



Bridging Realities: Navigating Pop-Culture Media for Equitable Muslim Portrayals through the Prism of Moderation in Post-9/11

The influence of media on the formation of attitudes towards Muslims and Arabs in the period following the 9/11 attacks resulted in the propagation of harmful stereotypes and the increase in hate crimes targeting Muslims and Arabs during this time. This was also spread by the role of media, including popular culture media, in disseminating these negative narratives. Using a qualitative approach, this study aims to examine the media's endeavours to depict Muslims in a positive portrayal and the dearth of meaningful sources documenting these empathetic endeavours through the prism of moderation, especially in post-9/11. This article argues that Evelyn Alsultany's notion of Simplified Complex Representation serves as a gateway for the media's effort to showcase Muslims and Arabs in a more nuanced way.. There are tons of instances that have been analysed from TV dramas, movies, and comics to demonstrate how the media shapes people's perspectives of Muslims and Arabs. The article contends that media is not merely a mirror of societal views but a powerful agent capable of shaping and modifying perceptions.

Keywords: Simplified complex representation, Islamic pop-culture, media moderation, Post-9/11.

Pengaruh media terhadap pembentukan sikap terhadap Muslim dan Arab pada periode setelah serangan 9/11 mengakibatkan penyebaran stereotip yang negatif dan meningkatnya kejahatan kebencian yang menargetkan Muslim dan Arab pada masa ini. Hal ini juga disebar oleh peran media, termasuk media budaya populer, dalam menyebarkan narasi-narasi negatif tersebut. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat upaya media untuk menggambarkan Muslim dalam gambaran yang positif dan kelangkaan sumber-sumber yang mendokumentasikan upaya empati ini melalui prisma moderasi, terutama pasca 9/11. Hasil dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa gagasan Simplified Complex Representation oleh Evelyn Alsultany merupakan pintu gerbang dari upaya moderasi media untuk menampilkan Muslim dan Arab secara lebih bernuansa. Ada banyak sekali contoh yang telah dianalisis dari drama TV, film, dan komik untuk menunjukkan bagaimana media membentuk perspektif orang tentang Muslim dan Arab. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa media bukan hanya cermin dari pandangan masyarakat, tetapi juga merupakan agen yang kuat yang mampu membentuk dan mengubah persepsi.

Kata kunci: Simplified Complex Representation, budaya pop-Islam, moderasi media, Pasca- 9/11.

Author:

Muhammad Nuril Fauzan¹

Affiliation:

¹ Indonesian International Islamic University (IIIU) – Edinburgh University

Corresponding author:

Muhammad.fauzan@uii.ac.id

Dates:

Received 17 Dec 2023
Revised 25 May 2024
Accepted 27 Jun 2024
Published 30 Jun 2024

How to cite this article:

Fauzan, Muhammad Nuril. "Bridging Realities: Navigating Pop-Culture Media for Equitable Muslim Portrayals through the Prism of Moderation in Post-9/11". *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 25(1). <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v25i1.5308>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors. This work is licenced under [the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#).

**Read Online:**

Scan this QR code with your mobile device or smart phone to read online





Introduction

The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 9, 2001, commonly known as 9/11, was a significant trigger for the increase in negative stereotypes towards Muslims and Arabs. The portrayal of the two as enemies and terrorists intensified due to the media's extensive framing in reporting these cases, especially about the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda. Increased discrimination and hate crimes emerged as some of the negative consequences in the aftermath of the attacks. Disha (2011) cited the report from the FBI indicating a sharp increase in hate crimes in 2001, with the number of incidents jumping from 28 in 2000 to 481. Notably, this represents a significant increase compared to the previous year.¹

As discussed earlier, the media played a significant role in fueling prejudice, hate crimes, and other hostile acts against Muslims and Arabs. This was mainly caused by the widespread dissemination of information regarding the 9/11 attacks. Not only the press and mainstream media, but also popular culture media contributed to spreading these messages. Multiple media forms, such as movies, TV dramas, comics, and animations, can also perpetuate negative stereotypes targeting Muslims and Arabs. As a result, there was a considerable rise in hate crimes in the period following the attacks..

However, during its development, it became evident that there was also a counter-narrative emerging in the media following the 9/11 attacks, one that aimed to portray Muslims with moderate ideals and values. The mainstream media certainly played a role in facilitating this

portrayal. This effort is quite crucial given the long history of discrimination and stereotypes targeting Arabs and Muslims. Despite the prevalence of negative portrayals, the media has also shown a more sympathetic and empathetic perspective on Muslims.

Evelyn Alsultany's book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, explores this very issue. She examines the strategies employed by Western media to depict Arabs and Muslims in a more sympathetic light, using examples from TV dramas and news broadcasts.² Alsultany also discusses this theme in another article, offering a more concise version of the same argument. Within this context, she introduces a key concept called Simplified Complex Representation, which will be the central focus and critical feature of this article.³

However, there is a lack of scholarly attention paid to the media's efforts to portray Muslims and Arabs in a more sympathetic light. A significant number of researchers have extensively documented how the media can influence negative depictions and biases against these groups. For example, Saeed's study analyzed the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in British media, finding they were often described as outsiders.⁴ This negative framing also contributes to Islamophobia. Another scholar, Satiti, focused her research specifically on Muslim women in Western media. Satiti examined the underlying assumptions and discourses surrounding Muslim women, similar to Saeed's analysis of how Muslim women wearing veils are often seen as "the other."⁵

Another study by Deeba Shahwar examined the portrayal of Muslims in major newspapers like The New York Times and The Daily

¹ Ilir Disha, James C. Cavendish, and Ryan D. King, "Historical Events and Spaces of Hate: Hate Crimes against Arabs and Muslims in Post-9/11 America," *Social Problems* 58, no. 1 (2011): 21–22.

