

Kapow! Bam! Wham! Shattering Adolescent Stereotypes and Promoting Social Change Making in Comic Books

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In this article, I discuss how educators can use comic books, like Marvel's Ms. Marvel, to shatter adolescent stereotypes and constructs. Using a modified version of Petrone et al.'s (2015) Youth Lens analysis, I analyze Ms. Marvel, Volumes 1 and 2, focusing on characterization, images, and themes centered on relationships between adolescents and adults, as well as adolescents and their inner struggles to play an important role in their world. I identified four themes: (a) adults serving as guides, (b) adults and authority, (c) the careless and reckless teen, and (d) adolescents as social change makers. Findings suggest comic books like Ms. Marvel can help adolescent readers become aware of the power they have to change stereotypes while addressing social issues.

...great literature surprises us; it makes us pause to consider people and cultures and ideas and conflicts and dreams and tragedies that we have not yet encountered in quite the same way before. Comic books, in my opinion, embody and demonstrate this potential. When masterfully created, they reveal our lives to us, and in so doing they help us to gain some insight into the world around us in surprising ways. (Versaci, 2001, p. 19)

Some of my fondest memories as a child involved my father and reading. I can remember watching him in amazement as he sped through the pages of what looked like Bible-length books. Each week we would walk to our small town's library, and he would get lost in the aisles while I would sit down on the worn-out beanbag in the children's section with my ten chosen books for the week. The fun part of this ritual was when he would ask me to show him which books I had chosen, and I would proudly start displaying my collection. He would always smile, affirming to me that I had chosen wisely. However, in particular, there was one time when he let out a sweet chuckle as I showed him one of my selected texts. It was a comic book. I do not recall reading many comic books as a child, though I would watch cartoons based on comic book characters. This time I had found, just lying on a corner table in the children's section like a discarded piece of treasure, a comic book. It was a

Bill Watters' *Calvin and Hobbes*. I remember seeing the strips as my dad read the newspaper each Sunday, but I had no idea there were books made just for them. I cannot quite remember which volume of *Calvin and Hobbes* I held in my hands, but I do remember a joyful look radiating from my father's eyes. It was at that moment that my love for comic books began.

As the years flew by, our shared love for a good comic book only grew. As a young child and adolescent, I unfortunately never saw the educative value of comic books as far as school was concerned. I vaguely remember a teacher reprimanding me once for taking my Scott Adams' *Dilbert* comic book as my sustained silent reading choice; I was supposed to have taken a *real* book. The reprimand did not bother me; what stung was the insinuation that I did not know what a real book was. I was an avid reader, of course, I knew what a book was. I had read my fair share of classics. I had just finished reading an American classic, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. I loved it. As lengthy as I remember it being, I resonated with Carrie who left her small hometown to try to make it in Chicago. I too was from a small hometown, and I could one day see myself moving to a slightly bigger town, not quite Chicago-size, to try and make a life. However, I could also relate to Dilbert who worked with intellectually questionable individuals, or to Calvin, who sardonically asked questions about real-world issues. Because my choice in texts was questioned, I felt personally attacked. I could not understand why the teacher did not see my text as a valid choice of reading for sustained silent reading time.

Fortunately, her close-mindedness would not deter my love of comic book reading. As a young adult, I dove into the comic book worlds of superheroes and villains, especially that of Wonder Woman. To this day, special-ordered drawings, and Funko Pops of the Amazonian Goddess adorn my school desk and my home office. The worlds I traveled to and the discourses I shared with characters taught me valuable lessons. I understood that comic books have more than mere entertainment value. Comic books gave me insight into the imaginary worlds written and drawn across the panels and to the real world around me. With comic books, I plan to have my students learn more about the world around them and to discover their place in the grand scheme of it all.

So, what is it about comic books that immerse readers, inviting them to enter characters' worlds, both imaginary and real? How is it that the reader experiences how characters take on their role(s), either villainous or good or sometimes a little of both? Through these characters, our desires to relate to them grow with every speech bubble and panel. As readers, we want to relate to their strengths. Their battles become our battles and their victories, our victories. We relate to these

characters' flaws or their downfalls from grace or power. This strong connection experienced between reader and character occurs when the character in the story shares a specific aspect in one's cultural upbringing. However, what happens during the reading experience when the character is someone different? What happens when a character's age, culture, religion, or beliefs differ from the readers? How can educators help students analyze young adult literature in a meaningful way that examines the young adult and adult characters and the global lessons intertwined with their interactions? This content analysis of Marvel's *Ms. Marvel*, volumes 1 and 2, shows how educators can promote social change making in adolescent readers while shattering disparaging stereotypes about youths.

