishness; her unguarded adoration for other present her as a non-threatening to the status quo" (78). The ways Kamala has been positioned as a fan "and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation [are] a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation, precisely because they [are] not superficial" ("Cultural Identity" Hall 71). The social and cultural contexts of 9/11 and the Muslim experience of living in North America speak to this as cultural power is concentrated in normative whiteness, and Kamala lives outside that. Kamala is read against the values of capitalism and patriotism.

What adds to this cultural identity of Kamala is her childhood. She was raised in the US. However, her interactions with Bruno, Nakia, and her other family members show us the otherness in a way that blends her Pakistani and American identities together. Diaspora literature often revolves around the themes of identity crisis, alienation, orientalism, generation gap, and displacement. While Wilson and others touch upon some of these themes, they spend more time on the (dis)identification of Kamala and her family and the "historicized analyses of contemporary trans/national movement of people, information, cultures, commodities and capital" (Brah 177-78). To be able to talk about such vast topics, Wilson brings together the multicultural nature of Jersey City and Kamala's cultural specificity together.

In the opening scene of *No Normal*, Kamala, Bruno, and Nakia are talking about the BLT sandwich on display at Circle Q, where Bruno works. Kamala is interested in at least smelling the sandwich but says bacon is "delicious, delicious infidel meat" (Wilson et al., *No Normal* issue 1). Kamala, the teenager from Jersey City, wants to try BLT, but Kamala, the daughter of religious Pakistani-Americans, cannot. Similar juxtapositions of religion and American culture persist throughout the comic, manifesting in different characters. Nakia, Kamala's best friend,

wears a Hijab against her father's wish, embracing her religion and culture, and is positioned opposite to Kamala's rule-bending, resisting teenage self. Wilson creates the two most famous types of Muslim identity in North America, one non-conforming and religious, the other “blending in” and performing the model minority myth, thereby becoming relatively acceptable. While it is initially clear that the former is Nakia and the latter Kamala, both identities fall in and out of the “lines of inclusion and exclusion that articulate a desired composition... of the nation” (M. Ngai 5) according to the situation they are in. Zoe Zimmer, the white classmate of Nakia and Kamala, portrays the social reality of who is the judge of the “desired composition of the nation” (M. Ngai 5) as her passively racist and xenophobic comments on Nakia’s hijab and very random mention of “honour killing” reinforce the juxtaposition of two different Muslim identities (Wilson et al., *No Normal* issue 1). The questions about “culture” and head scarf are directed at Nakia, the Muslim presenting Muslim, not at Kamala. Zoe’s desired composition of the party to which her classmates are invited includes Kamala but not necessarily Nakia.

Kamala’s superhero version’s precarity is that, even if she wanted to, she might not be able to wear a head scarf like Nakia because that does not fit into the nation’s idea of a superhero. This difficulty faced by Kamala is two-fold. One is certainly the precarity associated with her cultural identity and economic positioning. The other is her negotiations with her belief system. This struggle is written into the character. Wilson, in another interview, says that “Islam is both an essential part of her identity and something she struggles mightily with. She’s not a poster girl for the religion, or some kind of token minority .... and she’s going through a rebellious phase ... Yet at the same time, she feels the need to defend her family and their beliefs” (qtd. in Aayeshah 61). It is possibly this constant negotiation that makes her choose her superhero costume. Arjana argues that since Islam to Kamala is an integral part of her identity,

Kamala wearing a “deconstructed veil” (66), a long red piece of red fabric, and a costume resembling a burkini is central to her character.

Kamala’s slippery relationship with religion, in contrast with “Nakia’s strong relationship with her Muslim immigrant identity [that] is implied by her wearing a scarf, despite her father asking her to integrate with American culture” (Aayeshah 63), presents the reader with two different representations of Muslim religious identity. I argue that Kamala’s overt public presence forces her to negotiate an “acceptable” level of religious expression in North America, unlike Nakia. Thereby, the dominant regime of patriotic representation makes Kamala experience otherness. Kamala’s cultural identity as a superhero is “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (“Cultural Identity” Hall 70). Her identities and the political history of both identities are constantly at crossroads, challenging the amalgamation of the two. Muñoz calls this “hybridized identity positions” (32) and observes that the “subjects’ different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity” (32). This discomfort, as shown in Kamala’s portrayal—both as a superhero and as a Pakistani American teenager—is central to our reading of the character and the political tactics of Wilson. This contradiction is visible enough for those who look closely, and it creates a conversation about the journey the character takes “shuttl[ing] between different identity vectors” (Muñoz 32). This shuttling between identities becomes all the more nuanced in the adaptation of the comic, with the introduction of the violent history of partition and its legacy of trauma.

### ***Ms. Marvel the show—reinventing the superhero in a post-colonial context***

The adaptation of the comic to an original Marvel Studios—Disney+ show, starring Iman Vellani as Kamala Khan, reintroduces the questions of race and class through audio/visual media. Bisha K. Ali, as the head writer for season one, covers a lot of historical background that aids in understanding the characters better. The show is bright, fun, and visually stunning, and the music fits right into the world created by Wilson, Amanat, Ali and others.<sup>27</sup> Amanat states in an Entertainment Weekly interview that "we intentionally went in being like, 'okay, we're going to do a brighter show.' We always knew that and would just be like, 'how bright can we go? How much can we get away with?' while making sure it still felt like it was in the MCU. But I mean, that's what I loved about the comics was the brightness of it" (n.p). The bold colours fill every frame. Visual effects in the show, like other MCU movies/shows, are stunning. However, we also get visual treats of doodles, calligraphy, and 2D animation that remind us of the comic.

The show follows the origin story of Kamala's superpowers, and the story of how she gets the powers is entirely different from the comic. While it is maintained in the show that Kamala is part Kree and inhuman, her powers are now situated in a culturally specific context. Tracing the history of Kamala's great-grandmother, Ali and the team craft a story that goes all the way back to the partition of India. The audience is first introduced to this history when Kamala comes across a mysterious-looking bangle in a box full of her Nani (grandmother) Sana's (played by Samina Ahmad) belongings and wears it during AvengerCon. Her new powers are first used during the comic convention in the show, along with the powers of embiggening. Unlike in the comic, her powers are extensive in the show as she can conjure fields of energy for

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<sup>27</sup> The use of popular Pakistani and Bollywood music, reminiscent of a classic musical movie is clever and attractive. Amir and Tysha's marriage in the background of Tere Bina from *Guru*, for example, would connect with many people because of how influential the song was, culturally.

defence, shoot blasts, and create solid energy platforms that she then walks on. These additional powers become available to her as the bangle unlocks the powers that were genetically passed down to her or, as Bruno (played by Matt Lints) says, "So it looks like your power isn't coming from the bangle. It's coming from within you. Like the bangle unlocked the superhuman part of you" ("Crushed" 00:06:21-00:06:26). This detail is significant in the character development of Kamala as a superhuman because, in the comic, her powers awoke after she was affected by the Terrigen Cloud. The powers are bestowed upon her by Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America. As discussed in the comic, that scene plays a significant role in bridging the cultural divide between the white American superheroes comic book readers are used to seeing and a Pakistani-American teenager. However, in the show, her powers are an heirloom; her great-grandmother fought for them, and her grandmother saved them for her. One is not superior to the other; it is impossible to determine that, nor is it necessary. However, shift in focus in the origin story points towards Kamala's cultural identity and her Brownness that the creators of the show seem to be very carefully constructing. The show adds culturally specific relics and memories that are not familiar to the average non-South-Asian viewer to establish the significance of the characterization as well as to reify the reasoning for creating such a character in the MCU.

The show mainly focuses on Volume 4, *Last Days*, and Volume 5, *Super Famous*, along with Kamala's relationship with Kamran. Kamala's escape from the hold of Kamran and Lineage is the main focus of Volume 3 *Crushed*. In the comic, Kamran forcefully takes Kamala to make her part of the inhuman family. Kamala is upset that "THE GUY [SHE HAS] AN ENORMOUS CRUSH ON ZAPS [HER] WITH HIS POWERS AND LOCKS [HER] UP IN A JAIL CELL IN NEW ATTILAN" (Wilson et al., *Crushed* issue 15). What ensues is Kamala resisting joining the "family" of Inhumans by escaping. The language Wilson uses to establish Kamran's hand in

Kamala's entrapment is deliberately manipulative and condescending. He tells Kamala, "You got in my car of your own free will. As far as anybody knows, you chose to be here. You put yourself in this position"(Wilson et al., *Crushed* issue 15). This language is also neoliberalist and misogynist, as Kamran blames and gaslights Kamala. He forces her to join the group of Inhumans in order to extract her powers to "rise—Nuhumans for a new world" (Wilson et al., *Crushed* issue 15). When Kamala does not agree, Kamran exposes Amir to Terrigen mist. In the show, however, this dialogue within the frames of a patriarchal class consciousness shifts to a conversation that is culturally specific and extends to race.

Kamran's mother, Najma, and the rest of the Clandestine were accomplices with Aisha in saving the magic bangles during the British Invasion of India. Through Kamala, Najma and her associates attempt to retrieve the bangle that will help them "go home." The audience is placed into the cultural contexts of the *Noor* Dimension and *Djinn*. With the reference points that MCU fans have of the multi-universe and Asgardians, the transition would likely feel natural. As Kamala learns her bangle can unlock the full potential of the *Noor* dimension, the story develops into a conversation about British colonialism and extraction. Najma, in a conversation with Kamala, tells her, "We are not here by choice. We were exiled... we searched for [Aisha], but with all that happened during partition, we assumed she got lost, like so many others" ("Destined" 00:04:38 -00:04:48). This change brought into the origin story of Kamala is important historically as well as for the arc of the character. Dan Hassler-Forest makes an interesting observation about the significance of events that caused ruptures in history in the origin stories of superheroes. Guided by Naomi Klein's idea of disaster capitalism, he makes an argument for "traumatised superheroes" (69). The conception of the trauma narrative, as he argues, "strongly emphasizes the way in which the memory of traumatic events extends not only

into recollections of the past but affects our perception of the present and the future as well” (76). This trauma narrative influences the superheroes in ways that mould their actions. Hassler-Forest uses the example of Batman, but we have Captain America and World War II, Iron Man’s parents’ untimely death and being a prisoner of warlords as examples from the MCU that also support this argument.