² Evelyn Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a 'Post-race' Era," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 162.

³ Evelyn Alsultany and Valerie Hartouni, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 21.

⁴ Amir Saeed, "Media, Racism and Islamophobia: The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media," *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 2 (2007): 446.

⁵ Nur Latifah Umi Satiti, "Representation of Muslim Women in the Western Media," *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 14, no. 2 (December 6, 2017): 189.





Telegraph. Her findings showed a disturbing trend: the media overwhelmingly focused on negative stories about Muslims, rather than positive ones. This bias was even evident in how the media covered the difference in leadership styles between George W. Bush and Barack Obama.⁶

In contrast to Nurullah's linear analysis of Muslim and Arab characters in the TV series "24," which found them stereotyped as enemies and terrorists, Alsultany's work investigated the possibility of more sympathetic portrayals in the same series.⁷

A gap exists in scholarship on media portrayals of Muslims and Arabs. While numerous studies address negative stereotypes, the media's efforts to promote more balanced representations have received less attention. This article seeks to address this gap by examining the evolution of media portrayals and how storytelling can reshape narratives. Specifically, it will analyze how the media employs moderation through positive characterizations across various media forms, including movies, television series, social media, comics, and news reporting. This exploration reveals that media is not just a mirror reflecting cultural beliefs, but a powerful force that can shape and reshape perceptions. The post-9/11 media landscape serves as a prime example of how narratives can have a profound impact, going beyond mere entertainment to foster empathy, understanding, and appreciation for the diversity within Islam. In light of this, this article will also emphasize the importance of ongoing efforts to promote diverse, authentic,

and positive portrayals within the evolving media environment.

The Post 9/11 Media Landscape: Muslims and Arabs Portrayal

Following the 9/11 attacks, the media landscape was dominated by unfavorable portrayals of Islam, Muslims, and Arabs. The dissemination of news coverage and information about the attacks has been a major topic of discussion. Undoubtedly, 9/11 was the most extensively documented event in history.⁸

President George W. Bush's subsequent speeches further intensified the situation, contributing to the launch of the War on Terror. These speeches, along with the prevailing negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam (Orientalism), influenced how these groups were depicted in the media as regressive, docile, and conservative.⁹ The prevailing orientalist values that have a negative perspective of Muslims, Islam, and Arabs exert substantial influence in this context. Furthermore, the spread of information through numerous media outlets also contributed to the coverage of events relating to 9/11.

The 9/11 attacks dominated television coverage, particularly in the United States. News reports and entertainment programs quickly adopted a consistent news style in their coverage of September 11th. In the immediate aftermath, television channels provided uninterrupted coverage of the event, focusing on delivering detailed information.¹⁰ During this initial 24-hour period, television primarily served as a conduit of information, rather than offering guidance or analysis.¹¹ Research by Li (2007) has

⁶ Deeba Shahwar, "Portrayal of the Muslim World in the Western Print Media Post-9/11: Editorial Treatment in 'The New York Times' and 'The Daily Telegraph,'" *Pakistan Horizon* 67, no. 3 (2014): 164–65.

⁷ Abu Sadat Nurullah, "Portrayal of Muslims in the Media: '24' and the 'Othering' Process," *A. S.*, 2010, 1043.

⁸ Douglas Kellner, "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics," *Critical Discourse Studies* 1, no. 1 (2004): 44.

⁹ George Kassimeris and Leonie Jackson, "The West, the Rest, and the 'War on Terror': Representation of Muslims in Neoconservative Media Discourse," *Contemporary Politics* 17, no. 1 (2011): 30.; Satiti, "Representation of Muslim Women in the Western Media," 189.

¹⁰ Kellner, "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation," 41.

¹¹ Xigen Li, "Stages of a Crisis and Media Frames and Functions: U.S. Television Coverage of the 9/11 Incident





categorized the post-9/11 period into distinct stages. Examining a specific timeframe (8:45 am to 11:00 am) exemplifies the media's initial focus on providing descriptive accounts of the disaster.¹²

Following the 9/11 attacks, terms like "terror" and "terrorism" became prominent in US broadcast media, particularly on television.¹³ This focus on terrorism contributed to a media narrative that distinguished between "us" and "them," with "us" representing the democratic and civilized world. This framing led to unfavorable portrayals of countries perceived as breeding grounds for terrorists. Afghanistan, for example, received vastly different coverage in Western (US) media compared to media outlets from other parts of the world. According to Munshi (2004), US media coverage of Afghanistan deliberately omitted the devastating effects of the US-led War on Terror launched after 9/11. They portrayed Afghanistan as a peaceful, largely undamaged country, essentially erasing the disaster that had unfolded. In contrast, media from non-Western countries provided live coverage of the destruction caused by the US during the conflict.¹⁴

Entertainment media, particularly television shows set around the time of 9/11, also reflected the event's influence. These shows often perpetuated negative stereotypes of Islam, Muslims, and Arabs. For example, the series "24" (2001-2010), which debuted shortly after 9/11, frequently portrayed Muslims and Arabs in a negative light with a few exceptions. Nurullah (2010) conducted research on the series "24" and

observed that the show primarily depicted Muslims and Arabs as terrorists.¹⁵

In addition to that, in seasons two, four, and six, the series adapted terrorists originating from the Middle East who had the intention of detonating nuclear explosives in Los Angeles. Similarly, Alsultany (2013) examined other series like *The Sleeper Cell*, *The Practice*, *Threat Matrix*, and *The West Wing*. Her analysis found that these shows also relied heavily on negative portrayals of Muslim and Arab characters, often associating them with terrorism.¹⁶

Newspapers also played a significant role in shaping public perceptions after 9/11. Major publications like *The New York Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* provided extensive coverage of the attacks. Research by Shahwar (2014) found that news coverage of Middle Eastern countries, particularly Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, during the Bush administration was predominantly negative.¹⁷ This negative framing likely stemmed, at least in part, from the political climate of the time. Four years later, the effects of 9/11 arguably contributed to the controversial publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper, sparking outrage in many Muslim communities.¹⁸ It is undeniable that media framing of the 9/11 event resulted in unfavourable public sentiments, which in turn fueled a significant surge in Islamophobia.