MS. MARVEL

Ms. Marvel, volumes 1 and 2, written by G. Willow Wilson and illustrated by Adrian Alphona and Jacob Wyatt, depict the story of Kamala Khan, a teenager from Jersey City, exposed to Terrigen Mist, a "mutagenic substance," (Bacon, n.d., para. 4) that alters her genes transforming her into an inhuman with superhuman powers. As she learns to understand and control her powers, she also must balance societal and parental demands with the demands she faces as a superhero. She fights to save Jersey City and its youths from the Inventor, a mutated evil genius. His robotic minions keep Ms. Marvel on her toes, and along the way, she connects with experienced superheroes and forms stronger relationships with the adults in her life who help her navigate her new role. Throughout her journey in volumes 1 and 2, Kamala sees and embraces the strength she garners from her Muslim culture and makes it a part of her superhero identity. This comic book, centering on the life of a brave young heroine's journey through adolescence and becoming the *best* version of herself makes a great young adult literature (YAL) read for all, especially teenagers who crave nontraditional texts.

RELATED RESEARCH

Though using comic books in the classroom is far from a novice approach, many educators, school districts, and parents refuse to see the value in non-traditional texts. Many in education do not see graphic novels and classic adaptations with visuals as real literature (Griffith, 2010). The 1950s emergence of the American "comic Code Authority, a form of censorship or seal of approval" based on a comic's social and cultural suitability (Derbel, 2019, p. 55) kept educators from using them as primary texts. Alongside comic books, graphic novels have also garnered negative attention in the ELA classroom because they are seen as more recreational than academic (Fenty & Brydon, 2020, p. 279). Fortunately, current research shows the academic benefits of using comics and graphic

novels as teaching resources (Fenty & Brydon, 2020). Comics allow students to “explore key components of literary analysis such as characterization, setting, tone and mood using the color or visual cues from images” along with the text (p. 56). Because comics serve as a window into societal issues and popular culture, an argument is made that comic books are valuable YAL in the classroom (Kirtley et al., 2020, p. 6).

Moreover, comics promote understanding and empathy in readers because the unique textual and visual discourse can lead to reflective possibilities and increased engagement and motivation (Botzakis, 2010; Dallacqua et al., 2021; Lewkowich, 2019a; Lewkowich 2019b). Comics encourage critical self-reflection from the reader and critical reflection of society because they give readers opportunities to learn using “multiple access points...about literature, history, and culture” (Jiménez et al., 2017, p. 363). For some adolescents, the “non-linearity and the variety of layouts and constructions which make the reader’s gaze wander up and down and diagonally across a page (or pages)” (Sabeti, 2013, p. 840) is also appealing. Visually rich mediums can also help discouraged adolescent readers find a passion for reading. One educator noted that their reader who was struggling went from barely wanting to read to reading 184 Japanese comic books within a year because it is easier for a story to come together through images (Marshall, 2018). Another educator emphasized how comics can guide students’ reading comprehension of complex texts, lead to analytical enrichment activities, and provide similar universal ideas found in the traditional YAL canon (Sellars, 2017).

A TEXT FOR ALL ADOLESCENT READERS

Throughout the related research, educators promote teaching with comics especially with English as a second language (ESL) learners, because the amount of text in a comic is not as overwhelming and frightening (Linklater, 2019). Students will tend to choose multimodal texts that combine visual and text that are not difficult for them; these texts can also have audio accessibility. Moyer (2011), in their study about adolescents making non-traditional text choices, concluded that “educators, policymakers, and governmental agencies need to move beyond traditional genres like the NEA categories of fiction, biographies, drama, and poetry and modernize their definitions of reading” (p. 255). They argued that adolescents are reading texts, but they are not the traditional texts that educators are used to. Texts like graphic novels, rich in images, allow struggling readers to “read materials that were previously too difficult in length or in use of language” (Griffith, 2010, p. 184). Liu (2004) posited that the easy-to-read nature of most comics makes comics great resources for

ESL students trying to grasp the social nuances of the English language. Though Liu's population sample were ESL adults in a classroom environment, the study's results showed that students scored much higher in recall when a comic strip had text compared to assessed students given text alone (p. 236). ESL learners can also benefit from reading comic books or graphic novels in the classroom because these texts can be innovative vocabulary tools (Griffith, 2010).

