

HETERONORMATIVITY IN *MS. MARVEL* COMICS

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Abstract

The main subject of this study is the implementation of traditional masculinity and femininity theories within the Heteronormativity framework in 3 sequential volumes of *Ms. Marvel* by author G. Willow Wilson. The author relies on a post-structuralist feminist framework to describe gender stereotypes, using content analysis methods, which are mixed-methods quantitatively and qualitatively. This thesis attempts to answer a fundamental question; How Gender Stereotypes were presented in *Ms. Marvel Comics*?. In this findings, the data that have been collected shows significant differences in the distribution of social role attributes, traits, behaviors in characters divided into categories of masculine and feminine attributes. These quantitative data are then processed. Masculine attributes still dominated by male characters, and vice versa. , Nevertheless, there were at least a total of 67% (n=4) of female characters who were more associated with masculine attributes.

Keywords: Comic, Heteronormativity, *Ms. Marvel*, Gender Stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

Most of the religion, particularly Islam, is one whose adherents have been hereditary and, on collective awareness, are very firm and bound by Heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the idea that humans, based on heredity and biology, are exclusively: normative and aggressively: heterosexual. Men are masculine and only attracted to feminine women, and vice versa (Weiss, 2001).

This idea then drives the discussion to be more specific about gender stereotypes. Ashmore & Del Boca define gender stereotypes as "a structured set of beliefs about male and female personal attributes" (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1979). These beliefs are assumed through various imagery, behaviors, and affective components. Deaux & Lewis (1984) have distinguished between traits, roles, physical characteristics, occupations, and assumptions about sexual orientation as components of gender stereotypes.

The media depicts heterosexuality as 'normal' in today's society, and gender stereotypes play an important role in this image construction process. Since the image construction of a society is based on human expression, a cultural product such as literature becomes one of its essential reflective media in representing this set of living attributes. Speaking of 'concrete picture' delivered through language tools, the existence of comics opens the discussion room for experts about the validity of their status as literary works. Because the language media displayed in comics is accompanied by images as a complementary element and tends to be assessed as the main element of comics as a reading medium. When examined

deeper, comics have literary elements that surround the characteristics of a literary work.

Comics transmit narratives, ideas, and topics through a combination of visual art and written words. They frequently feature complex characters, elaborate narratives, and thought-provoking subjects, all of which are found in classic literature. Comics may be as powerful and emotionally evocative as books or poems, and numerous graphic novels have received literary and creative awards. In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation for comics' creative and literary worth. They are now taught in university literary classes and studied for their storytelling tactics, character development, and thematic depth.

Correlating with gender discourse, pop culture nowadays has entered the phase of the woke agenda wave. Where mass media production is often associated with LGBTQ+ campaigns whose values, ideas, and visions are internalized through narrative aspects to the key characters themselves. On the other hand, although comics have evolved with various genres, the authors identify that there are rarely comics that tell stories with Islamic religious backgrounds.

Ms. Marvel from the Marvel Comics publishing house is an exception and a unique example. Where the superhero comic genre, which the West dominates, then presents superhero characters with solid elements of Islam and immigrants with a very liberal American background.

Following the formulation of the problem above, this study intends to analyze Heteronormativity captured in gender stereotypes being presented in Ms. Marvel Comics. In this research, a qualitative description of the gender elements of Ms. Marvel comics is made. This is due to the large amount of information in the form of descriptions. Therefore, qualitative methods are used in this study. Data descriptions were collected as story panels in Ms. Marvel comics. The material includes narrative excerpts in panels, excerpts of dialogue in the comics, and other supporting documents and reports. The data were then analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis with content analysis. The content analysis method was chosen because it is useful in studying communication and allows in-depth description and analysis (Babbie, 2005). Quantitative data were obtained to examine the gender distribution of the characters, documenting features of appearance, social roles, traits, and behavior; and determining how content trends in a sample of comics using stereotyped male and female gender images with traditional masculinity and femininity attributes.