Pop culture media, like comics, movies, and cartoons, also displayed negative portrayals of Muslims and Arabs after 9/11. Worcester (2011) suggests a link between the tragedy's impact and

During the First 24 Hours," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51, no. 4 (2007): 680.

¹² Li, "Stages of a Crisis and Media Frames and Functions," 679.

¹³ Peter van der Veer and Shoma Munshi, *Media, War, and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2004), 46.

¹⁴ Veer and Munshi, *Media, War, and Terrorism*, 47-50.

¹⁵ Nurullah, "Portrayal of Muslims in the Media: '24' and the 'Othering' Process," 1042.

¹⁶ Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11," 161; Alsultany and Hartouni, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 21.

¹⁷ It is asserted that the negative coverage reached 71.63 per cent and was greater than the positive. Shahwar, "Portrayal of the Muslim World in the Western Print Media Post-9/11: Editorial Treatment in 'The New York Times' and 'The Daily Telegraph'," 165.

¹⁸ Marion G. Müller and Esra Özcan, "The Political Iconography of Muhammad Cartoons: Understanding Cultural Conflict and Political Action," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40, no. 2 (2007): 287, Satiti, "Representation of Muslim Women in the Western Media," 189.





its influence on artistic expression.²¹ The public's fear and shock manifested in various works, including graphic novels, memoirs, and films. Comics, in particular, often depicted discrimination against characters with Muslim or Arab identities. Many comics released shortly after 9/11 showcased negative stereotypes, as evidenced in *The Liberty for All* and *The Holy Terror*, analyzed by Ijaz (2020). These comics portray Muslims and Arabs as violent, villainous figures bent on global destruction, while non-Muslims are framed as heroic saviors who defeat them.²²

Films also played a role in shaping post-9/11 portrayals of Muslims and Arabs. Many films, even those released years after the attacks, seemed to draw on the event's backdrop. For instance, *The Kingdom* (2007) and *The Traitor* (2008) presented counterterrorism narratives with Arabs as antagonists. Even documentaries like *Jihad: The Men and Ideas behind Al-Qaeda* (2006), while informative about terrorist ideology, often contributed to negative stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs.

Despite this limited analysis, it is evident that media portrayals of Arabs and Muslims post-9/11 have been largely negative. Shahwar (2011) argues that the US government's selective information sharing can influence media framing, shaping public perceptions of foreign countries, particularly Muslim nations²⁵. While some positive efforts exist to counter these biases, negative portrayals remain dominant. The media landscape since 9/11 has been characterized by a

heightened focus on terrorism and security, scrutiny of Islam and Muslims, the rise of 24/7 news coverage, and a complex relationship between the government and media in reporting on these issues.

Simplified Complex Representation: A Gateway of Media's Moderation

Throughout history, media has been a powerful tool for shaping public opinion. It can act as a facilitator of ideas and ideologies, potentially influencing how we view individuals, faiths, races, and cultures.²⁷ As Kimberly Powell notes, citing Barry Brummett, the media's agenda-setting power can lead to the creation of associations between these groups.²⁸

Media framing, a deliberate strategy to influence public perception, shapes how we understand issues. Scholars like Entman (as cited in Rane, 2014) define framing as the selection of specific information to convey a particular meaning of a problem.²⁹ This, as Reese (2001) agrees, also involves organizing and shaping the social environment around an issue.³⁰ Framing can simplify complex information, potentially leading to one-dimensional perspectives.³¹ We saw this in the aftermath of 9/11, where heavy media coverage significantly influenced negative perceptions of Muslims and Arabs.

Despite the prevalence of negative portrayals, some media outlets attempt a form of moderation, termed "Simplified Complex Representation" by Evelyn Alsultany to refer to a technique and strategy employed by TV

²¹ Kent Worcester, "New York City, 9/11, and Comics," *Radical History Review* 2011, no. 111 (2011): 139.

²² Saba Ijaz et al., "Rendering Muslims as Terrorists in the English Comic Books: Analysis of Liberty for All and Holly Terror," *The Journal of Social Sciences Research*, no. 68 (2020): 795.

²⁵ Shahwar, "Portrayal of the Muslim World in the Western Print Media Post-9/11: Editorial Treatment in 'The New York Times' and 'The Daily Telegraph'," 165.

²⁷ Todd Gitlin, *"The Whole World Is Watching": Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 18.

²⁸ Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, Fourth Edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015); Kimberly A. Powell,

"Framing Islam: An Analysis of U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorism Since 9/11," *Communication Studies* 62, no. 1 (2011): 93.

²⁹ Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 54.; Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart, and John Martinkus, *Media Framing of the Muslim World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 6.

³⁰ Stephen D. Reese, Jr. Gandy, and August E. Grant, eds., "Prologue—Framing Public Life: A Bridging Model for Media Research," in *Framing Public Life* (Routledge, 2001), 9.