Not only do comic books and graphic novels help ESL students build their English language skills, but research also shows that these texts serve as great tools for students with learning disabilities. Fenty and Brydon (2019) explained that students with disabilities seek out these texts because they are "motivating, interesting, and engaging, especially when compared with" typical and traditional YAL canon (p. 279). In their study, Fenty and Brydon (2019) explained that educators can strengthen the comprehensive fluency of struggling readers using graphic novels with "prereading, repeated reading, and extension activities" (p. 282). In using graphic novels and these three main strategies, these researchers concluded that students with LD have a better chance of comprehending complex texts (p. 284).

Furthermore, the use of visual texts in the classroom provides struggling readers with opportunities to grow as critical thinkers; comic books have "narrative sequential art [that] demands that readers produce inferences to construct meaning and positions the reader in the role of co-author of the text" (Low, 2012, p. 370). In other words, students, perhaps unknowingly, begin to predict and draw conclusions; critical thinking occurs because students have to synthesize both images and text to derive understanding. Comic books and graphic novels, in this case, serve as great scaffolding resources for students with learning disabilities. In one study, students with learning disabilities claimed that graphic novels encouraged them to read more because they found these texts to strengthen their comprehension skills (Schneider, 2005, in Griffith, 2010, p. 185). Visuals in graphic novels and comic books are just as important as texts because students can begin to piece together the narrative with the clues given to them in the images (Fenty & Brydon, 2019; Griffith 2010). Students pick up necessary skills when reading visual texts, which helps them eventually become part of the narrative, thus creating an immersive reading experience. Through this immersive reading experience, students begin to see comic book literature as more than just entertainment; they will start to see the text as vehicles of agency from which to negotiate meaning.

Thus, using graphic novels and comic books allow educators to better serve all their adolescent students no matter the academic level. These texts prepare adolescents for a future where

text and images are heavily relied on for communication. Using graphic novels and comic books in the secondary classroom can help shatter misconceptions and stereotypes about adolescence/ts and make learning about change making and global citizenship much easier for both educators and students.

POSITIONALITY

When beginning this research, I took time to consider my positionality and question what I bring to the metaphorical table. In examining my role, I understand that my role as a secondary educator would have an impact in how I viewed both the YAL, the characters, themes, and relationships within the text. However, I knew that my years in working closely with adolescents would help me see beyond constructs, agreeing with Silva and Savitz (2019) that YAL “holds the potential to disrupt socially constructed stereotypes of adolescents/ce while fostering a learning environment where each can feel valued and respected as an individual” (p. 324).

I have taught at the secondary level for the last 15 and half years, with 14 of those years working specifically with high school students living in a South Texas border town. My students, primarily identified as 1st and 2nd generation Mexican American, work diligently to make their American Dream of earning a high school diploma and a higher education degree. For the last three years, I have strived to incorporate a sense of global citizenship in the adolescents that enter my classroom because I know they have ambitions and dreams of making their way in this world. As a typical English, language arts, and reading teacher, I promote literacy and the reading of as many classics as possible, not to meet the requirements of any state or nationally mandated quota, but to show my students that classic literature does have its merits. However, as a modern English, language arts, and reading teacher, I also know that to stir a passion for literacy in my students, it is imperative to provide them with YAL that are engaging and didactic.

With this in mind, a medium like comic books provides my students with visually rich, easy-to-read texts that are far more entertaining than the more intimidating YAL canon might be. Moreover, comic books, like *Ms. Marvel*, help me show my students the interconnectedness of humanity, which is a great way to introduce a social change-making mindset. My students might not share the same culture and religion as the main character, but they might *resonate* with her experiences and stories as a teenager in the midst of discovering who she is. I purposefully use the term *resonate* because I believe that there is no universal adolescence, but there are universal themes in literature that are relevant to all. With *Ms. Marvel*, my students can see the world through the eyes

of someone from a different culture, and yet they can still connect with Kamala Khan, a teenager who is trying to find and establish her identity as a hero.

