Culture

The Zakir family watches an episode of "Ms. Marvel" in Anaheim, California, on July 8. From left: father Yusuf; son Burhanuddin; Yusuf's niece, Insiya Maimoon; daughter Jumana; and mother Fareeda (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Deepa Bharath

View Author Profile

Mariam Fam

View Author Profile

The Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Los Angeles — July 30, 2022

Jumana Zakir knows who she is going to be for Halloween this year. Hint: Her new favorite superhero is a lot like her — female, teen, Muslim, American and "totally awesome."

"Kamala Khan is me," said the exuberant 13-year-old from Anaheim, California. "She is just like me."

Khan is the Marvel Cinematic Universe's first Muslim superhero to headline her own television show. "Ms. Marvel," which launched on Disney+ on June 8, has struck a chord with South Asian Muslims in the West because of its relatability and how it portrays Muslim families. Advocates for inclusion and representation hope the show will open the door to more nuanced on-screen portrayals of Muslims and their rich diversity.

The show tells the story of Khan, played by Pakistani Canadian actor Iman Vellani, getting her powers from a magical bangle that allows her to walk on air and conjure glowing light shields. But she is also a regular South Asian Muslim teen who goes to mosque, performs wudu or ritual ablution before praying, sometimes wears traditional attire called shalwar kameez, dances to Bollywood numbers at her brother's wedding, and breaks curfew to hang out with her buddy Bruno Carrelli at AvengerCon.

Munir Zamir, who is British Pakistani and grew up in East London, said seeing a "brown, Pakistani Muslim girl from New Jersey" in the comic books and, now, watching "Ms. Marvel" with his teenage children has been powerful. Zamir, 50, has been a Marvel fan since he was 7 and has followed the evolution of Kamala Khan since Ms. Marvel's inception in comic books in 2014.

"For Muslims in particular, representation matters a lot because, for many years, misrepresentation has mattered too much," he said.

Zamir points out that there are other Muslim superheroes in the Marvel universe, like Sooraya Qadir, also known as Dust. She wears a flowing black outfit, covers her

hair and face, and can transform her body into a cloud of dust.

"Even in that description, there are some classic tropes," Zamir said. "But Kamala Khan is not some exotic woman from a Muslim country. That instantly sets her apart in the Marvel universe."

Cast member Iman Vellani arrives at the premiere of "Ms. Marvel" on June 2 at El Capitan Theatre in Los Angeles. The show tells the story of Kamala Khan, played by Pakistani Canadian actor Vellani, getting her powers from a magical bangle that allows her to walk on air and conjure glowing light shields. (Photo by Jordan Strauss/Invision/AP)

The diverse experiences of Muslim women in "Ms. Marvel" are among aspects that stand in contrast to findings of a report published last year examining Muslim representation across 200 top-grossing movies from the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand that were released between 2017 and 2019.

The study found women were particularly underrepresented, with just 23.6% of Muslim characters in these movies being female. Conducted by the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative with support from others, it also found that 90.5% of these films didn't feature Muslim speaking characters and yet 39% of "primary and secondary" Muslim characters were perpetrators of violence.

Making Ms. Marvel more relatable was intentional, said Sana Amanat, one of Kamala Khan's creators and an executive producer on the show. She wanted to portray a Muslim character who "feels like someone you know."

"She is not put on a pedestal," she said. "She is awkward. She is funny. She is a sweet person who ultimately wants to do better."

Amanat and her co-creators felt it was important to show Khan's everyday life as a Muslim American teen.

That idea of normalcy resonated with Hiba Bhatty, a Pakistani American fan of the show. She particularly liked how Khan's father, Yusuf, was portrayed as "a loving dad" as opposed to a scary stereotype.

Bhatty, a Los Angeles-based architect, previously displayed Ms. Marvel comics on her desk at work as conversation starters. Now, she is getting ready to give co-workers a "Ms. Marvel" presentation. To her, it exemplifies how many in her community have moved beyond wanting to just be portrayed as "normal Americans," to actually telling their own nuanced stories.

"Ms. Marvel" is also "reclaiming language that has been weaponized against Muslims," said Arij Mikati, managing director of culture change for the Pillars Fund, which supports Muslim civic leaders and artists.

In one scene, Khan and her family joyously break into chants of "Allahu akbar," or "God is great," in celebration of her brother's wedding.

"When you hear the call to prayer, that's usually a sign that you're somewhere unsafe on television," Mikati said. "And all of these things are being reclaimed in this show ... That's really beautiful because those day-to-day, small moments of our faith

have really been taken from us in the media."

Pillars Fund's initiatives include a Muslim artist database, created in collaboration with and support from the Walt Disney Company, to bring more Muslims into the filmmaking process.

"A superhero story is not a genre where you expect a Muslim to be, and I love that this story is changing that," Mikati said.

The show touches on issues from surveilling mosques to what wearing head scarves means for some. Khan's friend, the hijab-wearing Nakia Bahadir, is played by Yasmeen Fletcher. One of the most important conversations between Khan and Bahadir happens in the girls' restroom, where Bahadir talks about how she feels like herself, with a purpose, when she dons her hijab.

Jumana, the teen from Anaheim who plans to wear a hijab in a year or two, said she appreciated the show's portrayal of what the hijab means to some young girls like her.

"My non-Muslim friends already know about my decision and respect it," she said. "But if more people can realize that by watching this show, that's great."

Fletcher said she has been touched by such powerful responses.

"The whole point of Nakia's character is to break down the stereotypes around hijabi women," she said.

For the show's seven writers — four of whom are Pakistani — representing Muslims and South Asians realistically was crucial, said the show's head writer Bisha K. Ali, who is British Pakistani.

"We felt a hunger for being seen in a way that was celebrated and beautiful, and comes from a place of love and compassion," she said.

The Zakir family watches an episode of "Ms. Marvel" in Anaheim, California, on July 8. The new series on Disney+ has resonated with Muslims in the West. The show's refreshing approach to portraying the everyday lives of American Muslims has won many hearts. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

While it's impossible to capture the experience of nearly 2 billion Muslims, Ali said the writers leaned into telling the story of this one family in an authentic way.

The show takes a similar approach to talking about the Partition in 1947, when British India was divided along religious lines into India and Pakistan, triggering one of the largest mass migrations in history. The violence from tensions between Hindus and Muslims led to a refugee crisis, which the show weaves in as part of Khan's family history.

Ali said the show's goal was not to point fingers in any direction, but to tell one family's story of the intergenerational trauma triggered by this chapter of history and convey "a sense of empathy for the amount of pain on all sides."

Ali described the mood in the writer's room as "incredibly emotional" as they talked about what their mosques were like growing up and contacted relatives on WhatsApp to gather more details.

Sitting in the belly of Marvel Studios in a windowless conference room, Ali said she had lost count of the number of times the writers looked at each other as if to ask: "Are we really here? Are we really doing this?"