³¹ Powell, "Framing Islam," 93-94.





producers, writers, or even directors. This strategy condenses complex issues, such as the portrayal of Muslims and Arabs, into more digestible narratives.³² However, Alsultany argues that these narratives often emphasize Western, particularly American political agendas and portray the West as a post-racial utopia.³³ Despite its underlying motive, the attempt at balance through "Simplified Complex Representation" suggests a potential for media moderation.

Evelyn Alsultany identifies seven forms of "Simplified Complex Representation" in her work. These strategies attempt to make complex issues about Muslims and Arabs more digestible for audiences. They include portraying patriotic Arab/Muslim Americans, sympathizing with post-9/11 struggles, challenging stereotypes by showcasing diverse Muslim identities, subverting expectations by revealing non-Muslim enemies, humanizing terrorists, promoting an image of multicultural America, and fictionalizing Middle Eastern conflicts with unidentified enemies. However, Alsultany argues that these efforts to simplify can be problematic, as they often reinforce underlying political agendas.³⁴

Media strategies and moderation can intersect when they share the goal of balanced portrayals. As Ido de Haan and Matthijs de Look point out in their edited book "The Politics of Moderation in Modern European History" (2019), Aristotle believed moderation involves achieving a balance to avoid extremes.³⁵ In the context of media, strategies that aim to balance negative portrayals of Muslims and Arabs with more positive ones can be considered a form of moderation, even if the specific strategies themselves might be debatable.³⁶ Here, the

media's efforts to counteract negative stereotypes with positive portrayals exemplify this kind of moderation.

In media representation, moderation fosters a more nuanced and balanced portrayal of Muslims and Arabs. This approach avoids stereotypes and recognizes the diversity of experiences within these communities. Positive portrayals can dispel negative prejudices and promote broader, more accurate understanding.

Positive Change in Media Representation of Muslims and Arabs in TV Dramas and Movies

A positive shift is emerging in media representation of Muslims and Arabs in TV dramas and movies. Media outlets are increasingly using portrayals that challenge stereotypes and promote understanding. These positive portrayals showcase nuanced, diverse characters with a wide range of experiences, moving beyond the narrow negative depictions that have been historically prevalent. This section will explore some examples of how media is countering negative portrayals with positive representations of Muslims and Arabs. It is important to acknowledge, however, that not all media will be covered, just a selection of representative examples.

Evelyn Alsultany, in her analysis of "Simplified Complex Representation" strategies in television dramas (2001-2009), identifies a shift towards more positive portrayals of Muslims and Arabs. These portrayals, while not without limitations, challenge stereotypes and offer a more nuanced view of these communities. For instance, the counter-terrorism drama *Threat Matrix* features Mohammad "Mo" Hassan, an Arab American Muslim working within the U.S. security forces. Similarly, 24 includes Nadia

³² Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11," 163-168.; Alsultany and Hartouni, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 21-31.

³³ Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11," 162.; Alsultany and Hartouni, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 11-12.

³⁴ Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11," 162.; Alsultany and Hartouni, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 21.

³⁵ Ido De Haan and Matthijs Lok, eds., *The Politics of Moderation in Modern European History* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 6.

³⁶ De Haan and Lok, *The Politics of Moderation in Modern European History*, 9.





Yassir, a Muslim woman who serves as a member of the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU). Even series like *Sleeper Cell* (2005-2006) challenge stereotypes by depicting Darwyn al-Sayeed, a Muslim FBI agent of African American descent who actively combats the misconception that terrorism is unrelated to religion. These examples highlight a growing awareness in television of the need for more nuanced portrayals of Muslims and Arabs.³⁷

Moving beyond counter-terrorism narratives, positive portrayals also feature Muslims in patriotic roles. For instance, the series *NCIS* (2003-2013) counters earlier stereotypes by introducing characters like Sam Hanna (LL Cool J), a Muslim American Navy SEAL and Special Agent, and Fatima Namazi, another Muslim Special Agent.³⁸ Similarly, *Blindspot* (2015-2020) features Afreen (Ami Sheth), a hijab-wearing Muslim FBI agent. This trend extends to other dramas like *FBI*, a CBS series that became the network's most-watched series in 2018, where the protagonist's Arab or Muslim background is not central to the plot, but their patriotism is.³⁹

Superhero stories are also expanding the landscape of positive portrayals. The 2022 Disney+ series *Ms. Marvel*, based on a comic book, features Kamala Khan, a Pakistani American Muslim teenager who gains superpowers. This series has been praised for its nuanced portrayal, breaking free from Western stereotypes (as argued by Mujahidah, 2023).⁴⁰ The shared Muslim and South Asian heritage of both the character and the show's creators, like Sana Amanat (as quoted by Mansur, 2023), is

seen as a significant step towards authentic representation. Safiyya Hussein, writing for *The Conversation*, highlights the show's impact on Muslim and South Asian audiences, who rarely see themselves reflected authentically in media⁴¹. On the other hand, Sanya Mansur (*The Time*) quoted Sana Amanat, the creative producer of this series, who said:

"I believe Islam is a pluralistic religion. There are many types of people. We in our own community need to be more accepting of that. Kamala may or may not pray five times daily but goes to the mosque. She is part of our community and is proud of that."⁴²

While *Ms. Marvel* features a Pakistani-American Muslim superhero, Kamala Khan, there's another Muslim character named Silver Kincaid in the series *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel*. Silver Kincaid (Jasmine Hussein) is a hijab-wearing superhero who has achieved various feats and serves as a UNESCO ambassador..