Because of my role as an educator, and my experience and love for the power of comics, I have chosen to employ a Youth Lens (YL) as I analyze the first two volumes of Marvel's *Ms. Marvel*. It is critical that as a teacher in secondary education, my students have opportunities to read YAL that give them a peek into an imaginary world while providing them with relevant messages. Showing my students how to analyze the relationships between adult and adolescent characters will help them tear down adolescent stereotypes and misconceptions while understanding the power they have to make a change in this world.

Throughout the first two volumes, indirect references in text and visuals address global citizenship traits and indirectly express the need for adolescents to become social change makers. Unfortunately, an adolescent's impact as a social change maker might not be evident to adults or even to youths themselves. However, while analyzing how the characters, visuals, and themes in *Ms. Marvel*, using a YL, shatter adolescent constructs and stereotypes, it is evident that adolescents are ready and willing to take up causes with the right kind of adult guidance.

I guided my analysis with the following two research questions:

- (a) In what ways do the *Ms. Marvel*, volumes 1 and 2, shatter disparaging stereotypes and constructs about adolescents/adolescence and adults in looking at the relationships between the two?
- (b) In what ways do the *Ms. Marvel*, volumes 1 and 2, shatter the apathetic adolescent stereotype when it comes to social change-making attitudes?

FRAMEWORK

For most educators, critically analyzing a class text or a suggested reading for students prior to implementing it in class is key for successful student engagement and learning. Choosing the right text or texts for one's units can make for an eventful school year or a trying one. As educators, the students in the classroom and our academic/social goals typically influence the texts we choose to incorporate into units. Class demographics can vary amongst blocks/periods, semesters, and school years. Even social and political changes and laws can affect who sits in the classroom. However, it is up to the educator to make sure that chosen texts are relevant and engaging. Unfortunately, much of the classical YAL canon is text-heavy and can be academically challenging or disengaging for

students. Thus, the use of graphic novels and comic books that are reflective of current societal issues and trends is highly encouraged. Moreover, researchers argue that these visually rich texts offer “an expanded and more flexible understanding of the narrative which is likely to enhance students’ literacy” (Derbel, 2019, p. 54). In understanding the educative value of a carefully and appropriately chosen comic book for classroom use, educators can then evaluate the text using a YL, like Petrone et al. (2015) outlined in “The Youth Lens: Analyzing Adolescence/ts in Literary Texts.”

Two major YL principles in Petrone et al.’s work are: (a) adolescence is a social construct, and not a biological one, and (b) there is no universal experience for adolescents. A YL encourages readers to look at different elements in a text and examine and analytically criticize how adolescence/ts are represented throughout (Brosheim-Black, 2015; Heron-Hruby et al., 2015; Murfield, 2020; Petrone et al., 2015; Sarigianides et al., 2014; Silva & Savitz, 2019). A YL encourages readers to re-think preconceived notions and stereotypes about adolescence, adolescents, and their relationships with adults and situations in life. Stanley Hall, the empiricist who defined *adolescence*, as a state of “emotional and behavioral confusion,” (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 29) published more of a description than an explanation because the scientist did not delve into causal reasons for this said confusion (Shanahan et al., 2005). It is important for educators to not guide one’s teaching of adolescents solely by biological markers or the broadly defined concepts of emotional and behavioral confusions established more than 100 years ago. As Petrone et al. (2015) posited, adolescence is a social construct “contingent on and constituted through social arrangements and systems of reasoning available within particular historical moments and contexts” (p. 209). If educators too narrow-mindedly accept the preconceived notions and stereotypes of the adolescent students in the classroom, then educators are doing their students a disservice by assuming that adolescents care little about the issues society faces. Furthermore, educators are not there as masters of their students’ futures; instead, they should serve as guides who present students with learning opportunities that hopefully inspire them “to think about who they can be and what they can do for the rest of their lives” (Sutton, 1997).

METHODOLOGY

My content analysis is based on a modified version of Petrone et al.'s (2015) YL analysis of *The Hunger Games*. Petrone et al. (2015) established that choosing literary elements such as “characterization, setting, plot, theme, and figurative language” (p. 511) help readers analyze adolescent constructs and representations in YAL. Because my chosen YAL are comic books, I chose to analyze the visuals along with two literary elements, specifically focusing on characterization and themes, asking myself how they help/hinder from shattering disparaging stereotypes and constructs about adolescents/adolescence in looking at adolescent and adult roles and relationships, and/or promote social changemaking.