Along with the following framework of this study, Ms. Marvel was previously dissected into sub-term discourses in any specific topics. There is *Unveiling Marvels* by Mirriam Kent in 2015, which its writing put an emphasis on the feedback from comic-book audience towards the recent phenomena of Muslim American-Pakistani young feminine hero, which describes the nature and conscientiousness of its creator. There is also *Ms. Marvel: Changing Muslim Representation of the Comic World* written by Casey L. Tratner, which the texts was revealing the phenomenon where people positively shifting their reaction towards Muslim protagonist. These previous studies in fact, were adding the collection of scientific studies on Ms. Marvel. Nonetheless, speaking on the corridor of gender

and feminism framework, it is still an intriguing fact that there are less than it expected to be, the number of articles that analyze Ms. Marvel within its certain topic on masculinity and femininity attributes. Therefore, this article was exist to fulfilled the absence.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. General Identification

Table 4.1 - Number and Percentage of Main and Supporting Characters by Gender

Character Portions	Male	Female	Amount	Ratio		Total
	n %	n %	n %	Male	Female	
Main	6 47%	3 50%	9 47%	67%	33%	100%
Supporting	7 53%	3 50%	10 53%	70%	30%	100%
Total	13 100%	6 100%	19 100%	68%	32%	100%

In the first 3 comic volumes of Ms. Marvel, written by G. Willow Wilson, has a total of 19 characters identified as main characters and supporting characters. As it appeared in data, among the 19 characters identified in the sample: 68% were male (n=13) while 32% were female (n=6). Among the 9 main characters identified: 47% were male (n=6) while 50% were female (n=3). For supporting characters among the 10 identified characters, there are: 53% are male characters (n=7), and 50% are female (n=3). The ratio of the main male and female characters is 2 to 1, while the ratio of the supporting male and female characters is 2.3 to 1. The ratio of all male and female characters is 2.16 to 1.

The numbers in this table show that the male and female characters appear unequal in terms of number and significance to the story. This can be attributed to the main involvement of male writers who carry stories about teenage girls. Even so, the numbers indicating that the number of male characters is greater than that of female characters does not necessarily conclude that there is inequality in Ms. Marvel.

Because, of the many male characters that appear, the role they play in the main plot is between being a supporting character for the main character--in this case Ms. Marvel--or become a villain in the comics. This indicates that the distribution

of male characters is more than female, which does not make Ms. Marvel, the main female character, is marginalized. However, in this comic, Wilson seems to be trying to display the efforts of a Kamala Khan, an Islamic teenage girl with super unstable powers, who compromises and connects herself to society with certain social norms with a strong eastern Islamic style, which basically still positions women on the subordinate side, not as dominant element.

2. Social Roles

Table 4.2 Number and Percentage of Social Roles by Gender

Social Roles	Male Characters (N= 13)		Female Characters (N=6)	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Masculine</i>				
Career	8	62%	3	50%
Wanderer	4	31%	2	33%
Leader	5	38%	2	33%
Hero	5	38%	3	50%
<i>Feminine</i>				
Careerless	5	38%	3	50%
Domestic	3	23%	4	67%
Imitator	4	31%	2	33%
Victim	2	16%	3	50%

Men are mostly shown with masculine social roles and women are shown with feminine social roles. These findings from table 4.2 indicate that the representation of social roles for men and women in Ms. Marvel has no ambivalence from finding in mainstream media forms. This clarifies the understanding of the heterosexual relationship between masculinity and femininity as the building blocks of Muslim society which are circulated through a pattern of 'properness'--the result of a long history of heteronormativity.

If we look a little at the narrative mecca of Islamic stories in Indonesia--as a reference, collecting examples from the drama genre which dominated narrative style in Indonesian Islamic cinema, these creations are conveyed through a strong romantic relationship. A storytelling pattern that involves heterosexual relationships between men and women--which in films often end up in the institution of marriage--has presented imagination, rather than reality, where this genre also becomes Barker's thing (2019: 111-37) call it a site of how Islamic life is able to offer stability, certainty, and appreciation.

Stability, certainty, and respect in relation to gender and Muslim identity which are manifested in a mystical, immaterial, and narrow way, can be

interpreted as a way to place women in a subordinate position. In post-New Order Islamic narrative products, the potential for religion as a revolutionary force is absent. This is evidenced by the changing patterns of themes and narratives that previously made Islam a collective force into things that are more individualistic in nature.

The conspiracy between religion and capitalism which plays an important role in the production and dissemination of Islamic visions and ideals--through cultural products since the reformation era began--has preserved a narrow understanding that has increasingly marginalized women. In post-New Order films, this is demonstrated, among other things, through the significant differences in social roles: "leader" (for male characters) as well as "domestic" and "imitator" (for female characters). The ancient myth "behind a successful man, there is a great woman," is further strengthened, when some adult female characters are even presented without real names, taking nicknames such as: mama, umi, or following their husband's name.