There is a growing trend in TV dramas to showcase Muslims beyond stereotypical crime narratives. Shows like *Ramy* (featuring Ramy Youssef as a young Egyptian American in New Jersey) exemplify this shift. The success of *Ramy*, a comedic series, lies in its focus on personal experiences, a stark contrast to the post-9/11 media portrayal of Muslims solely as terrorists.⁴³ Series like *The United States of Al, Chad, We Are Lady Parts*, and *Man Like Mobeen* further illustrate this diversity in Muslim representation on television. It is safe to assume there are many more dramas featuring positive portrayals of

³⁷ Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11," 163; Alsultany and Hartouni, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 21-22.

³⁸ "How Muslims Became the Good Guys on TV - BBC Culture," accessed January 7, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190620-how-muslims-became-the-good-guys-on-tv>.

³⁹ "How Muslims Became the Good Guys on TV - BBC Culture."

⁴⁰ Fitra Kanza Mujahidah, Aceng Abdullah, and Jimi N Mahameruaji, "Representasi Umat Islam dalam Miniseri Ms. Marvel" *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 8, no. 4 (2023): 864.

⁴¹ Safiyya Hosein, "Why Ms. Marvel Matters So Much to Muslim, South Asian Fans," *The Conversation*, June 30, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/why-ms-marvel-matters-so-much-to-muslim-south-asian-fans-184613>.

⁴² "'Ms. Marvel' Offers a Groundbreaking Celebration of Pakistani and Muslim Culture," *TIME*, June 10, 2022, <https://time.com/6186214/ms-marvel-pakistani-muslim-culture/>.

⁴³ Brett Krutzsch, "The Rise of the Muslim Sitcom," *The Revealer* (blog), December 9, 2021, <https://therevealer.org/the-rise-of-the-muslim-sitcom/>.





Muslims and Arabs beyond those mentioned here.

Post-9/11 films increasingly depict sympathetic Muslims, even in narratives involving terrorism. Often, positive characters are added to counter negative portrayals.⁴⁵ The 2007 film *The Kingdom* presents a complex case. While some consider it a film that breaks stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims after 9/11, critic Jack G. Shaheen argues it is actually one of the cruelest portrayals post-9/11.⁴⁷ Despite this criticism, the film does subvert stereotypes as the plot unfolds. A key example is the developing friendship between FBI agent Fleury and Arab officer Faris, who collaborate against extremist forces. The film also showcases Faris' and

highlighting that people who kill one soul as if they have killed all of humanity.⁴⁹ *Flight Plan* (2005) explores a different strategy: flipping the script on who the enemy is. Here, Jodie Foster's character wrongly accuses an Arab man of kidnapping her child, who ultimately helps her. Similarly, *Rendition* (2007) evokes sympathy for the "enemy" by depicting the grief of Fatima, a terrorist's sister, over his death. This technique, known as Simplified Complex Representation, is where the media humanizes the supposed antagonist.

Streaming giant Netflix contributes to the evolving portrayal of Muslims and Arabs in media. Their focus on diversity as a branding strategy plays a part in this shift.⁵¹ Research by Abbas suggests Netflix avoids one-sided portrayals, favoring nuanced characters rather than solely negative or positive depictions. Abbas highlights a broader trend in media – a shift towards more accurate and respectful portrayals of Arabs and Muslims. This is particularly evident in Netflix's content, where his research found no use of offensive terms in analyzed movie scenes.⁵²

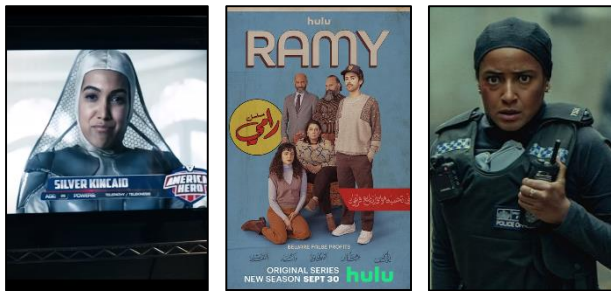


Figure 1 Some TV Dramas depicting Muslim representations

(From left to right: The Boys series, Ramy series, Bodies series from Netflix)

Source: Prime Video, Hulu, Netflix

Haytham's (another officer) humanity through scenes of their family interactions.⁴⁸

Other films offer complex portrayals of Muslims alongside *The Kingdom*. *Traitor* (2008) features Don Cheadle as a devout Muslim FBI agent. Interestingly, the film quotes a verse from the Quran (chapter al-Ma'idah, verse 32) emphasizing the sanctity of human life

Positive Change in Media Representation of Muslims and Arabs in Comics

Comics, a significant influence on pop culture, especially for young audiences, also reflected changing portrayals of Muslims and Arabs after 9/11. While some works, like *Mike Mickey's Liberalism For All* (2005), perpetuated negative stereotypes, others sparked criticism for their Islamophobic content. Frank Miller's *The Holy Terror* (2011) is a prime example. Daniele Croci

⁴⁵ Uzma Kiran, Ayesha Qamar, and Malik Adnan, "Muslims Depiction in Hollywood Movies: A Qualitative Study," *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology* 18, no. 8 (2021): 1133.

⁴⁷ Jack G. Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press, 2008), 43.

⁴⁸ Youcef Mekhanet, *The Portrait of Arabs Before and After 9/11 In Hollywood* (Amar Thelidji University, 2013), 27.

⁴⁹ Syed Rizvi, "A Look Into How Hollywood Has Portrayed Muslims Throughout History," September 20, 2022,

<https://themuslimvibe.com/western-muslim-culture/a-look-into-how-hollywood-has-portrayed-muslims-throughout-history>.

⁵¹ Mareike Jenner, "Netflix Marketing: The Binge and Diversity," in *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television*, by Mareike Jenner (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 171.

