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Representation of Islamic symbols in Ms. Marvel series

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ABSTRACT

Ms. Marvel is an American television series based on the same-named Marvel Comics superhero. It is the nineteenth Marvel Cinematic Universe television series and the twelfth chapter of Phase Four. This study intended to find and analyze the Islamic symbols represented in Ms. Marvel series so that the writers could elucidate them. As this is qualitative research, the writers, who have role as the primary instruments, analyze the data which were downloaded from internet (Ms. Marvel series) and they found that Islamic symbols in them can be analyzed through verbal and nonverbal data. The analyzed verbal data consists of expressions such as assalamualaikum and walaikumsalam, whereas the nonverbal data, which are in the forms of symbols, consists of Islamic clothing and mosque. Based on the data, the nonverbal symbol is the most prevalent in the movie series.

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1. Introduction

Interest has been resurgent in recent decades, as evidenced by extensive academic research that examines the relationship between media representation of minorities and issues of ethnicity, race, multiculturalism, and identity politics (Ahmed & Matthes, 2016, p. 1). However, among all the multiculturalism, Muslims and Islam are at the center of much criticism and debate. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the representation of Muslims in popular media, particularly in the Western context, where Islamophobia and negative stereotypes about Muslims are prevalent.

The movie industry is one of the popular media being talked about all the time. This matter is also supported by streaming platforms such as Netflix or Disney+ that are easily accessible online. The

movie has the same elements as short stories, novels, drama or poetry, and it has potentially analyzed (for example see Lailiyah & Yustisia, 2018; Winarsih, 2019). According to research conducted in 2017, although the movie is a fictional form of literature, the movie can contain real-life issues (as cited in Arnetta & Amelia, 2022, p. 150). Boggs and Petrie stated that literature and movies share and communicate similar elements (as cited in Royani, 2016). In addition, Royani (2014) commented on literature and movie:

Literature shows the power of imagination and the product of fictional imagination stories with not about the real world. Literature is about life or human life as the writer sees something they believe to be real. In brief, the movie's narrative story can also be analyzed using literary theory. (p. 2)

The following previous research or studies show that the narrative story of movies, even animation, are interested to be analyzed by using semiotic theory. First is research done by Sihite, et.al. (2021), they analyzed the Spongebob movie regarding its visual semiotic analysis. The result shows that there are 19 qualisigns, feeling happy (for Spongebob) and sleepy (for Patrick). Those two qualisigns; feeling happy and sleepy, represented by non-verbal communication. Second is research done by Aminu (2021). The result shows that symbol is the second mostly used, after icon, in the Black Panther movie, with 35 occurrences. They convey messages to African and African American audiences regarding the richness of African cultures and resources. The last is, research done by Akpan and Ikeulogbon (2023). The result shows that symbols are one of the signs that are richly deployed in American (Hollywood) and Nigerian (Nollywood) movies.

Ali and Rizvi (2020) in their study revealed that Muslims portrayal had high tendency in negativity in the Hollywood movies and the symbols associated with Muslims characters were as follows: having beard, rosary in their hands, wearing a prayer cap during their religious practices. Other study about Muslim character is a movie was done by Trattner (2016). He described Kamala Khan in her Muslim identity: Kamala is Muslim, and while her religion is a big part of her identity, it is not the only thing that defines her. She is unlike how most Muslims are viewed: one-dimensional terrorist, thief, or villain. She is also not the stereotypical Muslim woman who is smitten with religion or her husband. (p. 2). Furthermore, Ms. Marvel is not only American but Muslim, not only female but heroic (which destabilizes masculinity/femininity gender norms), and not only brown but white (Cooper-Cunningham, 2019, p. 32).

Based on the above explanation, regarding semiotic, especially symbols in Islam, the writers were keen on conducting research on similar topic towards Ms. Marvel series. They intended to find and analyze the Islamic symbols represented in Ms. Marvel series so that the writer can elucidate them. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is one of the popular media franchises in the movie industry. It has just been released the Ms. Marvel series on Disney+, which features the first Muslim superhero, Kamala Khan. This series depicts Islamic symbols in mainstream media, which gained even more attention. Ms. Marvel can be used as a representative to change the perspective of Islam in the Western media, especially the movie industry. Therefore, the writer realizes that it is important to display Islamic symbols following Islamic teachings to change the perspective and understanding of Islam in Western society.

