Illustration by Natalie Chiovitti (@artbynat)
BECOMING THE SUPERHERO:
SELF IMAGE IN MS. MARVEL

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The first volume of the comic book, Ms. Marvel, written by G. Willow Wilson and illustrated by Adrian Alphona, addresses important themes pertaining to superhero comics such as adolescence, social identity, and family. However, in this particular re-incarnation of *Ms. Marvel*, Wilson tackles these themes in a new way with the introduction of a Muslim Pakistani protagonist who has not previously been given the chance to be a popular mainstream superhero. This paper will perform a close reading of the first two pages of Issue Two in the superhero comic book, *Ms. Marvel*, where Kamala Khan, the protagonist, reacts to her very first transformation into Ms. Marvel after receiving her powers. The scene where a superhero realizes their power is traditionally the pivotal turning point in the narrative arc. However, in this case, Wilson depicts this moment to be one that is not necessarily empowering, but one which reveals Kamala's personal insecurities as a Muslim, Pakistani teenage girl living in Jersey City. Being a minority in an American metropolitan city, Kamala struggles to fit in amongst her schoolmates, while also trying to please her immigrant parents. Thus, her transformation ends up being a physical manifestation of her own self-image.
This scene also foreshadows the journey she goes through later in the comic, as she learns to use her shapeshifting powers to save others while also becoming more comfortable in her own skin. By depicting the theme of negative self-image during Kamala's transformation, Wilson conveys the difficulty of becoming a superhero and the reality of living in a world where the most popular superheroes, including the ones Kamala idolizes, look nothing like her, which also speaks to the experience of many readers and fans of the superhero genre.

At the beginning of Issue Two, Kamala is seen sitting on the ground with her hands on her face (Wilson page 1, panel 1). She is in complete disbelief over the fact that not only has she become Ms. Marvel, but she has become Carol Danvers' version of Ms. Marvel (1.1). Carol Danvers, who is also known as Captain Marvel, is the first superhero to carry the title of Ms. Marvel in the Marvel Comics, and is a superhero Kamala greatly idolizes (Brown). Despite Kamala's desire of being like Danvers, something she technically wishes for in a dream, the outcome is something she does not expect. After her transformation, she thinks "I passed out in the fog and had a dream that I asked Captain Marvel to make me like her. Apparently she took me literally" (1.1). This narration indicates that Kamala did not want to become Captain Marvel literally, and yet that is exactly who she transforms into, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and white skin. Ultimately, this physical transformation becomes a manifestation of Kamala's own insecurities. It was obviously not the Captain Marvel she saw in her dream who made her like this, rather it was Kamala's powers that allowed her to physically become someone she thinks is "strong and confident and beautiful" (2.3). This initial transformation reveals that Kamala does not view herself as strong, confident, or beautiful, and the fact that her idea of who embodies these traits looks nothing like her, makes this superhero transformation ironically dis-empowering. This moment of transformation becomes a reflection of her own negative self-image, of wanting to look and be like someone else.
The panel where Kamala awkwardly attempts to stand up, trying to regain her balance, illustrates that she is clearly not feeling like herself (1.2). The biggest panel in these two pages is one in which Kamala is covering her mouth with her enlarged hand to try and stop herself from vomiting (1.4). It is interesting that her first transformation results in this feeling of nausea, to the point that she thinks she is about to vomit. This not only shows the reader that Kamala’s body is not accustomed to such rapid shape-shifting, but that she feels disgusted by it. When she finally sees herself literally become someone else, someone who does not have to deal with the baggage of being an outsider, she feels disgusted that she ever felt embarrassed of her own body, and starts to realize that, at least physically, she would much rather be herself. Before she vomits, her body transforms back into her original form (2.5). Here, Kamala can be seen wearing a jacket that has the Ms. Marvel symbol on it, the yellow lightning bolt, which she has been wearing since the beginning of the comic (2.5). The image of Kamala wearing this symbol as her own physical self, contrasts with the image of her wearing this symbol as Carol Danvers in the previous panel. It is a reminder to the reader of the nature of the superhero mantle: something that can be worn and embodied by anybody. Even the circumstances by which Kamala becomes a superhero is a reflection of this, as she receives her powers by being exposed to Terrigen Mist (2.1), an alien substance which can alter someone’s biology to become inhuman and gain superhuman abilities (Fraction). Her becoming a superhero was accidental, at least on her part. Anybody else could have been in her place and be affected by the Mists, since they just appeared in a random part of the city. Therefore, Wilson signals to her readers that anyone, including Kamala, can have superpowers and choose to become a superhero. They need not change their physical self in order to carry that responsibility. This ties into the larger theme of the comic, where Kamala learns to embrace her identity in its entirety instead of running away from it in order to become a better superhero.
On the next page, after returning to her normal self, Kamala says, “Okay. Okay. I’m okay” (2.1). This is a significant moment because it is the start of Kamala’s journey of learning to be more comfortable with her own identity and embracing herself for who she is. Although she is reassuring herself that she is now physically back to normal, it is also as though she is saying to herself that she is enough, that there is nothing wrong with being Kamala. However, after this brief moment of peace, Kamala’s powers transform her back into Carol Danvers. While she is transforming into Danvers, Kamala tells herself “this is not happening,” while her internal dialogue narrates: “It is happening. This is what I asked for, right? So why don’t I feel strong and confident and beautiful? Why do I just feel freaked out and underdressed?” (2.3-4). Here, the reader can see how Kamala is finally starting to realize the fact that the further she tries to run away from her own identity in order to fit in, the more uncomfortable and confused she will feel. Even after transforming into the person she admires, Kamala realizes that this is not what she wants. Furthermore, this dialogue is happening when Kamala is holding her hand to her stomach, once again feeling nauseated. This entire sequence constantly shows Kamala’s physical body in positions of discomfort. She is often seen bent down on the ground with her hand covering her neck or stomach, as if she is in pain. This reinforces the fact that not only is constantly transforming into someone else physically exhausting, but also emotionally and psychologically exhausting. Kamala’s desire to fit in, despite being someone who is considered a minority in society, is in fact difficult. But what she does not yet realize is that putting on a façade and pretending to be someone you are not is also difficult. This sequence of transformations makes her feel that discomfort physically, allowing her to learn and become more comfortable being herself later on in the comic.