⁵² Menatalla Abbas, "Netflix's Role in Reshaping the Global Audience's Perception of Arabs and Muslims," *American University in Cairo*, 2023, 68.





argues the comic's portrayal incites revenge and relies on Islamophobic tropes.⁵³ Ijaz et al. further highlight the use of distorted Quranic verses and violent imagery to depict Muslims and Arabs as inherently dangerous.⁵⁴

Comic scholar Fredrik Stromberg analyzed Muslim and Arab superhero portrayals in American comics post-9/11.⁵⁵ He focused on recurring characters like Dust (Sooraya Qadir), a Sunni Muslim Afghan X-Men member from 2002 who wears a black abaya and niqab. Stromberg also examined characters including G.W. Bridge (1991), a non-powered African American S.H.I.E.L.D. agent in the Marvel Universe with the most character appearances according to Stromberg's research until 2007.⁵⁶ Bridge appears as a character with no superpowers but a large and dashing stature. Habib ben Hassan also appears in Wildstorm comics. Excalibur (Faiza Hussain, 2008) from Marvel features a young Muslim doctor in a white hijab, suggesting a modern Muslim woman. One scene depicts her wanting to join a superhero group and visit her Muslim family living in a suburban British home. This character also embodies the concept of a British knight who wears a hijab. Wildstorm's Hamza Mansour al-Rashad (2002)

depicts a Native American Muslim superhero. Some of the comic issues discussed by Stromberg show Rashad worshipping, highlighting his devout faith. Stromberg suggests these diverse characters, including a doctor, a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, and superheroes, aimed to counter negative stereotypes of Muslims prevalent in American media after 9/11.⁵⁷

In 2004, Dr. Naif al-Mutawa launched *The 99*, a Teshkeel Comics series featuring 99 Muslim superheroes inspired by the *Asma al-Husna* (Divine Names of God), intended to fill a void in positive Arab and Muslim content.⁵⁸ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 32(2), 391, the comic gained international recognition. Initially published in the Middle East (2006), it was later reprinted in the US (2007-2013). The series garnered acclaim, including praise from Barack Obama for its appeal to young Muslims.⁵⁹ Another achievement was being named one of the Top 20 Trends sweeping the Globe by Forbes⁶⁰, and the comic was also reported by many media outlets such as *The New York Times*⁶¹, CNN⁶², *Newsweek*⁶³, BBC⁶⁴, and *The Washington Post*⁶⁵.

Recent comics from Marvel and DC portrayals show a shift towards more positive

⁵³ Daniele Croci, "Holy Terror, Batman! Frank Miller's Dark Knight and the Superhero as Hardboiled Terrorist," *Universita Degli Studi de Milano*, no. 15 (2016): 167.

⁵⁴ Ijaz et al., "Rendering Muslims as Terrorists in the English Comic Books." 795.

⁵⁵ Fredrik Stromberg, "'Yo, Rag-Head!': Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books After 9/11," *American Studies* 56, no. 4 (2011): 573-577.

⁵⁶ Stromberg, "Yo, Rag-Head!," 589.

⁵⁷ Stromberg, "Yo, Rag-Head!," 595-597.

⁵⁸ Mary-Jane Deeb, "The 99: Superhero Comic Books from the Arab World," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 2 (2012): 391.

⁵⁹ The White House, "Remarks by the President at the Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship Thank You for Reaching Out. Whitehouse.Gov," The White House: President Barack Obama, April 26, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-presidential-summit-entrepreneurship>.

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Eaves, "In Pictures: 20 Trends Sweeping The Globe," *Forbes*, 2008,

https://www.forbes.com/2008/01/09/internet-culture-global-forbeslife-globalpop08-cx_ee_0109pop_slide.html.

⁶¹ Hassan M. Fattah, "Comics to Battle for Truth, Justice and the Islamic Way," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2006, sec. World,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/world/middleeast/comics-to-battle-for-truth-justice-and-the-islamic-way.html>.

⁶² Neil Curry Soffel Jenny, "The 99: Islamic Superheroes Going Global," CNN, June 11, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/11/showbiz/comic-book-heroes-the-99-write/index.html>.

⁶³ "Muslim Superheroes to the Rescue," *Newsweek*, March 4, 2007, <https://www.newsweek.com/muslim-superheroes-rescue-95595>.

⁶⁴ Baba Naif, "'Why I Based Superheroes on Islam,'" July 2, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8127699.stm>.

⁶⁵ Nora Boustany, "Nora Boustany - Superheroes Powered on Islam," February 8, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/07/AR2006020702034.html>.



representations of Muslims and the Islamic world. A prime example is Ms. Marvel, a Pakistani American Muslim superhero whose story tackles the challenges of balancing her faith and her superhero identity. The series, written by a Muslim author, incorporates Islamic elements like trivia and the Quran into the narrative, offering a fresh perspective within the American superhero landscape. Another example is *Amazing Spider-Man #26*, where characters attend a khatm al-Qur'an (Quran recitation ceremony) following rumors of Ms. Marvel's death, showcasing Islamic traditions within the Marvel universe (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Marvel Comics (*Amazing Spiderman #26* depicts Islamic trivia in the narratives (From left to right: Wolverine (a superhero character) enters the mosque and conversates with the community; Several superheroes recite Qur'anic verses of al-Falaq; Source: Marvel Comics *Amazing Spiderman #26 "Fallen Friend: The Death of Ms Marvel"*)

Smit and Chetty highlight the significance of Ms. Marvel in challenging stereotypes. They argue the comic creates a space for discussion by depicting the intersection of religion, race, and gender. This approach foregrounds the social construction of prejudice against Muslims, immigrants, and women, both within Islamic and American contexts.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Dean Cooper-Cunningham, "Drawing Fear of Difference: Race, Gender, and National Identity in Ms. Marvel Comics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2020): 192.; Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji and Alyssa D. Niccolini, "Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Femininities in Ms. Marvel,"