Literature review

According to Martin and Ringham, semiotics relates to all things considered a sign, such as images, gestures, sounds, and objects. Semiotics is derived from the Greek word “Semion” which denotes a sign. In modern usage, semiotics refers to a theory of signification (as cited in Royani, 2016, p. 7).

Semiotics as a study of the sign is rooted in structuralism proposed by Ferdinand De Saussure the father of modern Linguistics and the founder of semiotics, which has influenced semiotics science. According to Saussure, semiotics is a science and symbol that specifically communicate something verbally and unspoken (as cited in Pratami et al., 2022, p. 2). One of the broadest definitions is by Umberto Eco, who states that semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. Moreover, Semiotics is the study of sign and symbols and their meaning and use, especially in the writing, or method to analyze the sign (as cited in Pratami et al., 2022, p. 8).

As for Islam itself and its symbols, the following are explanation about them. Salleh (2015) stated, “The message of Islam (“submission” to the One God, The Almighty Allah) has been propagated, preached, and taught throughout time since the existence of first mankind, beginning with Adam’ (p. 4). In addition, the researcher explained Islam based on linguistics that “the word “Islam” is an Arabic word which means “submission” or “surrender” of one’s will to the only true God, known in Arabic as “Allah” (p. 5).

In Arabic, one who submits his will to God is termed a “Muslim”. This word comes from the same root as the Arabic word “salam”, which means “peace” (Salleh, 2015, p. 5). Some people often mistake Islam is an Arab religion, Salleh (2015) commented on such beliefs:

Not only are there converts to Islam in every corner of the world, especially in Europe and America, but by looking into the Muslim World from Bosnia to Nigeria, from Malaysia to Morocco, and from China to India, one can clearly see that Muslims come from various races, ethnic groups and nationalities. (p. 5)

Based on some of the explanations above, it can be concluded that Islam is a religion that is only submitted to the One God (The Almighty Allah) and anyone who submits completely to Allah and worships Him alone regardless of anything is considered a Muslim.

A symbol is a form that marks something else outside the embodiment of the symbolic form itself. For example, a symbol depicting a flower refers to and carries a picture of facts called “flowers” as something outside the symbolic form itself (Sobur, 2017, p. 156). Symbols are often paired with emblems because they have the same understanding. Besides emblems, the words are also a symbol. Words are expressions commonly used by someone to say things, feelings, ideas, and values. According to Syam, the word has a social meaning (as cited in Septiani et al., 2019, p. 2). This is similar to one of the oldest opinions expressed by Plato in Pateda, symbols or emblems are words in a language; therefore, words can be said as a name, as a label for every object, activity, or event (p. 2).

The word symbol may be perceived differently depending on the context in which it is used (Sholihati, Putra, & Nugroho, 2016, p. 94). Sholihati, Putra, & Nugroho (2016) explained more about symbols, according to Collin Cobuild dictionary:

Symbol is defined as: (1) “a shape or design that used to represent something such as an idea”, (2) “something that seems to represent society or aspects of life, because it is very typical of it. While in the dictionary of Sociology by Jary and Jary, symbol is defined as: (1) a sign, in which the connection between the meaning and the sign is conventional rather than natural”, (2) an indirect representation of an underlying meaning, syndrome, etc, as in religious symbolism and ritual.” (p. 94)

In addition, they commented on such descriptions, “because of the relationship between meaning and sign of a more conventional nature, therefore, a symbol not always contains universal meaning, but it depends on the communities where the symbol is used” (p. 94).

However, the symbols contain more hidden meanings than the concept. It has a different meaning than the aesthetic image. The symbol’s defining trait is its multiple nature with preserving the symbolic form, as revealed by comparison analysis (Zhirenov et. al., 2016, p. 2842).