In a typical fiction, like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, the plot is comprised solely of text because “without representation imagery, no events can be said to take place because events...occur in the world of the story only” (p. 9). However, when presenting fictional plot in comics form, it “is created by a discourse of pictures and words” (p. 9), and “recurrent elements” such as “characters progressing” throughout the panels (p. 19). Similarly, Gavalier (2017) posited that while the concept of comics is far from unique, plots in comic books are unique. Thus, literary elements in a comic book, like that of plot and characterization, uniquely go beyond the written discourse because the drawings add to the story. I looked carefully at adolescent and adult characters throughout the volumes. I made connections between their relationships and looked at the source of their conflict(s). Petrone et al. (2015) suggested looking at how adults are in relation to adolescents and how the adult roles affect the adolescent and their decisions. They also suggest looking at the themes in the text, and how these themes “norm, complicate, or reimagine youth” (p. 518).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I wanted to understand if or how the visuals, characterization, and themes throughout the two volumes shattered stereotypes that readers might have about adolescents. As a society, we tend to stereotype or construct of others to *normalize* them. We construct understandings to help us understand “gender, race, class, and sexuality,” which leads to “problematic meanings” because the construct is connected to historical and social contexts (Petrone et al., 2015, pp. 508-509). I focused on the relationships between adolescents and adults, and on adolescents and their internal struggles, especially those that disrupt social constructs. In looking at characterization and images throughout volumes one and two, I found 15 themes. I then categorized these 15 themes into four major and

overarching themes. The content analysis shows the following: (a) adults serving as guides, (b) adults and authority, (c) the *careless* and *reckless* teen, and (d) the need for social change making. Throughout my analysis I will refer to either Kamala or Ms. Marvel depending on the character's role. For instance, if in the panel, the image depicts Ms. Marvel in superhero form, then I will refer to the character, Ms. Marvel.

ADULTS AS GUIDES

There are many adult characters throughout *Ms. Marvel*, volumes one and two. However, six adult characters play significant roles because of their relationships and interactions with Kamala/Ms. Marvel: Abu, Sheik Abdullah, Captain Marvel, Wolverine, Queen Medusa, and Vinatos. In their interactions with Kamala/Ms. Marvel, these adults offer her advice and guidance, never directly forcing her to take it.

Human

The one adult that does blur the line between sage and authoritarian is Abu, Kamala's father; however, for the most part, Abu tends to calm tense situations and have heartfelt moments and conversations with Kamala. These conversations are anecdotal and have morals and lessons interweaved throughout. Kamala must do her best to understand her father's advice and choose how to implement it in her decision-making and actions. In volume two, issue three, Abu has a heartwarming conversation with the weary Kamala, who is struggling to understand her newfound abilities and the role she thinks she must play. Abu calmly diffuses the situation between Ammi and Kamala pleading with her to explain her reckless behavior. Later, in issue five, he has a tender moment with Kamala as he explains that her name means perfection in Arabic, consoling Kamala because Abu sees her as perfect just the way she is.

With these heartfelt conversations between father and daughter, Abu opens lines of communication that he hopes Kamala will trust and depend on. He does not force her to talk to him; instead, he builds trust and shows her that she is loved no matter what. The relationship between adolescent daughter and father evolves throughout the volumes as both Kamala and Abu try to find a balance in their relationship. His guidance is needed, and they both know that, but Kamala's need for independence and emotional growth keeps her from fully embracing the support he is offering. Abu's inability to see a young woman in a world different from his own stifles his daughter's growth.

In the first volume, readers meet Sheikh Abdullah, Kamala's youth leader, and Kamala's perception forces readers to assume that he is authoritative and reluctant to change. In volume 2, issue 6, Kamala is forced to sit down with the Sheikh about her recent disapproving behavior. She had feared her conversation with the Sheikh because she believed him to be cold, distant, and uncaring about her as a youth. However, Kamala and the reader are left shocked when Sheikh Abdullah, instead of chastising her, advises her to find a teacher to help guide her on helping people. The Sheikh that Kamala had come to see as distant and out of tune with the needs of youths shows Kamala just how important teachers are when one is learning to do something new – and in this case, being a superhero. The dynamic shifts between this adolescent and adult when the adolescent understands that the adult is there to support and not hinder.