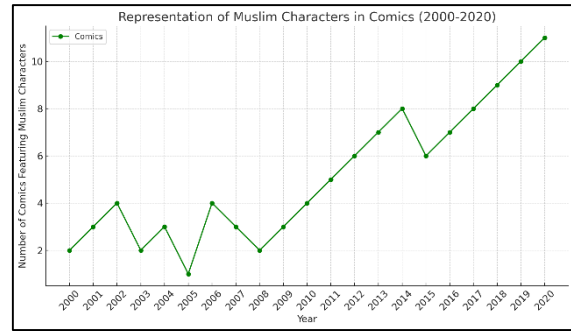


Chart 1 Muslim Representations in Comics
The chart witnesses an increase in the number of Muslim representations in comics.

The DC Universe also features positive portrayals of Muslim characters. Green Lantern Simon Baz, introduced in *Justice League #0* (2012), is a Lebanese-American superhero. Similarly, Monet St. Croix (M) of the X-Men is depicted as Algerian. These characters, along with others like Nightrunner (Bilal Aseelah) and Equinox (Miiyabih Marteen), contribute to a more diverse and culturally rich representation of Muslims in DC comics.

Conclusion

Following negative portrayals of Muslims and Arabs in post-9/11 media (movies, TV series, comics, news reporting), filmmakers are increasingly striving for "moderation." This means presenting balanced, nuanced characters that challenge stereotypes and reflect the diversity within these communities. Positive portrayals can foster empathy and dismantle prejudice. It is an ongoing process, but crucial for inclusivity and a more accurate media landscape. Scholar Evelyn Alsultany argues for "complex representations" of Muslims in media, moving beyond simplified stereotypes. This call for moderation resonates in pop culture, where TV shows, movies, and even comics (heavily

Girlhood Studies 8, no. 3 (2015): 36.; Johannes Smit and Denzil Chetty, "Debunking Marvel Comics' First Pakistani-American Born Muslim Female Superhero: Reading Religion, Race and Gender in Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)," *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2018): 19.



impacted by 9/11) increasingly feature nuanced portrayals of Muslim and Arab characters.

By featuring Muslims and Arabs in good ways, media outlets actively contribute to a more moderate and inclusive depiction. These portrayals challenge viewers' preconceived notions and foster empathy. Positive portrayals can encompass a variety of characters with complex and diverse identities, showcasing a wide array of experiences that go beyond the traditionally dominant and frequently unfavourable representations. It is crucial to acknowledge that attaining moderation in media portrayal is a continuous endeavour, and its effects might differ depending on the particular material, context, and audience. However, it is essential to emphasize that positive representations promote inclusiveness and challenge stereotypes, creating a more equitable and truthful depiction of the diverse Muslim and Arab communities.

Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to all contributors for their valuable efforts.

Competing Interests

There are no financial or personal connections between the author of this study and any other individuals that could potentially impact or distort the content of the study.

Author's Contributions

The listed author solely contributes to this article.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines and did not involve direct interaction with human or animal participants.

Funding Information

This research did not get any dedicated support from any public, commercial, or nonprofit organizations.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not relevant to this paper since no novel data were generated or analyzed in this investigation.

Disclaimer

The opinions and presumptions conveyed in this article are solely those of the writers and may not necessarily align with the official policy or stance of any associated agency with the authors.

References

- Abbas, Menatalla. "Netflix's Role in Reshaping the Global Audience's Perception of Arabs and Muslims." *American University in Cairo*, 2023.
- Alsultany, Evelyn. "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a 'Posttrace' Era." *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 161–69. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2013.0008>.
- Alsultany, Evelyn, and Valerie Hartouni. *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.
- Boustany, Nora. "Nora Boustany - Superheroes Powered on Islam," February 8, 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/07/AR2006020702034.html>.
- Brummett, Barry. *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*. Fourth Edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015.
- Cooper-Cunningham, Dean. "Drawing Fear of Difference: Race, Gender, and National Identity in Ms. Marvel Comics." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (January 2020): 165–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829819889133>.
- Croci, Daniele. "Holy Terror, Batman! Frank Miller's Dark Knight and the Superhero as Hardboiled Terrorist." *Universita Degli Studi de Milano*, no. 15 (2016).
- De Haan, Ido, and Matthijs Lok, eds. *The Politics of Moderation in Modern European History*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27415-3>.
- Deeb, Mary-Jane. "The 99 : Superhero Comic Books from the Arab World." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 2 (August 1, 2012): 391–407. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1628998>.
- Disha, Ilir, James C. Cavendish, and Ryan D. King. "Historical Events and Spaces of Hate: Hate Crimes against Arabs and Muslims in Post-9/11 America." *Social Problems* 58, no. 1 (February 2011): 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2011.58.1.21>.
- Eaves, Elisabeth. "In Pictures: 20 Trends Sweeping The Globe." *Forbes*, 2008. https://www.forbes.com/2008/01/09/internet-culture-global-forbeslife-globalpop08-cx_ee_0109pop_slide.html.
- Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.
- Fattah, Hassan M. "Comics to Battle for Truth, Justice and the Islamic Way." *The New York Times*, January 22, 2006, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/world/middleeast/>