The symbols are divided into two types, verbal symbols, and nonverbal symbols, according to their form. Verbal symbols in their use is using language (Riauan et. al., 2019, p. 256). In addition to verbal symbols, the researchers explain their understanding about verbal and nonverbal symbols:

Verbal communication is always followed by non-verbal signs that reinforce the content of the verbal message conveyed through language. According to Hafid Cangara, non-verbal symbols are usually created using sign language or silent speech. Non-verbal symbols used in communication can be categorized into several forms: Kinematics (body movements), body touch, sound intonation, eye movements, silence, posture, artifacts and visualization, color, time, logos and sounds. (p. 256)

Symbols carry the concept of representing a sign that can represent objects by using the symbols. According to the explanation about Islam and symbols, the Islamic symbol is a symbol that represents and is related to Islam. It can be understood that Islamic symbols emerge in verbal and nonverbal forms.

2. Method

As the role of the writers are as the primary or human instruments in the qualitative study or research, thus they gather and analyze the data by themselves, including conducting observation (Ary, et.al, 2018; Latief, 2010; and Gall et al., 2003). In other words, the primary instruments for these kinds of study is engaged in library research, conducted observations, and carried out interviews to gather information and recorded data for subsequent analysis (Farani and Winarni, 2018). However, in this study, the writer did not conduct any interviews, all the data was taken from library research from Ms. Marvel series, both verbal and nonverbal data. Apart from them, there are two main discussions in this subchapter and they are Semiotics theories and symbols (verbal and nonverbal) since the writers intended to find and analyze the Islamic symbols represented in Ms. Marvel series.

3. Results and discussion

The following discussion covers verbal and nonverbal Islamic symbols in Ms. Marvel TV Series by Marvel Cinematic Universe on Disney+. In each point to discuss of both verbal and nonverbal Islamic symbols, the writers provide with figures to support them.

3.1. Verbal Symbols

There are eleven verbal Islamic symbols discussed in this part, among others are *Bismillah*, *MasyaAllah* and *Assalamualaikum*:

a. *Assalamualaikum* and *Walaikumsalam*

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encouraged his followers to greet one another with the phrase *Assalamualaikum* and *Walaikumsalam*. It became an established tradition (Sunnah) that Muslims follow to emulate the Prophet's deeds and seek closeness to Allah. These greetings are used to summon and wish peace to all involved in the dialogue. Islam promotes peace and blessings among people, and these greetings contribute to a sense of calm and harmony in society. These symbols can be categorized as verbal because they are usually spoken and written by Muslim society. There are five pieces of data found about these verbal Islamic symbols in Ms. Marvel series that can be analyzed below.



Figure 1. Kamala's Aunty visits Kamala's Mother at the boutique (Episode 1, 13:06)

Based on Figure 1, Kamala's aunt visits Kamala's mother at the boutique to discuss Aamir's engagement. When Kamala's aunt arrives at the boutique, she says "*Assalamualaikum*".

b. Djinn

Djinn in Islam is a supernatural creature created by Allah from smokeless fire, just as human were created from clay and angels from lights. It is mentioned in various Quranic passages and Hadiths (Prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions). They are mentioned in numerous Islamic takes, such as those about Prophet Solomon (Sulaiman) and his meetings with *Djinn*, as well as ac-

counts of Djinn joining Islam and becoming comparisons of the Prophet Muhammad. *Djinn* in this case can be categorized as a nonverbal symbol. Because, in Ms. Marvel series *Djinn* is introduced by story from Kamala's father at Bruno's store because Bruno is curious about Djinn. It is also spoken by Kamala herself. These Islamic symbols can be analyzed according to Figure 2.



Figure 2. Kamala's father told Bruno about Djinn in Islam (Episode 3, 18:30)

c. Bismillah

Muslims seek Allah's blessings and guidance by saying *Bismillah* before beginning any task or undertaking. They confess their reliance on Allah and seek His support in their activities by invoking His name. *Bismillah* reminds muslim of Allah's supremacy over all things. It denotes that Muslims acknowledge Allah's ultimate power and that all activities should begin with an awareness of His presence. It is thought that chanting *Bismillah* before doing anything could protect against the influence of Shaytan (Satan). These verbal Islamic symbols can be found in Ms. Marvel series chanted or spoken by Aamir and Kamala in episodes one and four. It can be analyzed from the Figures 3.