Superhuman

Kamala's obsession with superheroes places two adult heroes front in center on her journey of becoming Ms. Marvel. The first adult superhero is encountered during her transformation in volume one, issue one. Even though Iron Man and Captain America show up in Kamala's vision, the one that provides her a beautiful poem and fateful words are none other than her favorite female hero – Captain Marvel. In her vision, Captain Marvel recites a few lines from a poem by “Amir Khusro...a famed Sufi poet from pre-partition Indian sub-continent,” which shows readers that Kamala is “just a multi-cultural teenager” (Sheraz, 2019). At the beginning of Kamala's Terrigen transformation, Captain Marvel soothes her with a cultural poem, but a goddess-like hero cautions her that the transformation that the young Kamala wishes for might not be what she longed for. The transformation from child-like adolescence to a much more mature adolescent is not lost; Captain Marvel serves as a spiritual guide ushering Kamala's coming-of-age transformation.

The second adult hero Kamala faces is Wolverine. In volume two, issue six, Wolverine begrudgingly fights alongside Ms. Marvel, and it takes Ms. Marvel to save his life for him to realize how unique this young superhero is. Wolverine willingly follows Ms. Marvel's leadership by the end of issue seven, developing newfound respect. In the end, he is grateful for Ms. Marvel's assistance. Wolverine's form of guidance comes from understanding the young Ms. Marvel's need to continue fighting the Inventor but promises to keep an eye on her. This superhero adult knows that the young Ms. Marvel needs help that he cannot provide, so he does the next best thing. He finds her the support that will help her on her journey. He asks Queen Medusa, the leader of the Inhumans, to take Ms. Marvel under her guidance. Though Wolverine has a more indirect approach towards

providing the young hero guidance, he makes sure that she gets the help she needs from the people who know how to help her the best.

Kamala/Ms. Marvel's interaction with these supportive and superhuman adults show that teenagers are receptive of advice and support given. It might not be evident at the moment the advice or support is given, but it does influence behaviors and decisions. The relationship between adolescents and adults also show that adults can serve as support and guides during difficult times and that they can offer the right tools leaving it to the adolescent's discretion on whether or not to use them.

Inhuman

The two adult figures who also share in Kamala's genetic uniqueness are Queen Medusa and Vinatos. Queen Medusa first interacts with Kamala towards the end of issue nine in the second volume. In issue eight, the queen had sent her most loyal subject, Lockjaw, to watch the young Kamala. The adult queen does not want to overwhelm the adolescent but does offer her support and a place of refuge. Instead of forcing Kamala to stay and overwhelming her with the intricacies of being inhuman, the queen gives her just enough to understand why she got her super abilities. The queen places the power of choosing when to learn more about her new inhuman side in Kamala's hands. While the queen is more subtle in her approach to guiding Kamala, Vinatos, another adult inhuman, offers two types of guidance and help. The first is emotional guidance. Secondly, he provides her with a scientifically jazzed-up superhero outfit. Vinatos, the adult in this relationship, reminds her that unique and lonely are not alike as she admits to feeling lonely. He reminds her that she has people that care for her, and in one image, he places his alien-shaped hand on her shoulder in a very fatherly manner. This emotional care and guidance give her just enough courage and strength to continue her fight against the Inventor.

Human, superhuman, and inhuman adult figures offer Kamala/Ms. Marvel guidance as she traverses between the worlds of adolescent and superhero adolescent. Their advice comes in the forms of anecdotes, poems, cautionary statements, understanding, protection, and solace. These adults do not force their advice on Kamala/Ms. Marvel; instead, they remind her that the ultimate decision is always hers to make, and they are willing to be there for her no matter what.

THE AUTHORITATIVE ADULT

Just as important as the guiding adults are in these first two volumes, in the life of young Kamala, are the roles of authoritative and dismissive adults. One minor adult character acts authoritative towards and dismisses adolescents: Mrs. Van Boom, a teacher. Three main adult characters are authoritarian and dismissive of adolescents: Ammi and Aamir, who are family, and the Inventor, Ms. Marvel's nemesis. I must note that not all adult characters identified as authoritarian are set to destroy Kamala/Ms. Marvel's world. In all four cases, these adults honestly believe they are doing what is best for the adolescents they seek to help and the world they are trying to save. And one, unfortunately, could care less who is hurt in their attempt to make the world a better place.

