

Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture

Sophia Rose Arjana (with Kim Fox)
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Sophia Rose Arjana's book *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture* raises a timely and critical discussion. The interdisciplinary nature of the book provides insight into various subjects, including women's studies, theology, and popular culture. Arjana, with Kim Fox, focuses on Muslim female (Muslima) superheroes. In a world where so often women (and in particular, Muslim women) are politicized, Arjana offers an alternate exploration of how Muslima superheroes are poised to battle both Western and Islamic misogyny.

Chapter 1, "Muslim Women in Popular Culture," gives an overview of the discourse around Muslim women. The chapter explores how Orientalism has influenced the presentation of Muslim women, particularly noting how Muslim women lose agency in all discussions. Arjana looks specifically at how the comic and cartoons have been subject to this thinking. She addresses how Muslims fall into the villain or the rescue narrative and then turns to the problematic representation of some Muslima superheroes. Comics are just the starting point, for such representations are found in cartoons and film as well. While this chapter provides a great basis for the rest of the book and an essential introduction to the narrative that has often surrounded Muslim women, it does at times jump quickly from one discussion to the next (as continues through much of the book).

"The Muslim Body, Veiling, and Contestations of Islam" describes the political and historical context of how Muslim women have been presented in both Western cultures and within Islam. Arjana begins with the hypersexualization of Muslim women's bodies upheld by Orientalism, but includes too how Islamic patriarchal systems have subjected women's bodies to such a regime. She considers the difficult position that Muslim women are placed in through the topic of veiling. In Western culture, veiling can be used as a subversive tool, but it can likewise be seen as upholding Islamic patriarchal systems. In an attempt to show how some agency can be reestablished, Arjana looks at different presentations of Muslims in comics (namely *The 99*). Arjana shows how Islamic theological principles strengthen the agency of Muslima superheroes.

“Ms. Marvel, Islam, and America” demonstrates how a Muslima superhero can represent agency that escapes from the discursive debate over Muslim women. Arjana discusses how *Ms. Marvel* is representative of Muslim American youth, and how symbolically she has been used by activists as a symbol against Islamophobia. Arjana then discusses the character of *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala Khan. She elaborates the Islamic teachings that are an integral part of the stories, as well as how Kamala is an embodiment of an American Muslim teen girl, whose story is also political. The discussion then moves to how Kamala is drawn, noting the desexualized style, which is different from other female superheroes, and touches on veiling as a source of power and identity.

The fourth chapter introduces a case created in Pakistan, *Burka Avenger*. This chapter situates animation outside Western cultures and gives an important example of a feminist interpretation in action. *Burka Avenger* is a show geared towards children and stems from feminist activism. Arjana discusses the *Burka Avenger*'s desexualization and use of the subversive veil, which is representative of how Muslim women's bodies are politicized. The focus is not only on the veil but also the body of *Burqa Avenger* and how Islam is essential to *Burqa Avenger*'s battles. She shows how Islam can be used to combat political problems and social issues by using values of inner peace and jihad.

“Qahera, Raat, Bloody Nasreen, and the Vigilante Superhero” addresses violence. Arjana explores three Muslima vigilantes from Muslim-majority countries. She emphasizes that these three representations reframe Muslim women as instruments of violence, rather than the Western representation of them as victims of violence. She presents the controversy over the sexualization of Bloody Nasreen, showing it both to be tied to colonialist ideals and to be a figure expressing Muslim women's agency in sexual situations. The three examples offer a response from Muslim women to the violence they experience from states failing them. They each offer a specific critique of feminist movements within the states they represent.

The conclusion focuses on “Islamic Feminism and Muslim Chivalry.” Arjana addresses issues with defining Islam as well as feminism, and argues that Islamic feminism must be looked at within its context. The Muslima Code of Chivalry highlights values important to Muslim women based on Islamic spirituality. Arjana discusses how the Muslima superheroes' actions are an example of how to live out Islam. This section could have helped to frame her work earlier in the book.

Arjana's *Veiled Superheroes* offers up an engaging and interdisciplinary look into the intersection of Islam and feminism through popular culture. The comics throughout made it engaging and interesting and the points presented offered various outlooks on the interpretations of Muslima superheroes, as well as what it means to be Muslim and a feminist.

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