What is interesting, however, is the fact that despite having ample ground to do so, Ali, Amanat, and Meera Menon did not approach Ms. Marvel as a traumatized superhero. Instead, the impact of the historical ruptures is focused on the characters around her. For Kamala, trauma functions “as a mode of [disidentification] understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force...foreground[ing] that lost object of identification; ... establish[ing] new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification” (Muñoz 30). After her visit to Karachi, Kamala accesses a part of her superhero identity that was unavailable to her. Her intervention in the history and in the life of her grandmother is the driving force behind her identity formation which is not bound to, or restricted by, trauma alone. This further emphasizes the revisionary nature of the comic because since the Djinnns are true subjects of disaster capitalism “whose conditioned response to each new crisis or catastrophe is expressed through higher levels of consumption, increased degrees of social alienation, and the thorough commodification of trauma through branding and popular narratives” (Hassler-Forest 77) thereby creating narratives that “suggest a connection between traumatic experience and heroic victimization” (Hassler-Forest 78). The positioning of Djinnns as a traumatized community with superpower shifts the conversation to a territory that was previously unexplored by white superhero norms. When she unlocks her powers, Kamala actively seeks an origin story. She asks Bruno, “So, what, am I Asgardian or something? Dude,

am I related to Thor?” (“Crushed,” 00:06:37-00:06:41). While this is delivered half-jokingly, Ali also places the inscription on the bangle: “what you are seeking is seeking you,” a famous Rumi quote parallel to Kamala’s quest in finding her origin story. Kamala has not faced any life-changing disaster in her own life. Rather, her origin story and the potential trauma associated with it is passed down through generations that partly motivates her. Even then, she does not entirely buy the trauma narrative.

This rebranding of the narrative excites me because there are two cultural memories of trauma that shape the narrative of the show: the partition of India and 9/11. While the former plays an active role in shaping the villains and their arc, the latter has an interestingly invisible omnipresence that influences the choices made by other characters, especially Kamala. The treatment of trauma in the show makes it distinct from other superhero narratives because for Kamala, trauma is individual. She travels through time and goes to her past to witness her great grandmother’s trauma. Even then, the writers do not make the pain generational, instead intervening using Kamala’s superpowers to restructure the trauma narrative. Kamala’s origin story and her superpowers, like her understanding of trauma, are inherited—not the trauma itself. Unlike in superhero tradition, Ali and the other writers do not let the trauma define her powers or the choices she makes; in fact, in the show, she is actively resisting the influence of trauma while simultaneously embracing the essential cultural elements that define her and her history. Kamala travels through space and time, visiting contemporary Karachi and the India-Pakistan border in 1947, witnessing the separation of her grandmother from her family. She acts as the guiding light that leads Sana to her father in a railway station where she is lost momentarily during the commotion during the partition, and Kamala does so by bending the laws of time and space.

Kamala is not a passive spectator in either space—she actively mends and redefines her relationship with the land, its people, and her cultural memory of Pakistan. She is mockingly called “American-Born Confused Desi,” but she picks up the cultural language that was inaccessible to her in New Jersey, forging new paths for reconciliation, memory making, and memory keeping. Najma’s account of how the Djinnns were exiled creates a parallel in the plot between the historical rupture and the hurt carried by generations. Kamala’s great-grandmother Aisha had the powers, Grandmother Sana, who survived partition, believed in Aisha’s powers, and mother Muneeba, who fled from the trauma and lived with a deep sense of shame, are all integral parts of Kamala’s origin story. It is these women and their lives that move Kamala, not necessarily a trauma inflicted on her or the society her ancestors lived in directly. I argue that this change in narrative with the relationship of superhero and trauma is deliberately revisionary as it aligns with the politics of the character and, quite possibly, the creators. Going back to de Certeau, I read this change in the narrative as a racialized tactic that “*insinuates* itself into the other’s place, fragmentally, *without taking over in its entirety*” (xix, emphasis mine) because the trauma narrative in the show is maintained in a way that is culturally specific. Trauma is central to the choices these characters make; it is central to Kamala’s superhuman abilities, and she is aware of both the intergenerational trauma and inherited superpowers, however in a way that does not directly determine her or her superhero identity.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* gives clarity to the question of identity developed in the imperial west. He identifies a “unique coherence and a special cultural centrality” (xxii) in the British, French, and American imperial experience. He establishes this in relation to the literary history and narrative fiction of the respective countries. The lived reality of second generation South Asians can resonate with this analysis since Said also identifies

culture as “a source of identity” (xiii). The creators of the show thoroughly explore Kamala’s relationship with the imperial history of India and the British and the significance of that relationship for her as a teenager living in the United States of America. The interrelationship of Kamala’s power with her cultural identity, the story of her great grandmother Aisha and the imperial experience in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries are larger themes explored in the show. Having that background information in understanding the comics’ Kamala, foreshadows the complexities of relationships featured in the show and provides a more fleshed-out perspective on Kamala’s racial and class identity.

To uncover the truths about herself and her history, Kamala, along with Muneeba, visits Karachi, Pakistan. This is where the show starts to really tap into the visual treat a vibrant city like Karachi can offer. By doing so, the Disney+ adaptation unapologetically embraces the Pakistani identity. Hall’s observation on the dominant regimes of representation positioning the racial minority in a way that they are constantly aware of their Otherness is recognized and subverted in episode 4, “Seeing Red.” Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy blends the whimsical present-day Karachi and the Karachi of the past that witnessed a lot of bloodshed into the world of Kamala, urging the viewers to experience Kamala’s Otherness as two-fold. In New Jersey, she follows Hall’s explanation of the Other. However, in Karachi, she is an American Born Confused Desi or “ABCD” (“Seeing Red,” 00:14:02), and her otherness is at the same time sought after and ridiculed.

In a series of events that follows her exploration of the origins of her superpowers, as well as her identity, she interacts with members of Red Daggers, who show how the Clandestines, including Najma, may unleash the two worlds that co-exist (one that used to be Kamala’s great grandmother’s home and the other, their world) into each other using Kamala’s

bangle. Therefore, it becomes Kamala's mission to stop the two realms from collapsing into each other. The metaphorical purpose these realms serve is to bring conversations back to Kamala's diasporic identity. The Noor dimension and her earth represents her Pakistani heritage and her diasporic identity, not necessarily in the respective order. They are possibly intentionally not distinguished as Kamala shuttles back and forth between "different identity vectors" (Muñoz 30) negotiating the terms of her identity. Avtar Brah, in her *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, has emphasised how the word diaspora "embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs" (178). For both the Clandestine and Kamala's families, the dispersion starts from one location. The displacement and dislocation of these people, along with "concepts of border and diaspora... reference the theme of location" (Brah 177). The Noor realm for the Clandestine and pre-partition India for Aisha's family "centre[] on the *configuration of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another*" (Brah 180). Kamala identifies this relationship and continually tries to bridge the gap between the two. Saving Kamran, for her, is her last resource that will stop the realms from crashing with each other and save the maximum number of people. Therefore, the creators of the show heavily rely on her cultural identity for her to be able to do this. The shift of Ms. Marvel's missions from resisting symbols of neoliberal conglomerates intent on destroying the lives of Jersey City's residents to the racially and culturally embedded struggles in a larger context is refreshing and fundamental to the discourse of her identity.

Episode 5, "Time and Again," further contextualizes the partition for the audience by giving a flashback into the life of Aisha, played by Mehwish Hayat, Kamala's great-grandmother and Hasan, played by Fawad Khan, Kamala's great-grandfather. The emphasis given to their relationship is useful in understanding Ms. Marvel's character since it establishes the cultural

identity of her superhero persona. Aisha left her home realm to have a life with freedom fighter Hasan. Like Kamala, the choices Aisha makes are significant to others in her life as well. The question of right and wrong weighs in the actions of both characters more than it would for most, precisely because of their superhuman abilities. White neutrality ensures that the white superheroes can transcend their race by involving themselves in questions of justice and morality as defined by white society, and their race does not define their choices or actions. However, for Kamala, it is not only her superhero identity and the choices she makes as a powerful person that comes under bad faith racial scrutiny, it also her everyday life. The conversation begins with her racial and cultural identity. The choices she makes are, sometimes, involuntarily informed by Aisha's past. Therefore, the trauma narrative proposed by Hassler-Forest finds a revised approach through this reading.

Her conversation with Sheikh Abdulla, the religious leader from the mosque, is important in the narrative of both the comic and the show because it is that conversation that helps her situate herself in the superhero world. In the show, she talks to him about Ms. Marvel without revealing her identity and asks what should the new masked superhero do to make people believe that she is good. Sheikh Abdulla responds, "Good is not a thing you are, Kamala. It is a thing you do" ("Destined" 00:16:46-00:16:47). His wisdom shapes the way she approaches her superhero crises. This interaction, from a wider vantage point, can render the negative stereotypes of the religion invalid with its inherent goodness, empathy, and humility. The creators allow the conversation to access this space so that bigger conversations can be had on this context. Landis, analyzing the conversation between Kamala and Sheikh Abdulla, observes, "while *Ms. Marvel* does indeed recuperate negative portrayals of Islam in popular media, it does so in a way that does not simplify it or minimizes its important [sic] to Kamala's subject

formation and even heroism” (41). One of the first striking cultural elements, certainly, is the bangle. The ornament is a big part of the gender identity of South Asian women, so much so that bangles have found their place in wedding rituals. The ritual of *chura*, where the bride wears a set of red and white bangles, is considered auspicious for marital life. The bangle to Kamala may signify many things, but primarily, it tells the story of three generations of women, and that defines her understanding of her cultural identity.