The Bitter Educator

I find it essential to write about one minor adult character who acts as an authoritative figure because her comments, though few, express how some adults see adolescents. The interaction between adult and adolescent helps develop this theme and brings awareness to another written about later in this analysis. Mrs. Van Boom is a teacher at Kamala's school, and in volume two, issue eight, she poses a poignant question to the tardy Kamala. On the classroom chalkboard is written, *teens and the media*, and with a yardstick in hand, Mrs. Van Boom questions whether society should give up on adolescents. Her question forces the young Kamala to argue that adults should not give up on teenagers' futures because they have the daunting task of fixing what previous generations have broken. Mrs. Van Boom's hurtful yet thought-provoking question gives readers, specifically young readers, an insight into how some adults might feel towards adolescents who *seem* to care less about social upheavals. However, Kamala's response gives all readers insight to how some adolescents might feel about this stereotype and misconception. Have adults bothered to ask adolescents about their thoughts on the crises that previous generations have wreaked?

The Overly Protective Family

Ammi and Aamir, two main characters, are Kamala's mother and brother. Both are adults who believe they know what is best for the young Kamala. Through guilt and yelling, Ammi constantly *encourages* Kamala to become the pious and academically responsible Pakistani woman she *should* be. In the first issue, Kamala is caught breaking house rules and her overprotective mother shares her disappointment by loudly blaming American society for Kamala's behavior. In volume one, issue five, there is a moment when Ammi looks like she will have a civilized talk with Kamala, who showed

up late to a family member's wedding after fighting a robot. However, the moment passes, and Ammi *demand*s that her daughter explain her tardiness. During this one-sided conversation, Ammi explains that expectations are set high for her daughter so Kamala can have many successes, and the young Kamala sarcastically responds to the controlling adult. With both the image and text, it is easy to see that Ammi, the adult, has the authority in this relationship leaving Kamala to grapple with her status as obedient daughter.

Aamir is a young adult and Kamala's older brother. He instigates many of the arguments that Kamala has with their parents. Throughout the first two volumes, Aamir is depicted as a devout student of the Muslim faith, so he does have issues with Kamala not following her faith as strictly as he does. In issue one, Aamir shifts between a caring older brother to a rebuking one after catching Kamala breaking house rules. Without allowing her to explain, the stereotypical overprotective brother believes that she had been dishonored. The minute Kamala assures him that her virtue is still intact, her caring older brother willingly hands her to her upset parents to suffer the consequences. In looking at images of Aamir throughout the first two volumes, he always acts and stands as if superior to Kamala. However, instead of using his young adult status to guide his adolescent sister, he constantly reminds her of her inappropriateness and shameful actions.

The Nemesis

The Inventor is Ms. Marvel's nemesis throughout volumes one and two. However, in volume two, issue nine, Ms. Marvel becomes aware of the Inventor's manipulation of adolescents adrift in an adult-led society they do not understand. As Ms. Marvel rescues lost teens held hostage by the Inventor, she realizes that they have been manipulated into believing that the only way they could be of service to society is to sacrifice their lives physically. One lost teen explains how overpopulation is killing the earth, and the adolescents believe that their physical sacrifice will save the planet. There is a clear relationship between manipulative adult and vulnerable adolescents. This evil adult, who swears that he plans to better the world, has done nothing but poison adolescent minds. The Inventor's relationship with these lost teens is symbolic of the influence and power that adults, especially those with intellectual and even political power, can have over adolescents.

THE RECKLESS TEEN AND CONSEQUENCES

I found five subthemes throughout volumes one and two that contributed to the making of this *Reckless* and *carefree* youths overarching themes:

- Questioning tradition
- Consequences of rebellion
- Consequences of leading a double life
- Consequences of dishonesty

I emphasize the term reckless because the adult reader or the adult character deems the adolescent as reckless. The benefit of analyzing with a YL is that we can identify when an adult character forces adulthood on an adolescent as if adulthood is the only plausible solution for a dilemma. Petrone et al. (2015) argued: “YL draws attention to the idea of adulthood as the norm in relation to which adolescence is an othered, inferior category and YAL a vehicle to help youth arrive at a particular destination” (p. 512). We must ask, are these teens truly reckless, or are they making mistakes just like adults do? And, just like adults who make mistakes, these adolescents must face the consequences.