Figure 3. Aamir reminds Kamala to say Bismillah before starting the car (Episode 1, 03:06)

d. Astaghfirullah

Astaghfirullah translates as “I seek forgiveness from Allah”. Muslims say it to express regret and sorrow for their misdeeds and failings. This expression can be found in episode one, spoken by Kamala’s mother.



Figure 4. Kamala’s mother gets shock when Kamala wants to go to AvangerCon. (Episode 1, 16:48)

Based on to Figure 4, Kamala wants to go to AvengersCon., where she can meet the superhero’s stuffs. Unfortunately, her parents do not allow her to go because the clothes of superheroes are mostly tight.

e. MashaAllah

Based on Figure 5, After jumping from the rooftop, Nakia and Kamala see Khamran out of the swimming pool. When he gets out of the pool, both Nakia and Kamala say *Mashaallah*. *MashaAllah* is used by Muslims to show thankfulness for the positive things they see or experience. It is a method for them to express their gratitude to Allah for His generosity and benefits.



Figure 5. Nakia and Kamala say Mashaallah (Episode 2, 13:26)

f. Islamic calligraphy

Based on Figure 6, Nakia talks to a man in Mosque when the Damage Control Board arrives at Mosque to check the people. In this scene, calligraphy behind Nakia can be categorized as a verbal symbol. Mosques and other Islamic religious buildings are frequently embellished with calligraphy, particularly Quranic phrases and Allah's names. This practice not only beautifies the halls of worship, but it also acts as a constant reminder of God's presence and the Quran's significance.



Figure 6. There is a Calligraphy behind Nakia in Mosque (Episode 6, 10:13)

3.2. Nonverbal Symbols

There are three verbal Islamic symbols discussed in this part and they are: Islamic clothes, Mosque and prayer. Each symbol is provided with figures to support them.

a. Islamic Clothes (Hijab and *Kopyah*)

Based on Figure 7, the hijab is shown from one of the characters in the series, Nakia. She always wears a hijab throughout the series. This scene can be categorized as a nonverbal symbol because the symbol is represented as an object or clothing. The hijab reminds Muslim women of their spiritual connection with Allah and promotes mindfulness in their acts and behavior. The hijab separates Muslim women from non-Muslims and their customs. Wearing a hijab symbolizes a woman's Muslim identity and a mark of her faith. It moves the emphasis from outside beauty to inner beauty, character, and intelligence. This symbol is well represented by the actress Yasmeen Fletcher. Through her character, she shows a strong, beautiful, intelligent, and independent Muslim woman.

Based on the Figure 8, *kopyah* is represented by Sheikh and Aamir. Wearing a *kopyah* outwardly manifests one's beliefs and Islamic identity. It denotes a man's commitment to Islamic traditions and beliefs. Wearing the *kopyah* can foster brotherhood and solidarity among Muslim males by recognizing a shared identity as Muslims. *Kopyah* is considered a sign of humility before Allah. It reminds men to be humble and unassuming in their acts and interactions with other.



Figure 7. Nakia wears hijab on exercise (Episode 1, 22:51)



Figure 8. Sheikh wears a kopyah at Mosque (Episode 6, 08:30)

b. Mosque

Figure 9 shows the Mosque situation where Kamala and her family or friends pray from outside. This scene can be categorized as a nonverbal symbol because the symbol is not spoken nor written but in the form of a building, a mosque. In Islamic architecture, the dome represents the celestial sphere and the skies. It symbolizes the oneness and vastness of the universe and serves as a reminder of Allah's magnificence and greatness. Domes can have a practical purpose in some areas, as their design can aid in natural cooling by letting hot air rise and escape, resulting in a more comfortable temperature inside the mosque.