The racially conscious narrative in the adaptation is further emphasized through Nakia. Unlike in the comic, Nakia in the series is politically aware, even more so than Kamala. MCU productions are incomplete without sidekicks, but Nakia is not written for that role.<sup>28</sup> She runs for the mosque board member elections and wins, sticks up to Damage Control invading the mosque, and is visibly upset that Ms. Marvel does not seem to realize the cultural specificity of her superhuman persona. The final episode, “No Normal,” directed by Adil and Bilal, brings the conversation on race, culture, and community together. Ms. Marvel’s efforts in resisting Damage Control and helping Kamran find his way to the Red Daggers become possible through the help of her friends, family, and neighbours. The elaborate sequence of Ms. Marvel fighting Damage Control is supplemented with everyone, including Nakia, Bruno, Amir, Zoe, and others, helping the superhero. Unlike in many other superhero movies, the crowd does not serve the purpose of passive spectators or collateral damage. They also do not wait for the superhero to save them. Rather, they actively take part in the process of protecting their own. The underlying political nature of the community is emphasized through the last episode as it brings together the

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<sup>28</sup> I think neither is Bruno, since he is a fully developed character in the comic; his girlfriend (rightfully) tries to help Bruno navigate through life as someone who is a lot more than just Kamala’s helper, but the show very much follows the sidekick narrative.

continuing interest writers have in creating narratives that subvert the traditional superhero expectations.

### **Fandom and the political context**

The conversation about the political involvement of the community in the show extends to the parallels in fan communities. After Damage Control is “defeated,” a montage of different people sharing their experiences over social media is shown. From the account @TheRealGWW, in true Stan Lee-esque manner, Wilson is seen posting a TikTok with the caption “Even with that mask n[sic] she looks SO familiar!” where she says, “She looked so familiar” (“No Normal” 00:34:37). Everyone, including Wilson, is presented as part of the large, diverse Ms. Marvel fan community. The friends and neighbours to fan pipeline is intriguing in Kamala’s case precisely because of her racialized superhero persona. Like Kamala, “because of their status as minorities within Western media fandoms, nonwhite fans are seen to interrupt normative operations of such structures only in specific contexts when they make themselves visible” (Pande 6). By streaming Ms. Marvel’s superpowers live and by not being passive spectators, the community in the last episode is able to contribute towards subverting the normative understanding of the superhero-fan relationship. Following Fiske’s insistence on the subversive nature of the fandom, the final episode of the show seems to be reflecting on the capabilities of collective subversion in real-time. The interplay between the global political scenario of 2024 and the MCU fandom requires a class-conscious analysis that would take into consideration the continuing effects of settler colonialism and imperialism. The conversations about neoliberal, settler colonial countries are at their height in 2024, as the world discusses Israel’s invasion of the Gaza strip and the continued genocide of the Palestinian people. Social media is being widely used as an important platform

for these conversations. Fan communities interact with the continuing political importance of these conversations in interesting ways since we get to lurk and see how various articulations of individual identity can and do form the basis of online dialogic and discursive communities with significant personal and political implications. In fact, my interest in this project stems from the lurking I have done for years on social media platforms, noticing fan interactions. The two examples I'm interested in discussing are from X can be understood as a representative of larger trends.

While I don't tweet as a member of various fan communities, I do engage with the tweets that come up in my timeline by either liking or retweeting them. I also write original tweets about politics, academia, and culture. So, my timeline, after years of use, now shows tweets relating to all kinds of topics. Since October 2023, I have been seeing a lot more anti-settler colonial and pro-Palestine content. I engage with those tweets since active efforts in Marxism and decolonization deeply inform my political ideology. I happened to come across a tweet that was posted by user @kamalameme (see fig. 1). The tweet has 16k likes as of January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025. It is an edited photo of Ms. Marvel holding a Palestinian flag, seemingly leading a big group of people. The big speech bubble shares the first part of the famous slogan "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," depicted as chanted by Ms. Marvel. The user who posted the tweet has been very vocal about the settler colonial violence and continues to create similarly edited images.



Fig. 1. *Ms. Marvel for the Palestinian cause*

Rukmini Pande, in *Squeezed from the Margins*, recognizes the importance of using anticolonial theory when analyzing cyber cultural fan communities since the theory is “broadly concerned with creating tools to confront the continuing realities of representational power as wielded by the Global North and disseminated through various means, whether cultural, economic, or geopolitical” (54). Using a well-known comic character, which is textured with cultural and racial elements, to convey a message of resistance is to apply the intended purposes of anticolonial theory through cyberspace. Pande recognizes the racial aspects of fan activities and opines, “transnational and transcultural communities are engaged in the consumption, interpretation, and repurposing of hegemonic popular culture texts that constantly negotiate not just issues of gender and sexuality [...] but also issues of racial, cultural, ethnic, and religious identity” (56-57). Ms. Marvel makes this process easier with the way she has been carefully constructed by Wilson, Amanat, and Ali.

Being able to repurpose the cultural symbols opens somewhat murky waters since the traditional superheroes represent the values of the neoliberal, colonial, and patriarchal systems. In another edited photo (see fig. 2) posted by @nachal\_giyus86, we see three soldiers (presented as part of the IDF) walking in a long corridor. The caption reads, “Kudos to the heroes of the IDF battling evil & darkness in Gaza. The real Justice league! #IDF #heroes #Israel.”



Fig. 2. *Superheroes bowing IDF soldiers*

On each side, superheroes from both the MCU and DC bow down to them, standing in a single file. On the left side from the front, there is Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Dr. Manhattan; on the right, there are Spiderman, Iron Man, Thor, Wolverine, and Hulk. This tweet was not well received by users (it got 1k likes) compared to the image before—which should not be a surprise considering how badly the AI-generated photo looks. In addition to that, it was also almost ratioed by another tweet (with 1.3k likes) that said, “those ‘heroes’ are child killers,” tweeted along with the photo of a Spiderman costume propped up in front of the rubble created by constant bombing and attacks. It might not be entirely because of the neoliberal, ultra-nationalist behaviour of the superheroes that influenced the tweek to share the AI-generated image, but it certainly plays a major role. Both of these accounts are anonymous, so one cannot

apply Pande's methods of analyzing postcolonial and anticolonial activities in cyberspace. However, these examples certainly demonstrate how fandoms function in the face of active conversations about settler colonialism and racism. Ms. Marvel's subverted superhero persona becomes an accessible tool for sharing progressive politics.

### **Looking forward: comics, adaptations, politics and the readership**

The multitude of people, from the writer's board to users of X, accessing the agency for dissidence through the medium of comics reinforces my observations about the underlying strong current of politics that fuels comic production. I want to stress Fiske's cultural economy's social media examples I discussed to raise questions about how the fandom actively engages in semiotic textual production. Ms. Marvel is considered the symbol of resistance, a popular one at that. The co-option of other MCU characters from example two was facilitated by the North American racial politics that centre the character arcs of these white superheroes, making them bound to the right-wing's talking point. This is precisely what makes Ms. Marvel different. Her diasporic identity and class positioning enable the readers of colour to be involved in the cultural economy of fandom, where politics is central to their conversations. It is also important to note the active distancing of writers from the personal tragedy trope. Kamala steers away from Hassler-Forest's traumatized superhero by actively resisting neoliberal narratives and imperial emotional roller coasters, thereby allowing secondary characters in the comic to develop fully. Nakia's newly acquired position as the Mosque board member is an example of how the writers team approached conversations around Islamophobia and other trauma inducing incidents.

I intended to rewrite the superhero definitions by adopting the valuable cultural and racial context from *Ms. Marvel*, but at the end of this chapter, I can only offer a revisionary superhero

narrative. The politics of disidentification, as explored in both the chapters, is important in ways that can be translated into praxis. Ms. Marvel both demonstrates and embodies the potential for a tactical politics that can insinuate itself into powerful structures. In our current political scenario where “public resources such as knowledge, attention, and values become distorted and distributed by power structures” (O. Táíwò 8) and where identity politics are captured by elites to satisfy their settler colonial and neoliberalist needs, tactical resistance is a valuable praxis. May Miles Morales, Falcon, and other superheroes who do not feel included by canonical definition find a resolution here—if a definition is necessary for them. The revisionary superhero as represented by Ms. Marvel strives for the end of exploitation of all kinds, racial, patriarchal, capitalist, and bureaucratic. They tread lightly between the lines of selflessness and vigilante activism every day, making choices informed by their personal struggles that are rooted in the sociopolitical aspect of life. They are part of Fiske's cultural economy; they are objects of fascination for subordinate groups of people, and they are also part of those groups. Revisionary superheroes like Ms. Marvel strive to end war before one begins and not to fight as a soldier. Therefore, Kamala can do important political work and transform social imaginations.

### Chapter Three

#### Disidentification, representation, and imperialism: Reading Netflix's *Bridgerton* as speculative romance

“Empire becomes a gift that cannot be refused, a forced gift. If the empire is understood as giving happiness, then perhaps happiness names the force of this gift.” — Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*

The (un)making of identity in previous chapters was set in the milieu of Pakistan, the timeline stretching across the events from the pre- and post-independence era of the country. The focus of this chapter goes further back in history, making an undivided, colonized Indian subcontinent its inspiration for a cultural backdrop. The Indian subcontinent lurks in the background of the plot that is set in Regency-era Britain, exerting considerable influence without being visible. Netflix's *Bridgerton*, based on Julia Quinn's novels of the same title, was first released in 2020. The three seasons of the historical romance show have garnered much attention, and, as of now, it is among the top ten most-watched Netflix shows of all time.<sup>29</sup> The plot of season two of *Bridgerton* revolves around an awkward love triangle between the sisters Kate and Edwina Sharma (played by Simone Ashley and Charithra Chandran) and Anthony Bridgerton, the Viscount of the Bridgerton family (played by Jonathan Bailey). The sisters are of Indian heritage, and the plot follows the story of their integration into both the wealthy, influential, and white family, the Bridgertons, as well as the fictionalized setting of English nobility in Regency-era Britain, where interracial social existence is the norm.