Identifying an adolescent who makes mistakes as a reckless or carefree teen is a dangerous stereotyping and labeling tactic used by adults to justify not trying to understand just how much teens care about pressing issues. Not only do *Ms. Marvel*, volumes 1 and 2, show the disparaging constructs created to define adolescents and their relationships with adults, a light is shined on the desire that adolescents must make their world a better place. The stereotype of the apathetic adolescent is shattered throughout the volumes as Kamala/Ms. Marvel and her adolescent friends and companions struggle with their roles as social changemakers. As adults, we tend to believe that adolescents either do not care about the issues facing society, or that they should be sheltered from these issues. In these volumes, the adolescents’ actions and words around social change-making forces us to reevaluate our need to protect them from dangers seeing that “teens are not always in need of insulation from harsh realities of the outside world. They can often handle themselves just fine” (Silva & Savitz, 2019, p. 329).

ADOLESCENTS AS SOCIAL CHANGE MAKERS

The misconception that adolescents could care less about social or political issues, at least in these two volumes, is far from true. However, within the literature, some posit that adolescents “can play an important role in their communities” and are usually “aware of the issues in their community often 3 years ahead of adults” (Mortensen et al., 2014, pp. 446-447). Moreover, involving adolescents in “decision-making and design processes, communities and local organizations would more effectively...foster meaningful community change” (p. 447). However, to include adolescents in said

discourse and actions, they must first see their role as global citizens and their purpose in social change making. One way of accomplishing this is through YAL that promotes adolescents as social change makers shattering the notion that adolescents could care less about social issues.

Ms. Marvel is one such YAL. Throughout volumes 1 and 2, readers are made aware of adolescents' power to make a difference in their community and the world. One might argue that, of course, Kamala Khan can make a difference - she has superhuman powers. However, readers can see other adolescents becoming social change makers through the text and images. Volume two's title alone, *Generation Why*, establishes what readers might see as a carefree and lazy generation of adolescents, but the misconception is shattered throughout the storyline. In issue ten, Ms. Marvel awakens a lost generation of teens manipulated by the Inventor. These teens, either runaways or mistreated by adults, agreed with the Inventor that the only way to make meaning of their lives was to sacrifice themselves for the betterment of the world. As morbid as that is, it does show how strongly these misguided teens feel about the issues humankind faces. Ms. Marvel empathizes with their disillusionment and explains that adults do not always have all the answers, and that as the younger generation, they are left to clean up the mess of past generations.

Later, in that same storyline, Ms. Marvel enlightens these lost teens about their gifts and skills and how they can use those, like how she uses her superpowers, to change this world. In reference to the second guiding research question, the adolescents, though portrayed as apathetic, are more emotionally impacted about social issues than the adults in the comic believe them to be. It takes an adolescent peer, like Ms. Marvel, to shatter this pejorative portrayal. She shows them that there is potential in their gifts and skills if they just took the time to recognize it, and if adults in their lives could not encourage them, these teens would need to find encouragement within.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Whether it is a Sunday funny or a complex comic book, I will always have an emotional connection to these types of literature. They are a part of my life, and I have continued that love for reading comic books with my own children, purposefully showing them the value these texts can carry, especially in the 21st century. Kirtley et al. (2020) asserted that "while it seems doubtful that [society] will ever abandon text entirely; it certainly seems naïve to neglect the importance of the interaction of text and image" (p. 6). I need my children and my students to know that literacy does not begin and end with the classical canon, but that there is more. Comic books will continue to make their

way into adolescent hands, and as educators, we need to use this to our advantage. As educators, we need to take comics like *Ms. Marvel* and use them as guiding texts for our adolescents because these are the stories they are intrigued by. Stories of Kamala Khan, and other heroes found throughout comic literature are trending, and if it is one thing that educators have learned to utilize in the classroom, it is to engage our students with what they are currently in to. With this said, Marvel has plans of releasing *Ms. Marvel* on Disney Plus in the summer of 2022 (Allen, 2021), which will give educators a great opportunity to integrate comic book and film comparisons and analysis.

Reading and analyzing *Ms. Marvel* in the classroom will lead to important social change making discussions. With the guidance from educators, and the fictional adults and adolescents in this comic, adolescent readers are presented with opportunities to see themselves as active participants at both local and global levels. Let us not be the educator that questions a comic book's validity. Let us be the educator that takes a form of literacy that engages and encourages our adolescent readers to find the superhero within.

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