- comics-to-battle-for-truth-justice-and-the-islamic-way.html.
- Gitlin, Todd. *"The Whole World Is Watching": Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1980.
- Hosein, Safiyya. "Why Ms. Marvel matters so much to Muslim, South Asian fans." *The Conversation*, June 30, 2022. <http://theconversation.com/why-ms-marvel-matters-so-much-to-muslim-south-asian-fans-184613>.
- "How Muslims Became the Good Guys on TV - BBC Culture." Accessed January 7, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190620-how-muslims-became-the-good-guys-on-tv>.
- Ijaz, Saba, Muhammad Awais, Mudasar Ali Nadeem, and Farahat Ali. "Rendering Muslims as Terrorists in the English Comic Books: Analysis of Liberty for All and Holly Terror." *The Journal of Social Sciences Research*, no. 68 (August 31, 2020): 785–96. <https://doi.org/10.32861/jssr.68.785.796>.
- Jenner, Mareike. "Netflix Marketing: The Binge and Diversity." In *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television*, by Mareike Jenner, 161–82. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94316-9_9.
- Kassimeris, George, and Leonie Jackson. "The West, the Rest, and the 'War on Terror': Representation of Muslims in Neoconservative Media Discourse." *Contemporary Politics* 17, no. 1 (March 2011): 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2011.552684>.
- Kellner, Douglas. "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics." *Critical Discourse Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 2004): 41–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900410001674515>.
- Khoja-Moolji, Shenila S., and Alyssa D. Niccolini. "Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Femininities in Ms. Marvel." *Girlhood Studies* 8, no. 3 (January 1, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2015.080304>.
- Kiran, Uzma, Dr Ayesha Qamar, and Dr Malik Adnan. "Muslims Depiction in Hollywood Movies: A Qualitative Study." *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology* 18, no. 8 (2021).
- Krutzsch, Brett. "The Rise of the Muslim Sitcom." *The Revealer* (blog), December 9, 2021. <https://therevealer.org/the-rise-of-the-muslim-sitcom/>.
- Li, Xigen. "Stages of a Crisis and Media Frames and Functions: U.S. Television Coverage of the 9/11 Incident During the First 24 Hours." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51, no. 4 (December 2007): 670–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150701626578>.
- Mekhanet, Youcef. *The Portrait of Arabs Before and After 9/11 In Hollywood*. Amar Thelidji University, 2013.
- Mujahidah, Fitra Kanza, Aceng Abdullah, and Jimi N Mahameruaji. "Representasi Umat Islam dalam Miniseri Ms. Marvel" 8, no. 4 (2023).
- Müller, Marion G., and Esra Özcan. "The Political Iconography of Muhammad Cartoons: Understanding Cultural Conflict and Political Action." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40, no. 2 (April 2007): 287–91. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909650707045X>.
- Naif, Baba. "'Why I Based Superheroes on Islam,'" July 2, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8127699.stm>.
- Newsweek. "Muslim Superheroes to the Rescue," March 4, 2007. <https://www.newsweek.com/muslim-superheroes-rescue-95595>.
- Nurullah, Abu Sadat. "Portrayal of Muslims in the Media: '24' and the 'Othering' Process." *A. S.*, 2010.
- Powell, Kimberly A. "Framing Islam: An Analysis of U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorism Since 9/11." *Communication Studies* 62, no. 1 (January 31, 2011): 90–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.533599>.
- Rane, Halim, Jacqui Ewart, and John Martinkus. *Media Framing of the Muslim World*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137334831>.
- Reese, Stephen D., Jr. Gandy, and August E. Grant, eds. "Prologue—Framing Public Life: A Bridging Model for Media Research." In *Framing Public Life*, 0 ed., 23–48. Routledge, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410605689-7>.
- Rizvi, Syed. "A Look Into How Hollywood Has Portrayed Muslims Throughout History," September 20, 2022. <https://themuslimvibe.com/western-muslim-culture/a-look-into-how-hollywood-has-portrayed-muslims-throughout-history>.
- Saeed, Amir. "Media, Racism and Islamophobia: The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media." *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 2 (November 2007): 443–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00039.x>.
- Satiti, Nur Latifah Umi. "Representation of Muslim Women in the Western Media." *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 14, no. 2 (December 6, 2017): 189–202. <https://doi.org/10.24002/jik.v14i2.789>.
- Shaheen, Jack G. *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*. 1. publ. Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press, 2008.
- Shahwar, Deeba. "Portrayal of the Muslim World in the Western Print Media Post-9/11: Editorial Treatment in 'The New York Times' and 'The Daily Telegraph.'" *Pakistan Horizon* 67, no. 3 (2014): 133–66.
- Smit, Johannes, and Denzil Chetty. "Debunking Marvel Comics' First Pakistani-American Born Muslim Female Superhero: Reading Religion, Race and Gender in Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)." *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.14426/ajgr.v24i2.48>.
- Soffel, Neil Curry, Jenny. "The 99: Islamic Superheroes Going Global." CNN, June 11, 2013. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/11/showbiz/comic-book-heroes-the-99-write/index.html>.
- Stromberg, Fredrik. "'Yo, Rag-Head!': Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books After 9/11." *American Studies* 56, no. 4 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1163/2468-1733_shafr_SIM260100170.
- The White House. "Remarks by the President at the Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship | Whitehouse.Gov." The White House: President Barack Obama, April 26, 2010. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-presidential-summit-entrepreneurship>.
- TIME. "'Ms. Marvel' Offers a Groundbreaking Celebration of Pakistani and Muslim Culture," June 10, 2022. <https://time.com/6186214/ms-marvel-pakistani-muslim-culture/>.
- Veer, Peter van der, and Shoma Munshi. *Media, War, and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Worcester, Kent. "New York City, 9/11, and Comics." *Radical History Review* 2011, no. 111 (September 1, 2011): 139–54. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1268758>.