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<sup>29</sup> As per Tudum Netflix (<https://www.netflix.com/tudum/top10/most-popular/tv>) *Bridgerton* has been viewed 846,500,000 hours, making it the sixth most watched shows of all time.

The second season is loosely adapted from Quinn's novel *The Viscount Who Loved Me*. The show is known for its creative choice of racebending, where they cast people of colour in the lead roles, as opposed to the all-white character portrayal in Quinn's original. The show, produced by Shonda Rhymes and created for television by showrunner Chris Van Dusen, features sexually and racially diverse characters. The second season specifically interests me because of the geopolitical vastness it seemed to encompass in its storyline. The colonial and imperial history of India and Pakistan is a topic of great interest to me as a South Indian, and the global appeal for racebending and a speculative approach to historical understandings of representation in the show presented itself as very desirable to me as an acafan.<sup>30</sup> My first interaction with the source material was through social media, even before watching the show. I noticed the fandom of *Bridgerton*, and, specifically, fans who identify as people of colour on social media practicing "disidentification" when engaging with the show. The portrayal of the sisters, as I will demonstrate in detail in this chapter, is significant for its treatment of Indian and Brown identities. They carry a sense of whiteness with them in order to be able to navigate their life in the Ton. However, there is an undeniable presence of cultural specificity that exists simultaneously in this portrayal. The fandom interacted with the representation of the Sharma sisters by negotiating "between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects" (Muñoz 6). The interracial casting invoked a sense of joy among the fan groups despite its many flaws that prevented an easy identification for South Asian fans—a point I will elaborate on in detail later in the chapter. I observed the fandom's understanding of

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Jenkins coined the term acafan to describe a "hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic" (Jenkins n.p) and many academics working in the field of popular culture and fandom associate with this definition. I agree with Jenkin's observation that organized fandom is "an institution of theory and criticism" (86) and as Benard Sharratt suggests (qtd. in Jenkins), "the intimate knowledge and cultural competency of the popular reader also promotes critical evaluation and interpretation, the exercise of a popular 'expertise' that mirrors in interesting ways the knowledge-production that occupy the academy" (86).

and engagement with the portrayal of Brownness as being rooted in the politics of tactics as they were unwilling to do a paranoid reading of the representation in the show. Muñoz clearly delineates this behaviour of fandom as a disidentificatory practice since, “for some [POC] spectators, this confrontation with whiteness does not occlude the pleasure that such images offer, but rather, such confrontations can be part of a disidentificatory project that manages to partially recycle and hold on to these representations” (72).

In this chapter, I argue that the involvement of racial and imperial history in the story has an intricate relationship with its medium, genre, and casting. The romance genre is historically conservative in its mainstream formulations. Having said that, I emphasize that *Bridgerton* has used the subversive potential of the genre by employing the politics of tactics and disidentification in its characterisation of people of colour. Therefore, the romance genre specifically needs meticulous analysis since the change that I propose in the genre of the show (I argue that the Netflix adaptation is speculative romance and not historical romance) affects what elements constitute a genre, and how it seems to be taking new shapes and forms according to the involvement of its fandom. Taking a closer look at the romance genre, which has a history of being used for strategies of imperialism where the white imperial structure is favoured, will also prove useful in analyzing the second season. The integration of Kate and Edwina into high society is completed through heteronormative marriage, which is kept as an institution with utmost importance in the show. Sarah Ahmed invokes this rather innocuously presenting effect of the institution of marriage to argue that happiness becomes “a justification of empire not only in the sense of giving support to the existence of the colonies but also as being what is assumed to be augmented through empire” (*Promise of* 130). Therefore, the choice of preserving marriage as an integral institution and performance of whiteness by these Brown people as an acceptable

form of identity formation, requires detailed analysis. I contend in this chapter that the disidentificatory practices in the show seem to be functioning as a sort of meta-disidentification. The characterization of the Sharma sisters, the tactics of the genre as speculative romance, and most importantly, the nature of the fandom of the show share politics that are deeply disidentificatory.

The racial dynamics of the show and of the speculative romance genre require a closer inspection. I borrow André M. Carrington's analysis as the racial dynamics of both the genre and medium seem to be formulated as influenced by the fields of cultural production that have implored creators to look into "the ways in which social differences like race provide the basis for the fictionalized configurations of identity ...that characterize the [speculative] genre" (3). The question of the significance of examining the field of cultural production in the context of the show becomes relevant as BIPOC fandoms interact with the unsatisfying characterization of BIPOC actors that ignores race through a combination of identification and disidentification. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach to locating the production of art within the particular social conditions that gave rise to its production is significant in my analysis of *Bridgerton* since the potential sociopolitical reasons for the race and class relationship shared by the characters, the employment of popular romance plots, and the fan interactions all read as interconnected in a way that directly relates to the production of the show. The social condition of the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture texts can be exhibited through fan interactions—and I argue that the *Bridgerton* fandom is an excellent example of this aspect of cultural production. This relationship between popular culture and fandom thus needs to be dissected using a race-conscious lens. Quinn's novel centres on characters whose perceived whiteness was expected and accepted within the Regency romance genre. However, the show flips the

characterization by creating a speculative Regency-era high society where people from all racial backgrounds share space in the Ton<sup>31</sup>.

### **Genre, popular culture, and the “whiteness” of the romance genre**

Popular romance, and specifically historical romance as a genre, has undeniably privileged whiteness as an ontological given and as the locus of cultural production. Whiteness, for the genre, is as indispensable as romance itself. Because of the genre’s racial gap, “when romance novels depict characters of color, particularly when the authors are not members of the group they are depicting, it is not unusual for the characters to be crafted in a stereotypical manner” (Young 524). Jayashree Kamblé further substantiates this claim: the “genre relies on structures of feeling and being that are ineluctably grounded in a white Protestant ethos, and may be promulgating them as the norm (at least for romantic behavior) to its worldwide audience” (131). The relationship between the genre and imperialism as analyzed by Hsu-Ming Teo complicates the understanding of the relationship between authors and readers since “empire romances were written predominantly by Anglo-Saxon women for other white readers—European, American and Colonial—and from very early on their romantic fantasies were inflected, even produced, by race” (Teo 283). Because racially conscious analysis of the genre, the novels that belong to the genre, and the involvement of the novels in the cultural production of whiteness has largely been based on the literary format of novels, it is imperative that the show be closely examined through a similar lens; for while the medium changes, the genre expectations remain stable.

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<sup>31</sup> The etymology of the term is from the French term *bon ton*, meaning good manners. The high society in the show reinforces the narratives associated with performing well (showing good manners, for example) in the Ton.

My focus on genre has led me to consider the casting and the racial portrayal of the characters as an incongruous intervention from the creators of the show into the historical romance genre. Sarah H. Ficke has observed that the geopolitical scope of historical romance has traditionally centered on European and American empires, with protagonists predominantly being white. Certainly, historical romance novel authors “consciously se[t] their plot during a period that feels historically distant from the one in which it is published” (Ficke 118), and it is not entirely unheard of where novels “that feature mixed-race characters and interracial romances” (Ficke 123) feature British-set stories. “These novels dig more deeply into questions of identity because those questions are implicated in the protagonists’ romantic journey” (Ficke 123). The story of *Bridgerton* is built on the base of a political and literary structure that has aided in the social construction of race. Numerous recounted stories of white normativity, domesticity, patriarchy, and imperialism reflect the interests of a privileged section of the society and function as an example for whom it was written. This show probably represents the needs of a multicultural Netflix audience, but it does more than that. I’m intrigued when thinking about what the show does with the 200 years of imperial history and geopolitics of India and Britain as the racebending in the show interacts with the extractivist history of the country, adding a layer of vital material history to the speculative romance genre.

The rules (or what one accepts as rules) of the romance genre are constantly bent in the show prompting several questions: How should the economic relationship between the characters be understood? What should one make of the genre of the show if it exhibits signs of speculative romance fiction as opposed to historical romance as commonly understood and accepted? And most importantly, how is the *Bridgerton* fandom situated in this conversation? This chapter aims to answer these questions by closely reading the characters and certain fan reactions on social

media. My preliminary analysis centres on the show's racial representations. I argue that *Bridgerton* is a speculative romance show by defining speculative romance in relation to traditional definitions of historical romance, speculative fiction, and alternate history. I move on to demonstrate how the show and the genre confine the Indianness of the Sharma family to the private realm while simultaneously portraying them as performing an acceptable whiteness. I conclude by examining the fan discourse that reveals the disidentificatory politics enabled by the show and fandoms.