For female characters, taking social roles that are different from their construction can be seen as defiance of the responsibility of 'woman' as an identity that has previously been stereotyped.

3. Traits

Table 4.4 - Number and Percentage of Traits by Gender

Traits	Male Characters (N=13)		Female Characters (N=6)	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Masculine</i>				
Brave	6	46%	3	50%
Ambitious	7	54%	2	33%
Dominant	10	77%	4	67%
Independent	9	69%	2	33%
Rational	9	69%	3	50%
Firm	7	54%	5	83%
<i>Feminine</i>				
Afraid	4	31%	3	50%
Incompetitive	3	23%	3	50%
Obey	4	31%	4	67%
Dependent	3	23%	4	67%
Emotional	5	38%	4	67%
Undecided	3	31%	3	50%

The shift from the concept of religion to religiosity among middle-class Muslims is conveyed through images of godliness--as a medium of da'wah--by Islamic principles in an era when norms, globalization, temptations, and desires change rapidly. For male and female characters in cultural product media, the



articulation of social roles (which has been explained in the previous chapter) ultimately still operates in the area of traditional concepts.

In practice, this has a close relationship with the attribution of traits to role characterization. From table 4.4, the total difference in the dimensions of the traits for male and female characters is quite significant (> 30%) in the "independent" and "firm" categories (for male characters) as well as "uncompetitive" and "dependent" (for female characters).

When examining the archetypes of characters in comic books, it becomes evident that male characters have predominantly been portrayed in a manner that aligns with traditional masculine traits, even when assigned the roles of side characters or supporting roles. According to Knight (2010), the male action hero is often associated with a set of characteristics commonly referred to as masculine, including features such as independence, aggression, physical strength, intelligence, competence, reticence, and cool-headedness. This stereotype is deeply intertwined with the societal perception that men are expected to be superior, while women are relegated to a submissive role.

The enduring historical presence of heteronormativity necessitates that males, beginning at early ages, internalise the notion that characteristics associated with non-masculinity and/or femininity are undesirable attributes. This expectation is not only propagated through familial institutions, but also educational institutions and the mainstream media. While women are equally subject to rigid traditional norms of femininity, men encounter more social repercussions when they deviate from these conventional gender identification norms.

The nature of "independent" and "firm"--far in contrast to "afraid" and "undecided"--which are possessed by male characters, has given them a lot of space to determine their path in life, and in a more extreme case: to make women the something that must be 'won' in life by men. It can mean antagonistic submission, the sacred ambition of establishing an ideal marriage relationship, to the continuation of the hegemony of male power as the owner of the highest decision-making authority.

The concept of masculinity was often associated with physical strength, emotional composure, and muscularity, whereas femininity was commonly regarded as its antithesis. Historically, conventional attributes associated with femininity encompassed qualities such as submissiveness, fragility, moral excellence, humility, tenderness, emotional sensitivity, physical vulnerability, reliance on others, susceptibility to deception, aptitude for caregiving, and perceived intellectual inferiority relative to men. (Knight, 2010).

4. Behavior

Table 4.5 - Number and Percentage of Characters Behavior by Gender

Behavior	Male Characters (N=13)		Female Characters (N=6)	
	n	%	n	%
Masculine				
Aggressive	6	46%	2	33%
Strong	6	46%	3	50%
Indifferent	6	46%	3	50%
Mature	8	61%	3	50%
Feminine				
Calm	4	31%	4	67%
Gentle	3	23%	4	67%
Loving	3	23%	4	67%
Childish	4	31%	3	50%

The significant difference in behavior (> 20%) between male and female characters in table 4.5 shows the difference for "aggressive", "strong", and "mature" behavior for male characters and "gentle" and "loving" for female characters. In the attributes of masculine behavior it is clear that male characters are still dominant in terms of numbers, but the paradox in the table above is the finding of "calm" and "childish" behavior (as attributes of feminine behavior) which are associated more with male characters, although the difference in numbers is not large.

In several parts, the writer identifies that there is a shift in the behavioral attributes of Kamala Khan's character whenever she acts with her alter-ego Ms. Marvel. This finding becomes intriguing, when feminine behavior attributes such as "calm" are attached to male characters such as Bruno's character. And "aggressive" and "indifferent" behavior was displayed by Kamala in several following panels.