Figures 10 show the Mosque's situation from the inside, especially when Damage Control Board arrived. Although no conversation is verbally spoken about the mosque, this nonverbal is well represented as a holy place in the series. It is shown in Figure 10 when the Damage Control Board team arrived at the mosque without taking their shoes off. Although, the sheikh has already warned them. Mosques are revered for their worship, purity, and holiness. Taking off your shoes

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before entering the mosque helps to keep it clean and preserves the sacred aura. The tradition of taking off one's shoes before entering places of prayer and worship stems from the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

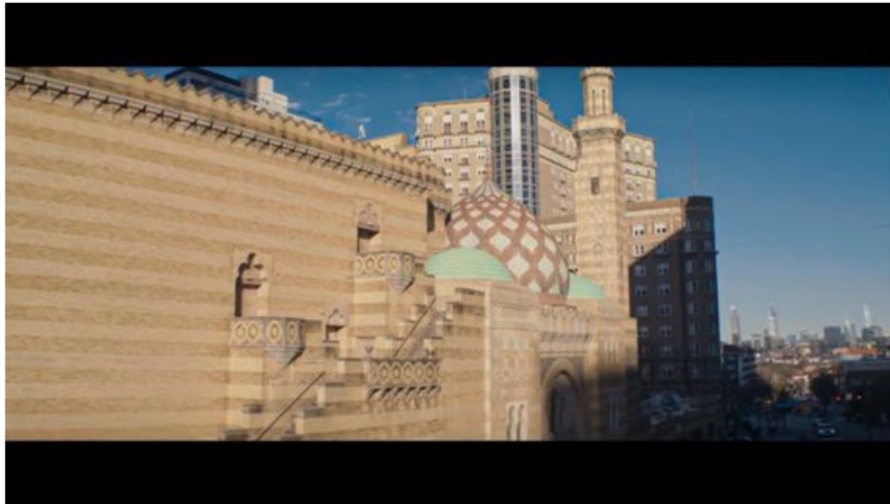


Figure 9. Situations of Mosque from outside (1) (Episode 2, 08:00)



Figure 10. Situation of Mosque from inside (1) (Episode 3, 10:20)

c. Prayer

Based on Figure 11, it shows that Aamir prays to God before he eats the food. This scene can be categorized as a nonverbal symbol because the symbol is represented by Aamir's gesture of praying before eating. Chanting a prayer before eating means thanking Allah for supplying the food. Muslims believe that God is the source of all benefits and sustenance and that saying His name before eating is a way to acknowledge His bounties.



Figure 11. Aamir prays before eating (Episode 1, 02:28)

Based on Figure 12, people pray (Shalah) in the mosque. This scene can be categorized as nonsymbolic because there is no conversation between two or more people who talk about Islam. For all Muslims, the essence of prayer remains the same: it is a form of worship, a relationship with Allah, and a chance for spiritual reflection and surrender to God's will.



Figure 12. People are praying (Shalah) in Mosque (Episode 2, 08:46)

In conclusion, in Ms. Marvel Series, the writers found and analyzed 55 data providing verbal and nonverbal of Islamic Symbols which can be seen in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Types of symbols and its numbers

Types of Symbols	Total Numbers	Symbols Found
Verbal	20	<i>Assalamualaikum</i> and <i>Walaikumsalam</i> , <i>Djinn</i> , <i>Bismillah</i> , <i>Astaghfirullah</i> , <i>MasyaAllah</i> , Islamic calligraphy, <i>A'udhu billahi min ash-shaytan ir-rajim</i> , Throne Verse, <i>Eid Mubarak</i> , <i>Halal</i> and <i>Haram</i> , and <i>Allahuakbar</i>
Nonverbal	35	Islamic clothes (<i>hijab</i> and <i>kopyah</i>), Mosque and prayer
Total Numbers	55	

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Semiotics as a study of sign is rooted in structuralism proposed by Ferdinand De Saussure, the father of modern Linguistics and the founder of semiotics, which has influenced semiotics science. A symbol is a form that marks something else outside the embodiment of the symbolic form itself. As of Islam religion, the definition of it is a religion that only submits to the One God (The Almighty Allah), and anyone who submits completely to Allah and worships Him alone, regardless of anything is considered a Muslim. In the Ms. Marvel Series, there are 55 data found, that consist of well-presented Islamic symbols both in verbal and nonverbal data. The writers found 20 verbal data such as *assalamualaikum*, *walaikumsalam*, and *bismillah* and 35 non-verbal data such as Islam clothes and mosques. Based on those data, it can be concluded that the nonverbal symbol is the most prevalent in the Ms. Marvel Series.

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