### **Speculative romance and the positioning of racial relationship of the characters**

In the novel, the whiteness of the characters is, to a very large extent, historically accurate. Quinn's portrayal of her white characters is parallel to the racial and imperial history of Regency-era England, which had class and racial superiority mostly consolidated in white nobility. However, the show inserts people of colour into the plot with an ease that presents the viewers with a society that is racially inclusive and oblivious of the era's racial and political realities. This ease is attained mostly through never explicitly engaging with race itself. Most current criticism of the show has pointed out this anomaly as colour blindness.<sup>32</sup> However, I think that *Bridgerton* does not disengage from the discussions around race, and neither does the show dismiss the existence of the racial history of Britain. It is certainly discussed far less

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<sup>32</sup> The fan discourses primarily revolve around the argument of colour blindness. While many such opinions are shared on social media or webpages that are interested in popular culture and politics, the very argument I'm making for fans considers their agency and the cogent arguments they make that signify their interest in sharing space with directorial choices in casting. "Is Color-Blind Casting In Regency-Era Romances Really Progressive? Or Just Delusional?" published in *Unbothered*, "What Colorblind Casting Does for Shows Like *Bridgerton* in the Long Run" featured in *The Beat* and "Bridgerton: It's not colour-blind casting, it's colour-conscious casting" published on the *BBC* webpage are all examples of individuals and traditional and social media weighing in on the conversations around the casting. In addition to these published articles, there have also been discussions on different social media platforms, with comments about the casting and venturing further into discourses on how the usage of the term "colour-blind" signals a form of ableist language. This argument suggested the need for a redirection and reorientation of conversations around race in the show, giving the discourse an inclusive and intersectional lens.

frequently than one would hope, but *Bridgerton* does see colour. It engages with colour in a way that, while questionable, is equally intriguing. The imperial historical influence behind the treatment of race in the show bears a strange resemblance to Lord Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education. This is a flagrant example of imperialist methods used to colonise India as he advocated for "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (430) through British education. People of colour in *Bridgerton* maintain an inhabited cultural whiteness, one similar to what Macaulay was a proponent of. Therefore, to understand the perceived whiteness in the show, it is imperative that whiteness is considered as an important force that forms opinions, characters, and creative choices.

Sara Ahmed's seminal contribution to critical whiteness and critical race studies informs my research on the second season of the show as well as the analysis of the characters. I argue the second season can be read as an effort to show whiteness as "an ongoing and unfinished history, which orients bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed 150). The relationship between the Sharmas and the Bridgertons is constantly in conversation with whiteness that "is lived as a background experience" ("A Phenomenology" Ahmed 150). As I observed in the beginning of this chapter, Brownness serves an aesthetic purpose in the show in addition to bringing in relevant cultural significance. However, it is an aestheticism veiled by whiteness. The employment of eighteenth-century material history as a trope (specifically the influence of the trade between India and Britain) also plays a significant part in conveying whiteness as an integral and inevitable part of the relationship between the main characters. Bombay in the show is referred to as not only a place, but a piece of private cultural memory for Kate Sharma. In a conversation with a potential suitor, she mentions how she dearly misses Bombay—a comment that can be read as a parallel to how the Sharma sisters access their

Indianness. Bombay is a land, a source of important cultural history, and a part of their past. The writers dispose of the tensions in the plot in Bombay. In season three, they remove Kate and Anthony at the time of Kate's pregnancy to mystical Bombay, and a passing remark is made about how Edwina found a true love match in India. The faraway land is a private affair, a private memory for the Sharmas, occasionally accessed by Anthony or by the creators to passively mention a change in plot. For Kate and Edwina, their "hybridized identificatory positions are always in transit, shuttling between identity vectors" (Muñoz 32). Muñoz draws from Spivak to analyze the theory of migrancy to understand the negotiation of identities and claims, "the negotiations that lead to hybrid identity formation are a travelling back and forth from different identity vectors" (32). This hybrid identity in the lives of the Sharma sisters is highly racialized both by their Indianness and cultural whiteness.

Therefore, reorienting the racial relationship of the characters (within themselves and with the genre) in the show is done in a way that reads like speculative fiction. The word *speculative* originates from the French term *speculatif*, meaning "worth great attention; theoretical", which since the fourteenth century, acquired the meaning "theoretical, purely scientific, in theory only" in English. Speculative fiction, as we understand it today, is a genre that constantly reinvents itself, as it pulls apart reality, intercalating it with fantastical, dystopian, scientific stories that have elements of magical realism, fairy tales, and weird fiction. Speculative literature is famously known to be accommodating of "the proliferation of indigenous, minority, and postcolonial narrative forms that subvert dominant Western notions of the real; and (...) new conceptual categories to accommodate diverse and hybridic [sic] types of storytelling that oppose a stifling vision of reality imposed by exploitative global capitalism" (Oziewicz 1). Speculative fiction also invents theoretical plot situations that are involved in the process of cultural

production. These inventions could be scientific or fantastical, as we often see in speculative novels, but it could also incorporate sociopolitical elements that protrude, exposing the readers to a world order that is so strange it feels surreal. In fact, such literary choices characterize the genre since “social differences like race provide the basis for the fictionalised configurations of identity (technological superhuman, extra-terrestrial, supernatural)” (Carrington 3) for the characters in speculative literature.

Similar to speculative fiction, there is no gradual transition or pointed arrows from a familiar vantage point provided to the viewer in *Bridgerton*. They do not spend time explaining why such a multiracial society exists, beyond the transformative power of love.<sup>33</sup> Is it because of trade? How are these social and class relationships made, unmade, and remade? What motivates the society to be one without racial discrimination, and why are similar rules not applied to patriarchy or class? These questions eventually are rendered somewhat invalid as the modern plot motives intertwine with historical motifs like disguise and cross-dressing. Viewers develop connections with Kate’s and Anthony’s characters and the relationship’s racial connotations by being enthralled by the visual imagery, captivating colours, and music. Marek Oziewicz defines speculative fiction as a genre and field of cultural production that has “departed from consensus reality or embraced a different version of reality than the empirical-materialist one” (1). But the “different version of reality” can be also termed as an alternate historical genre.

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<sup>33</sup> In *Bridgerton*’s first season, released in 2020, slavery is portrayed as an annoyance that was quickly removed since that acted as an inconvenient hindrance to the establishment of Queen Charlotte and George III’s marriage and their personal, romantic relationship because, in the show, the Queen is Black and the King is white. In season one, to a reluctant Duke who refuses to take Daphne Bridgerton’s hand in marriage, Lady Danbury says it is the love between their King and Queen that allowed people of colour equal rights in the society. She says, “We were two separate societies, divided by colour, until a king fell in love with one of us” (“An Affair” 00:20:23 – 00:20:58). This often-quoted conversation is the only instance in the entirety of the show where race is explicitly discussed. Years of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery are almost trivialised for the purpose of a multiracial cast and in the show *Queen Charlotte*, this very plain and simple reason for the eradication of “two separate societies” is justified by creating two characters who are madly in love with each other.

In fact, the show has also been understood as alternate history. Many opined that the show is curated as a “Sparkly Period Piece With a Difference,” including a *New York Times* article from which I borrow the expression. Since this opinion has gained much traction online, it is necessary to delineate the difference between alternate history and speculative romance. Alternate history, a subgenre of speculative fiction, concerns itself with history occurring differently than the accepted understanding. As Karen Hellekson writes, “alternate history asks questions about time, linearity, determinism, and the implicit link between past and present. It considers the individual's role in making history, and it foregrounds the constructedness and narrativity of history” (453). According to Hellekson, authors envision the plot to function in a future or past, sometimes with a similar worldview that is familiar to readers, but sometimes creating a world order that is entirely new. Works in alternate history concern themselves with not only a version of history that could have existed, but also a different rendition of the possible future that forms as a result of the alternate history. As Hellekson notes, for alternate historical pieces, the “future” is usually what the readers experience as their present. Thus, the continuity of a historical process is implicit in alternate history. The causation of an alternate history is reflected in the reality where the readers are experiencing it.

The new world *Bridgerton* has created is not revolutionary, considering many alternative historical works of fiction have featured interracial characters intermingling and have placed them in a historical time where a world order like that would not have been accepted without resistance. However, the unique juxtaposition of interracial yet imperial society as the setting for the show, the interaction of a large fan base that assesses this social setting without a paranoid

reading,<sup>34</sup> the popular romance plots that are at the heart of the show, and the sheer impact of the visual medium, come together to create added layers of speculateness to the show.

Therefore, unlike alternate history, I argue that speculative romance does not offer a future. It solely offers a history to the readers that feels familiar in certain ways, because of their experience of the current moment. In *Bridgerton*, history is not influenced by race in an historically conscious sense. The storyline's orientation towards colonialism, imperialism, and whiteness is therefore detached from the process of history. And, by doing so, the creators of the show are able to erase the conflicts caused by a race-conscious understanding of the history. Race is kept within a private realm. It does not influence the "future" that the audience know and live in, nor does it permeate the speculative history in the show. In addition to speculating a mixed-race romance story in Georgian aesthetics, the makers of the show ask the viewers to reevaluate the sense of time they associate with period dramas. The viewers of the show in the post-pandemic society generally possess a chronological understanding of time though varying in levels—a general knowledge of history and probably a peripheral understanding of the general pattern of period dramas that have existed in the popular culture zeitgeist at any given moment. These viewers are then presented with a storyline that follows a sense of time that is rather alien to them and ensnares them into it by the aestheticism of "Bridgerton blues" and Indian fashion in Regency silhouettes. Our chronological understanding of British imperialism is superimposed onto a speculative moment in time where all societal divisional structures, except race, remain, allowing Black and Brown subjectivities to claim space in society with their white peers. This

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<sup>34</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the influential "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading. Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" questions the reasons for Western critique predominantly relying on paranoid readings—interpretations that seek to uncover hidden violent structures. Sedgwick proposes a 'reparative' approach that not only considers what is being written, said, or done, but also examines how these actions are carried out and for what purpose.

space, however, is private and secluded from the aristocratic white society's vantage point.

Therefore, I use the term speculative instead of "alternate" very intentionally. The relationship between Kate's and Edwina's private cultural expressions and the employment of disidentificatory tactics are the two sides of the same coin, and therefore, I will spend some time investigating it.