In the fourth panel, Kamala finally gets up and narrates “I don’t recognize this street . . . I’ve got to . . . somehow get home. I can fix this—” as she tries to find her way back home (2.4). Once
again, this panel is an example of how the events taking place in the outside world are a reflection of Kamala's inner conflict. Saying that she does not recognize this street is a reflection of how this experience of becoming someone else has made her feel out of place. This can also be seen in the mist which is present in this setting, as it echoes the feeling of confusion and disarray Kamala is going through. It is also important to note that this entire sequence is illustrated in panels that are very inconsistent in size, some crossing the boundaries of other panels, while the smallest panel in the first page is placed on top of a larger one. These two pages do not follow an organized pattern, allowing the reader to visually see and experience the feeling of displacement that Kamala is going through.

In the last panel, Kamala is in the middle of transforming back into herself. The image shown is her as a hybrid between Carol Danvers and herself, with her right arm, right leg, and torso still transformed as Danvers. This reflects the larger idea of the story, in which Kamala is in a space of disconnectedness because she wants to emulate the qualities of someone she idolizes as a superhero, while also retaining her own subjectivity. Hence, Kamala's multiple transformations into Carol Danvers, before ultimately transforming back into herself, foreshadow her learning curve as she learns to be proud of her identity and establish her own version of Ms. Marvel, rather than simply copying someone else. This image also symbolizes the struggle Kamala will inevitably go through as someone trying to balance her life as a young Muslim Pakistani girl who is also a superhero.

Kamala first learning about her superpowers and experiencing the physical transformation into Ms. Marvel illustrates, literally and thematically, her inner conflict and negative self-image, while also foreshadowing the character arc she will go through as a superhero, who becomes empowered by embracing the very identity she initially has difficulty accepting. Through this new incarnation of Ms. Marvel, G. Willow Wilson reflects the experience of many minority readers by introducing a young
MAHERA ISLAM

teenager struggling with her identity as a Pakistani Muslim girl to the larger Marvel canon, thereby challenging the traditionally accepted image of a superhero.

Works Cited