In page 69, Kamala was on her way to Circle Q where Bruno was keeping a shop when she witnessed Bruno being held at gunpoint by a masked robber who looked like a robber. Kamala as soon as possible gathered determination and courage to lunge and stop the robbers. Meanwhile, what Kamala didn't know at the time was that Bruno knew the identity of the robber, who was Vick, his own cousin. While Bruno was busy asking for reasons, and persuading him to stop, Kamala who had turned into Ms. Marvel immediately burst into Circle Q's front door, leaving a large hole in it, then promptly smashed Vick.

In this panel, it can be identified that aggressive behavior has been embedded in Kamala, since she changed to Ms. Marvel. "Indifferent" behavior is also attached to the action due to the lack of first observing the situation, and taking action too quickly. While on the one hand, Bruno faced the phenomenon of robbery by "calm". Casually, he invites the robber to talk so he knows the identity

of his cousin. Problems can be solved with a cool head, but Ms. Marvel, which was reckless, actually turned it into a disaster and not completely resolved.

This aggressive behavior, were expected only for male characters in comic books and films--namely part of pop culture, due to late 1890 - 2000 (Knight, 2010). Toughness only defined from male perspective, since this attribute of the male action is toughness. As an illustrative example within the realm of film, action heroes can be examined. One notable instance is the portrayal of a rough physique, exemplified by the barrel-chested John Wayne, a renowned figure in war and Western films spanning the years 1926 to 1976. Another prominent figure is Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose action hero career spanned from 1970 to 2003 and was characterised by his muscular and well-defined physique. Additionally, Sylvester Stallone's disciplined musculature is worth mentioning, particularly in his iconic roles as the bloodied boxing champion Rocky Balboa (1976 - 2006) and the resilient and formidable one-man-army John Rambo (1982-2008).

In Ms. Marvel narrative, the archetype for female action heroes were significantly differs from its predecessor. Knight (2010) asserts that there has been significant progress in the portrayal of women and girls in action films, television, comic books, and video games throughout the past century. This evolution is characterized by a shift away from conventional feminine stereotypes and a movement towards roles that have historically been associated with men. The growth of [subject] is intricately interconnected with contemporaneous societal developments and ongoing events in the real world. During the 1990s, there emerged a growing movement known as third-wave feminism. This phrase denotes a younger demographic of women whose concerns often diverged from those of second-wave feminists. Notably, third-wave feminism welcomed notions such as femininity, ambition, and independence.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified findings on the selected object namely; 3 volumes of Ms. Marvel comicbook written by G. Willow Wilson. Using content analysis methods that are versatile in quantitative and qualitative forms, this research is supported using a post-feminist theoretical framework processed from several previous researchers, to support research on gender attributes which are divided into several categories, namely social role attributes, traits, and behavior, related to traditional masculinity and femininity.

The first, quantitative research applied to 3 comics of Ms. Marvel has presented the findings data, in the form of 19 main characters and supporting characters who are considered significant in the narrative aspect. There are 13 characters with male gender, while 6 for female characters, indicating that the portion of the role based on gender is still considered unequal.

Other findings show that male characters are often depicted with masculine attributes, while women are often depicted with feminine attributes.

Male characters are most often described with social roles: "career" by 62% (n=8) and "leader" by 38% (n=5), trait: "dominant" by 77% (n=10) and "independent" as much as 69% (n=9), behavior; "mature" as much as 61% (n = 8).

Female characters are described mostly by social roles: "domestic" by 67% (n=4) and "hero" by 50% (n=3), traits: "firm" by 83% (n=5) and "obey" 67% (n=4), behavior: "gentle" and "loving" with the same amount of 67% (n=4).

In addition, masculine social roles, traits, and behaviors are dominated by male characters, while feminine social roles, traits, and behaviors are dominated by female characters.

Patterns of gender identity based on gender stereotype data did not change significantly, but there were at least a total of 67% (n=4) of female characters who were more associated with masculine attributes, even though they did not have appeal to appeal when compared to the number of male characters and their associated feminine attributes. , and vice versa. At least, it can be concluded that the number and distribution of female characters outside of feminine attributes experienced slight growth in correlation with the theme of superheroine comics.

Even so, the socio-cultural expressions in the setting of the story still legitimize traditional forms of masculinity and femininity. This is due to the predominance of male characters, as well as the main story which is set in a conservative Islamic environment. Until the values of Islamic identity also piggyback on conventional stereotypes.

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