### **Domesticated Brownness or the Indianness relegated to the private**

The show introduces the recent arrival of the two sisters and their mother, Mary Sharma, into high society from India and follows their integration into London society. This seamless and natural integration is written into the show, which presents to the viewers a cultural and racial phenomenology of twenty-first-century multiculturalism. Kate and Edwina's Indian heritage is disproportionately compared and contrasted with the cultural whiteness they both inhabit. The unfolding of their Indianness is used instrumentally at intervals when it seems to be useful for the storyline but otherwise ignored. It is certainly interesting to note where exactly in the storyline the relationship between whiteness and nationality is shown as an ontological given as it is sometimes abstracted and sometimes preserved.

The introductory scene with Kate and Anthony happens in the woods as Kate rides past Anthony, and he follows, thinking that the lady on the horse is in danger. The ride soon becomes a race. By riding a horse, Kate is marked as a lady belonging to a high class, one that probably has a maid or is already married—two of the assumptions Anthony makes during their first conversation. Her class and the cultural whiteness Kate performs are therefore presented as an ontological given. The show places class as an institution of primary importance, like patriarchy. Fan and academic discourses around the choice of the creators in removing the history of unjust

race relationships often ignores a very apparent class relationship that looms over the plot. Class in the show conflates with whiteness and the empire, substituting itself in the absence of any acknowledgement of British imperialism.<sup>35</sup> The system of injustice is not removed, but merely replaced, and the replacement presents itself as innocuous and rather invisible to an audience living within a neoliberal socioeconomic world order. Kate is hypervigilant about the importance of maintaining a class status quo and works towards achieving it. However, elements of her cultural and racial history are brought back into this equation occasionally. After the “race,” as Kate finds her way back to Mayfair, she is startled by Anthony, who appears out of nowhere and asks, "Enjoying your victory lap?" (“Capital R” 00:08:17), to which Kate exclaims "*Baap re!*" (“Capital R” 00:08:18). This is the *only* time she speaks in Hindi in the entirety of the season. This oddly placed exclamation and the deliberate code switches to Indian-accented English that happen occasionally place the viewer's attention on the tussle between Kate's performance of whiteness and her Indianness.

Kate's intention in coming to England, as she repeatedly states, is to find a love match for her sister, Edwina. She takes on the role of a matriarch and actively embroils herself in her sister's interests; she does not hesitate to interact with potential suitors and even decide whom her sister gets to marry. For Kate, the alliance that their family is seeking is of utmost importance. While they are delighted at the attention Edwina has gained (she is named the season's diamond by the Queen), Kate seems to be sceptical of this acceptance and insists on further performing the inhabited whiteness to Edwina. The aforementioned slip of Hindi exclamation reinforces how conservatively she lets her Brown subjectivities shine through the cloud of inhabited whiteness.

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<sup>35</sup> To give an example, Will and Alice Mondrich, Black characters who were first introduced in season one as the Duke's friends, only gain social acceptability and friends once their son inherits a title. They access spaces with money and a name. Spaces that were before unavailable to them, despite being the Duke's confidants when they were working class.

The occasions when Kate's Indianness feels comfortable to shine through are—I would argue quite intentionally—entirely private and domestic. She is portrayed as a tea connoisseur, who makes her own spiced Indian tea (“A Bee” 00:43:56) and mentions in a brief conversation with Mr. Dorset that she misses Bombay "especially during teatime" (“Off To” 00:08:34). In public spaces, she approaches her cultural identity as a memory buried deep in the performed nobility, and as something that needs to be quietly removed as a potential threat to social acceptance. She approaches this with such forthrightness that her practical and guarded choices portray her decisions as “manly” in a highly gendered class society. The unrestrained protection Kate offers to her family holds space for her to be compared with Anthony as an equal. If these characteristics orient her in a gender spectrum to be close to “manliness,” the moments where she is honest and vulnerable, talking about her Brownness, moves her to “womanhood” with its delicate and soft portrayal. The public interactions between Kate and others at the pall mall game, the sharing of the experience of being stung by a bee, and seeing Anthony falling in water, are all instances in the show that suggest the constant tugging between the character’s gendered association with cultural and societal expectations and her choices.

Another instance where the topic of tea comes up is during the crucial conversation between Kate and Lady Danbury, discussing the family's financial situation. Kate insists that it is vital for Edwina to find a love match. Kate is aware of the potential social ostracism that would have awaited Edwina in high society had she not been taught to "walk in the right way, to talk in the right way, to play pianoforte just so" (“Capital R” 00:53:09). She continues; "I even taught her how to make this pitiful excuse for tea the English so adore. I despise English tea" (00:53:24). Kate hides her true self from society, her family, and even herself. Her Indianness is only allowed a few restricted meanderings outside of an upper-class whiteness that she performs,

and she can only follow certain patterns. Hence, Indian spiced tea becomes a part of her Indian heritage.<sup>36</sup>

Another example of her Indian heritage being confined to private spaces is in episode six. The night before the wedding of Edwina and Anthony, the Sharma women gather to participate in the Haldi ceremony—a predominantly Hindu pre-marriage ritual where usually the bride, groom, and their family come together and rub turmeric paste on the bride and groom, wishing them a happy life together. The Sharma women quietly share this moment of love and hope, away from the Bridgerton family. Even Lady Danbury, with whom the Sharmas are staying, is not present at the ceremony. The ritual usually involves a lot more people as it is supposed to be an event where bride and groom are blessed by the family members. However, the Sharma women choose to celebrate it privately, and therefore, do not rupture the social whiteness that is usually performed by them. Hence, the story line stays intact, without the distraction of protruding Brown subjectivities and remains agreeable to a large audience who watch the show expecting only romance. This convergence of speculative fiction and historical romance interests me. The content of the genre, like the form, reinvents and reorders. There are no limits to the fantastical racial interconnectedness of the characters in this Georgian romance because the BIPOC characters' race goes almost completely unacknowledged by the white characters in the show. This in *Bridgerton* is surreally fictionalised, and yet it is not too far removed from some discourses about race in our current reality. The racial equation (and specifically *only* the racial

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<sup>36</sup> During the colonial rule in India, tea was an expensive indulgence, only accessible to the English palate. During the freedom movement, many freedom fighters boycotted tea due to this very reason. Indian tea was only popularised in the 1920s, post-World War I when tea prices plummeted in Britain. A cheaper variety of tea, known as CTC, was advertised by the British, and a marketing campaign was created where workers were urged to take a tea break during work hours. Kate's anachronistic love for spiced tea is colonial and capitalist in nature, and that is quite interesting and fitting, in my opinion.

equation) of the show seems to have time travelled from a liberal version of the twenty-first century to the private spaces of the Regency era.

Therefore, drawing on Ahmed's question of whiteness as a phenomenological issue, there needs to be a closer examination of how Kate's race operates within and outside of the bounds of whiteness. Whiteness, according to Ahmed and as depicted through the Sharma sisters, is not natural. It is acquired, inhabited, it is "real, material and lived" ("A Phenomenology" Ahmed 150). Kate's insistence on Edwina marrying well certainly emphasises the hope she has in the vertical class mobility promised by an alliance with whiteness. For Kate, "freedom takes form as proximity to whiteness" (*Promise of Ahmed* 135). What these geopolitical positions do differently, however, is help explore "what emotional and sexual success for women looks like in a potentially-hostile world, transforming women from the object of Orientalist pornography into the subject of Orientalist romantic fantasies" (Ficke 125). Kate can go against the interests of her family (and of herself) since the creators have positioned her free of many social and cultural restrictions. Thinking through the financial insecurity faced by the Sharmas and the failed marriage between Edwina and Anthony with Ahmed's analysis of the melancholic migrants, it becomes apparent that the happiness of the characters in this romantic novel is contingent upon their subjective experience of successfully inhabiting whiteness.

### **Time, place, and the speculative romance**

Thinking about time, society, and history, I also adopt Saidiya Hartman's cultural theoretical approach to understand the speculative nature of this romance show. Hartman's attentive and detailed reimagination of Black intimate lives in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and her successful attempt at writing a "speculative history of the wayward" as an

“effort to narrate the open rebellion and beautiful experiment produced by young black women in the emergent ghetto” (470) emphasises the importance of reading between the lines of forgotten history. As she unearths the vital parts of history in the context of Atlantic slavery archives and material history, she offers an invaluable praxis to scholars who are interested in the lives of the marginalised—looking farther than you are ever trained to look. Imagine a life for the kin you lost in the colonial reproduction of history. Hartman’s writing practice of “narrating the time of slavery as our present” (12), therefore, becomes even more relevant to my observation about the Brown subjectivity in *Bridgerton*. For Hartman, “narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present” (4) as her engagement with archival materials is anti-colonial and anti-imperialist and continues to remain so, since it is also an ongoing project against settler colonialism. The three Indian women finding agency in the Regency era, therefore, becomes an important talking point in the conversation about the social positioning of Black and Brown folks in the Western world now and in the past, even if the writers of the show have steered clear of this discourse in season two.

There are interesting records of interracial people in Britain who lived lives of social and political importance, but their stories are relegated to the marginalia of historical records. Durba Ghosh, in her *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*, argues, “In early colonial British India, creolization, conjugality, and cooperation between men and women of different cultural backgrounds created the image of a golden age in which racial hierarchies and boundaries were unimportant” (1). Ghosh rightly points out the systemic and social privilege European men possessed during this era specifically, as Indian women rarely had agency when it came to sexual and bodily autonomy. In an interview with *the Los Angeles Times*, Ghosh said, “There were a lot of Indian women coming in and out of the military camps to do housework, as well as sex work

and provisioning” (n.p.). This is not to say that all interracial relationships followed the same pattern; rather, relationships like those between Mary Sharma and her Indian husband were not as common. However, Ghosh and William Dalrymple, authors of the book *White Mughals*, have documented multiple interracial relationships where the multi-racial children lived in Regency-era Britain. Dalrymple’s book is the account of Lieutenant Colonel James Achilles Kirkpatrick and his wife, Khair un-Nissa. His extensive research focuses on the

no less remarkable tale of Khair un-Nissa's daughter, Kitty Kirkpatrick. She had initially been brought up as Sahib Begum, a Muslim noblewoman in Hyderabad, before being shipped off to England at four years old, baptized on her arrival in London and thenceforth completely cut off from her maternal relations. Instead, she had been absorbed into the upper echelons of Victorian literary society, where she had fascinated her cousins' tutor, the young Thomas Carlyle, and formed the basis for the heroine Blumine, 'a many tinted radiant Aurora... the fairest of Oriental light-bringers', in Carlyle's novel *Sartor Resartus*. (15)

Ghosh, in “Inspiring *Bridgerton*: the real South Asian Women in Regency-era England,” supports many of Dalrymple’s observations of the era and offers examples of Helene Bennett and Elizabeth Ducarel, women who shared similar social and personal history as Kitty and notes these women “are a small but very real piece of the history of Georgian and Regency England that rightly inform the casting” (Ghosh n.p) of the show. She adds, “We might be tempted to think of these Asian women as social climbers, aspiring to join the ranks of the elite and cultivated in England. Instead, we should recall that they were elite and educated in India, which allowed them to adjust to the expectations of social life in Georgian and Regency England” (n.p). These examples certainly throw much light on the casting choices of the show. Therefore,

analyzing the Sharma sisters in the context of these well documented histories in parallel to the creative choice of the makers of the show that removed any colonial struggle or structural racism in the plot of season two, becomes much more nuanced.

According to Hartman, “a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing” (4). *Bridgerton* writes the past as interrupted by our now and thereby establishes a relationship with our knowledge of the past and this speculative past offered by the show. This speculateness, coupled with racebending, creates an experimental environment where the characters could thrive, devoid of the baggage of historical events. This creates an opportunity for conversations about people who were really part of British society to emerge. Reading Hartman’s conscientious analysis of the lived experience and perceived future of people of colour, parallel to Muñoz’s arguments, reifies the racialized elements of literature that are most commonly associated with the speculative genre. The literature that belongs to the genre emulates subversive characteristics, and intrinsically, so do the characters, setting, and the story. Muñoz writes, “the process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (31). Speculative Romance shares its universalizing facets through *Bridgerton* while simultaneously reinforcing the need for BIPOC actors to play roles that are not restricted to historical misery, thereby employing the politics of tactics to maintain representation in popular culture while portraying the happiness of people of colour.

Therefore, it would not be a stretch to claim that the genre itself has racialized qualities that support its literature, and vice versa.

In addition, it is not merely the lack of racism within the Regency society of *Bridgerton* that makes me read this show as a speculative romance; rather, the genre itself is complicated by the history of race and imperialism. As mentioned, while it is characteristic of the historical romance genre to show love stories set in historical settings, there is a distancing approach to history that the creators of the show undertake. They have removed certain parts from history and placed elements of a popular romance overlapping the genre. The meticulous effort other contemporary historical dramas (like many Jane Austen movie adaptations or *The Favorite*) put in to present a story that is partly parallel to the history is not followed by the creators of *Bridgerton*. Pamela Regis observes in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* that "in historical romance novels, the society is carefully drawn and its unfamiliar principles explained" (31). *Bridgerton* assumes the viewers accept their version of a Regency era from the onset. The historical account of interracial existence vouches for the active presence of people of colour in high society in imperial Britain. The narrative that the social space was exclusively for white Europeans and the consensus reality around the existence of BIPOC people in British history have been rooted in rather a systemic disregard for their history, poor record keeping, and the continuous rewriting of white history as the only truth. Ghosh and Dalrymple's examples proves this approach. *Bridgerton* replaces the act of deliberate forgetting with a successful romance. It is this replacement that excited the viewers, as well as the acafan in me. The forgotten history, as Hartman suggests, creates an opportunity for people to create a world order that it at the same time not disrespectfully fictionalised, but speculated as a counter-history. Therefore, *Bridgerton* creates a parallel between historical romance and speculative genres by precisely extrapolating

Hartman's theoretical approach of historical reimagination. This allows people of colour to inhabit a spacetime created for them, and it acts as a pathfinder to the real, undocumented, and systemically removed lives of their long-lost kin. What allowed Kate and Anthony to win many hearts in the fandom could also be the ability of this reimagination.

### **Disidentificatory practices of the fandom**

The acceptance Kate's and Anthony's characters have received since the release of the show is disproportionately big. South Asian subjectivities that were highlighted throughout the season certainly helped the case of this pairing. One cannot negate the fact that Brown people have too often been represented as nerdy Raj or Apu with an accent (*Big Bang Theory*, *The Simpsons*) in western popular culture. Much has changed since these representations as the conversations around race, class, and imperialism have advanced. As an acafan, I'm interested in both the change in representation as well as the conversations around said representation in online fan communities. In many of the couple rankings, Kate and Anthony seem to be ranked first, or as a close second to Charlotte and George.<sup>37</sup> The fans seem to be defending the characters and the actors a lot in online discussion, compared to other Bridgerton couples.<sup>38</sup> The show is placed in an amalgamation of many historical contortions, and many of these aspects work well with the audience's expectations. With the change in representations, the viewers are open to new and exciting portrayal of people of colour in the forefront. Social vectors like poverty, spiritualism, and mysticism that are commonly employed for the depiction of Brown

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<sup>37</sup>These are articles that have ranked many of the Bridgerton couples: (<https://screenrant.com/bridgerton-show-romances-couples-ranked-worst-best/>, , <https://screenrant.com/best-couples-period-romance-tv-shows/> ). There is also direct involvement of fandom through spaces like X where they share their opinion on each pairing. An example is a tweet from the handle @kirkxxs (<https://x.com/kirkxxs/status/1791672087918035059>).

<sup>38</sup> This is another example of the posts made on the Bridgerton fan community on X from the handle @Liiiioness (<https://x.com/Liiiioness/status/1836521094766813543>)

subjectivities have gradually changed, accepting a fictional life with happiness and drama that was once only accessible to white characters. Viewers accepted the portrayal of Black joy in season one of *Bridgerton* despite its omission of conversations around slavery because viewers employ a disidentificatory reading of the representation in the show. This analysis is supported by Muñoz’s analysis that “for some [POC] spectators, this confrontation with whiteness does not occlude the pleasure that such images offer, but rather, such confrontations can be part of a disidentificatory project that manages to partially recycle and hold on to these representations” (72). Similarly, the fan community analyzed the colours of the costumes Kate wears in season two,<sup>39</sup> to make connections between the portrayal of Indianness and the politics of representation in western popular culture. Muñoz insists that “disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspectives of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (25). The representational hierarchy in Western popular culture that has designated Brown subjectivities according to their will is seen taking a different shape in *Bridgerton* as the fans analyze the characterization through the vectors of aesthetics that were designed for White viewers or that are based in pan-Indian stereotypes held by white viewers.

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<sup>39</sup> The show has always given importance to the wardrobe of the characters. The *Bridgerton* family wore blues and pastels with delicate jewelry representing refinement, elegance, and wealth. This is often contrasted with the costume of the Featheringtons. They are dressed in bright yellows and greens with loud feathers and ornate jewelry, suggesting a rather tacky and blowsy public presence. This tweet by @sturmhoehein analyses the significance of colours Kate wear in each episode (<https://x.com/sturmhoehein/status/1808606637361418509>). The colours and design of Kate’s clothes signify her character identity. The repeatedly worn shades of dark blue and teal represents her Indian heritage and her strong personality. Orange has been remarkably used in the show, both to invoke Indianness and to add warmth to the character as she opens up to a relationship. Both Kate and Edwina’s jewelry, while adhering to the social standards of the Ton, are also ornate, elegant and evoking of a different cultural background. Kate and Edwina wears bangles quite regularly, as opposed to other characters who wear gloves. At times, they wear bangles on top of their gloves. While these might look like breadcrumbs of genuine representation of Brown subjectivities, like Muñoz, I’m interested in understanding how the response to these are examples of disidentificatory tactics employed by fandoms.

A Reddit thread posted by Sure-Count4449 under the thread r/BridgertonNetflix shows stills of all the brides in the show so far and adds a "No Image Available" note to where Kate's photo should have been placed. The viewers are clearly bothered by the fact that Kate did not get a wedding scene (unless one would factor in the scene in Anthony's imagination) possibly to make the character's Brownness acceptable. One user commented, "Telling, isn't it? There's no limit to how many weddings can be included in a season, as long as none of them are Kanthony's." The characterisation of Kate's interest in leading a private life renders the choice of the writers of the show to make imperialism further invisible. By removing the wedding and pregnancy from screen, the show cements its interest in not imagining a future, adding to the speculativeness. The interracial marriage between a historical colonizer and a colonized in Regency romance is shown through a veil of white imperial romance requirements. One could even argue that the personalities of Kate and Anthony were matched so well to create an image of the couple that mirrors the Christian values of a one-flesh union. Kate is—quite unsurprisingly—supposed to mend Anthony's character with love and care, despite the similarities in grievances they share at a personal level. At the social and economic level, it becomes Kate's duty to perform this with utmost care, for it naturalises and cements the process of marriage. These elements also stay true to the characteristics of the romance genre.

As noted by the diligent fan community, both the sisters eventually get married off-screen. The only time we see Kate in a wedding dress is in Anthony's imagination, and she is wearing the same wedding dress as Edwina ("The Choice" 00:20:38). The sisters, their identity, and their Brown subjectivities seem to get enmeshed in one another, existing as one entity. Anthony, despite being in love with Kate, is willing to marry Edwina, thereby creating the rift between the sisters, and comes in as the rescuer, trying to mend the issue. Edwina and Kate, both

of whom have been sharing similar passions and interests, drift apart as their performance in white society falls apart because their emotions get in the way. This symbolic tension between imperial Britain and colonized India continues to find a place in the relationship of Kate and Anthony as they eventually get together, since they continue to be portrayed as very competitive with each other—although now, after the marriage, more playfully. This geopolitical tension privatizes into this heteronormative couple, creating an interesting equation that the white romance genre adores.

BIPOC fandoms need to restructure their relationship to the show's portrayal of Brown subjectivities in a way that prioritizes the "good" representation functions in a similar disidentificatory way. Kate comes from an unlocatable place in India. The writers of the show seem comfortable in positioning Kate between the ambivalence of her character adamantly not being interested in being part of society and her awareness that meaningful assimilation is impossible for her since her father (presumably dead) and stepmother are not themselves part of the society—although eventually she finds a place for herself in the society by marrying Anthony. These incongruities are noticed by fans as well. The detailing in the characterization of the sisters has irked me for a long while. Specifically, Kate's constructed identity looks like a melting pot of Indianness with elements that are infamously known for being easily acceptable and identifiable to white audiences. To start with, Kate calls Edwina "Bon" multiple times in the show, a term of endearment, although pronounced incorrectly (the correct pronunciation is bona/bone), meaning "little sister." This term comes from the Bengali language, which is spoken by people living in the eastern neck of India. Edwina calls Kate "Didi," meaning elder sister, in Hindi, a language spoken majorly by people from North India. Kate calls her father "Appa," meaning father, in Tamil language, spoken by people from South India. The surname Sharma is

indicative of a group of upper-caste people from North India. Kate remarks multiple times that she misses Bombay, a city on the western coast of India in the state of Maharashtra. Both Kate and Edwina call Lady Mary, Mama, and the most used word of address in public is English.

Despite these facts, Brown fans appreciate the characterization of the Sharma women, the place they are capable of holding in North American popular culture, and the sheer joy of it. Muñoz has analyzed this very equation of representation, identification, and public acceptance by analyzing Mapplethorpe's images of Black gay men. He calls it a "disidentificatory pleasure" (70) and suggests that "disidentification is an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to retain the problematic object and tap into the energies that are produced by contradiction and ambivalencies" (71). By quoting Mercer, Muñoz brings the "dispersive shock effect" (qtd. in Muñoz 70) into the centre of his argument to analyze the emotional quotient of disidentification.

So, the creators of *Bridgerton* throw out the historical understanding of racial operations in colonial Britain, creating an ambiguous structure of representation which is, at the same time, a poor composition of a group of easily accepted Brown subjectivities in the contemporary Global North and a space that is very visibly carved out for Brownness to exist. By dwelling in the ambiguity, the fandom thrives in refusing an "unequivocal yes/no answer to the question of whether they reinforce or undermine commonplace racist stereotypes," (Mercer qtd. in Muñoz 70). This ambiguity (or the speculativeness as I have called it throughout this chapter) becomes the fandom's practice of disidentification. The "shock value" of the beautiful, sexy, intelligent, and authoritative presence of Brown women in Regency romance and North American popular culture is absorbed into the social fabric of fandom, and the shock is dissipated, forcing and restructuring the ability of shock to be rendered as commonplace, acceptable, and even desirable. The Brown body shall not shock is a deliberate decision of the fandom. They fixate on its natural

positioning and move past, seeing that the representation is not for them, in truly in a disidentificatory fashion.

The whiteness of the romance genre has manifested differently for the actors and the fan reception of the show. While the characters are secluded in a safe, albeit speculative, Shangri-la, the actors take the brunt of it. An X user @kathanisharma posted a few screenshots from TikTok where the text read, "I have nothing against dark-skinned actors, but he is not giving," to which OP responded with "... to say that ...and post a bunch of white people or lighter skinned actors? the racism is jumping out." Despite the whiteness of the romance genre facilitating sanitized English weddings and privatized Indian rituals, the expectations from many viewers of the show go back to whiteness and the tradition of the romance genre. The social conditions that influenced the production of the show allowed it to create a speculative romance show despite some viewers being faithful to the romance genre in all its traditional glory. The unseen relationship between the empire and the genre gets a double-folded meaning in season two and in the audience's reception after its release.

The relevance of the British Empire and the social value of cultural whiteness for the characters translates into the relevance of capitalism and the social value of multiculturalism for the actors after the release of the show. In the introduction, I wrote about a video showing the price reduction stickers stuck on the cover of *The Viscount Who Loved Me* covering Simone Ashley's face. While this example from the bookstore could have been an isolated incident, the underlying argument that the genre pressure maps onto the actors and their identities stands. As Ahmed argues, "[Colonial] histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how the bodies surface. Race then does become a social as well as bodily given, or what we *receive* from

others as an inheritance of this history" ("A Phenomenology" 154). The bigger social issues get pulled into private relationships, and this pattern of cultural reproduction is endlessly reproduced.

In this chapter, I proposed that the interaction of the fan community with the source material, and the underlying socioeconomic structures that influence the field of cultural production come together to create a speculativeness to the historical romance genre. This speculativeness takes further precedence as the fans of the show and the characters perform disidentificatory politics. The future of *Bridgerton*, and the representational politics in North America will continue to be influenced by these factors. The buoyancy of this will be tested by the influence imperialism and neoliberalism have over the production of art and will decide if the sailing for these acts of politics will be smooth or through choppy waters.

## Conclusion

My analysis of *Ms. Marvel* and *Bridgerton* spans politically, geographically, and historically contoured memories, as well as the reproduction of memories. While studying *Ms. Marvel* and *Bridgerton*, physically removed from the land that acted as inspiration for the creation of these texts, I kept thinking about the current popular culture climate in mainstream Hindi. As a Malayali from the southern state of Kerala—despite my culture, language, and milieu being nothing alike—I grew up watching Hindi movies and listening to Hindi songs. To me, Hindi popular culture comes in a close third when the question of the most influential popular culture is raised, right after Tamil. Malayali popular culture was not big enough to be represented globally, let alone domestically. Many popular Malayalam movies were adapted into Hindi, making the adaptations a popular culture sensation without ever really crediting the original language or culture. However, in the current Hindi popular culture climate, what I knew as a Malayali growing up in Southern India and much of what influenced the portrayal of characters in both the texts I studied has changed drastically.

India and Pakistan have been constantly at a warring stage ever since the partition, which has crept into every dimension of human existence in each country—economic, cultural, and emotional. The countries exist, threatening to unleash its industrial complexes made of military, prison, and religious extremism. The partition was the “forced gift” (*The Promise of Ahmed* 125) of the British, and the countries are hanging on to it. What becomes of the culture in such a volatile system? What happens to the actors who are banned from performing in the neighbouring country and revered musicians who are unwelcome from crossing the border? Fawad Khan, the actor who played the character of Kamala’s great grandfather, Hasan, in *Ms. Marvel*, was one among the many Pakistani actors who were banned from acting in Bollywood

movies in 2016.<sup>40</sup> What becomes of mainstream and popular Hindi culture and the significant impact it could have on future Western popular culture works because it has transformed into the mouthpiece of the right-wing majoritarian Hindu government? Will an Indian Muslim girl see Kamala and feel kinship? Will it touch the heartstrings of Tamilians when the Sharma sisters refer to their dad as *Appa*? How many elements of these portrayals still shaped with predominantly white, North American audiences in mind will they need to push aside in order to value the representation rather than rejecting it as built from western stereotypes?

When I stressed the potential tactics of the popular culture genre throughout this thesis, I did not do so without being cognizant of its conservative tendencies. After all, the two genres are not monoliths; they will not decidedly and continuously exhibit one set of patterns of cultural expression. Nevertheless, the sociopolitical context of cultural production determines its ability to resist hegemonic ideologies. The inspiration for both these texts was India's global and impactful history of Bollywood and Hindi popular culture. Despite all the flaws, when the plurality of popular culture is replaced with right-wing crusaders, there will not be any useful currency to be exchanged between Western and South Asian popular culture. The reproduction of cultural memories in such a context requires the critical employment of politics of tactical disidentification both in the Indian subcontinent and in Western popular culture.

In Chapter One, I discussed how *Ms. Marvel* the comic operates under a neoliberal social and economic structure. There are compelling economic reasons in the Western popular culture industry to include the nuances of the cultural politics of the Indian subcontinent when representing people of colour. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the political reality of society is

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<sup>40</sup> This *Vogue* article discusses the issue of artists crossing the border. In 2023, this was overruled by the Supreme Court of India, allowing artists from both countries to work transnationally. <https://www.vogue.in/content/in-lifting-the-ban-on-pakistani-artists-bombay-hc-salutes-the-transformative-power-of-art-and-culture>

entangled with our popular culture, and the authorial hand fandom has in this relationship is significant. Looking forward, there is a need to study the potentially dangerous shift in Hindi popular culture, which acts as a source of inspiration and cultural catalyst for South Asian representation in the Global North.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that there is a notable link between the historical and political environment of superhero comics and the depiction of the revisionist superhero, Ms. Marvel. Similarly, the dynamics between white heteronormative culture and the romance genre are questioned through the racebending casting choices in *Bridgerton*. In the end, this thesis asserts that the tactical politics present in Western popular culture provide both a theoretical framework and a driving force for action, which is essential in a racially hegemonic society characterized by neoliberalism and settler colonialism. I would like to reiterate that the discourse around South Asian representation in North American popular culture is significant for three reasons: first, the neoliberal and imperialist structures are actively questioned and resisted every day. At times, this resistance comes from the fandom, and, at other times, it is manifested through the intentional defiance of the artist. Second, it is important to have global representational power that can redefine popular culture “back home.” Brown subjectivities are connected, despite the distance between the lands (Pakistan and India), and there is equal responsibility in curating politically conscious content in the current sociopolitical structure as both industries exert significant influence on diaspora. And three, it is vital to occasionally remind ourselves of this reality to maintain hope in a world that often feels bleak.

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