Ninety Nine New Superheroes to the World's Rescue:

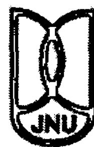
A Study of the Representational, Situational, and Cultural Dynamics of

The 99

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Philosophy

by

Hiba Aleem



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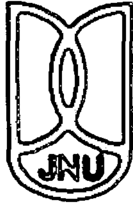

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CERTIFICATE

This dissertation titled **"Ninety Nine New Superheroes to the World's Rescue: A Study of the Representational, Situational, and Cultural Dynamics of *The 99*"** submitted by **Ms. Hiba Aleem,** Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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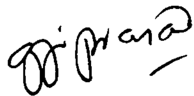

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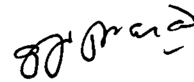

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Declaration

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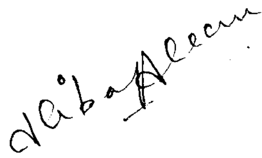
Hiba Aleem 

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to provide an analytical and critical study of the first superhero comic book based on Islam, *The 99*, focusing in particular on the dynamics of 'construction' and the representation of the post 9/11 Muslim image in it. The research attempts to locate the position of *The 99* within the larger framework of the image building exercise undertaken by the Muslim world as a response to the socio-political narratives arising out of 9/11 and its aftermath where notions about Muslims and Islam which were often perceived to be negative were in circulation. Part of this research then, is based on the premise that the historical and socio-political conditions surrounding 9/11 and its troubled aftermath led people within the Muslim world towards adopting forms of popular culture as sites where both the expression of their belief and identity, and the redefinition of their image and that of Islam took place side by side. One cannot of course, relegate all the work produced by people of Muslim origin to the phenomenon described above, nor can one be so presumptuous as to claim that there was nothing akin to popular culture in the Muslim world prior to 9/11. However, it is believed that since 9/11 "unleashed an unprecedented period of a global re-thinking of issues" pertaining to Islam, and since the religion "emerged as the focus of inquiries and debates", Muslims "found themselves compelled to speak for the 'real' Islam... both to themselves and to non-Muslims".[1] Work produced by those within the Muslim world consequently touched upon issues pertaining to their belief and identity in a way that had perhaps seldom been seen before. In fact, what is being referred to here as work produced by the 'Muslim world' (for lack of a better term) came into focus as a united entity immediately after 9/11, when, as Karine Ancellin reports, Andrea Kempf "wrote an article entitled "The Rich World of Islam: Muslim Fiction", and in so doing, delineated an innovative area of writing",[2] where by using the term 'Muslim' she united people on the basis of the one common factor of their religious background. As a conference held on Islam and popular culture indicates: "Ideas, sounds, images, gestures, and meanings about Islam abound in contemporary popular cultural forms including film, music, television, radio, comics, fashion, magazines, and cyber culture".[3] Popular culture produced by the Muslim world post 9/11 encompasses phenomena as diverse as "sermon-filled soap operas, rock music played by veiled women, Muslim magazines, newspapers, and portals",[4] standup comedy routines, sitcoms, dramatic monologue performances, rap performances, 'chick-lit'[5] and so on. Though these phenomena come from different corners of the world (for instance, the sitcom [*Little Mosque on*

the Prairie] is from Canada, the standup comedy routines ["Allah Made Me Funny"][6] and the dramatic monologue performances ["The Hijabi Monologues"][7] from the U.S., the rap performances ["The *Burqa* Rapper"][8] from India, the 'chick-lit' [*Does My Head Look Big In This?*] from Australia, and the comics from Egypt [A.K.], Kuwait [Teshkeel], and Jordan [Aranim]), and have been produced by Muslims from different backgrounds, the one common factor uniting them is their negotiation with issues pertaining to religious belief and identity, and their attempt to create a counter discourse to the negative discourse about Islam stemming from the aftermath of 9/11. As Nabil Echchaibi states:

> This process (of the production of popular culture in the Muslim world) is at the same time generating divergent discourses that arguably are already coming to challenge the religious authority of clerical Islam. Today, Muslim men and women, young and old, secularists and Islamists, Westerners and Easterners, gay and straight, rappers and comedians, journalists and scholars, bloggers and televangelists, are changing the conventional pathways of religious discourse and disintegrating the old centers of knowledge production within Islam. In fact, Muslims around the world are taking advantage of new media platforms like the Internet and other forms of conventional media like satellite television, music and film... These media have become prime discursive spaces in which Islamic knowledge is contested, reinterpreted, and popularly re-mediated. Given the unprecedented amplification of this inner struggle within Islam… a range of questions dealing with the mediation of Islam and other religions are also coming to the fore.[9]

There are, of course, as Ancellin points out, "tensions inherent" in this process of labeling the aforementioned works as 'Muslim' on the simplistic grounds of their creators' "origins", because some of those creators[10], as she points out, might not be comfortable being identified as 'Muslim', or "might find it offensive to be associated with Islam".[11] For the purpose of this research however, the term has still been used because it talks about such works which might have not necessarily been produced by people of Muslim origin (not all the performers of "The Hijabi Monologues" for instance, are Muslim) but where issues pertaining to religious belief and the 'Muslim' identity have been specifically touched upon either in the works themselves or by their creators.

Created in the troubled aftermath of 9/11 by a Kuwaiti entrepreneur, Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, *The*

99 comics comprise of a team of ninety-nine superheroes from diverse religions, cultures, and countries from all over the world who possess one superhuman attribute each; and the names of the superheroes and their attributes are based upon the ninety-nine names attributed to Allah in the *Quran*. A comic book like *The 99* has been chosen as the subject of this research not so much because it has launched the world's first superheroes based on Islam and is the first ever comic to mine the *Quran* for its concepts, but because its stories make an effort to "capture the struggle within the Muslim world"[12] (especially the struggle over the interpretations of the *Quran*) in the present times and thus stand as apt metaphors for the post 9/11 Muslim world. Based on the idea that superheroes are created or reinvented in fictional narratives whenever the real world undergoes a crisis, the research draws parallels between the creation of superheroes like Superman during the 30's in America, and the creation of superheroes based on Islam in the post 9/11 world (prompted by Al-Mutawa's own observations about the same [see appendix]; thus, the interest of this research lies not so much in the exploration of how the comics are the first to launch superheroes based on Islam, as in the timing of such an attempt.

The understanding that comics have always played a role in mirroring the concerns of their times, like all the other forms of popular culture, and have often established, maintained, and sometimes challenged the socio-political narratives arising out of historical events, is an idea integral to this research, as it seeks to explore how a study of the post 9/11 American and Arab superhero comics can aid our perception of the issues surrounding the event in the real world. 9/11 and the events that followed in its aftermath were not only faithfully reflected in comics, but were also given newer, fictional dimensions that sought to aid our understanding of real world issues. This research is concerned though, with the superhero genre in particular, since it is a genre which has, in the years following 9/11, not just seen a revival of sorts in American popular culture, but has also taken birth in the Arab world in an unprecedented way, with not one but three publishing houses from different countries, each aiming to provide role models to Arab children and global ambassadors for Islam, choosing to create no other figure but the superhero to fulfill their avowed aims. As Joshua C. Feblowitz points out in context of the American "superhero renaissance" (a term coined by Peter Coogan)[13] post 9/11: "The genre's engagement with concepts of justice, evil and terror uniquely positions the superhero to comment on the events of 9/11. Superhero narratives allegorizing 9/11 possess the power to create analytical spaces in which reworked conceptions of terrorism, justice and 'good and evil' can be examined

and tested".[14] And in the context of the Arab world, the very fact that post 9/11, the superhero figure was created almost unanimously to star simultaneously as the 'local hero' and the 'global ambassador' in comics in Egypt, Kuwait, and Jordan perhaps bears sufficient testimony to the genre's relationship with issues of socio-political concern, and the same shall be explored in the research.

The Kuwait based Teshkeel Media Group's superhero title *The 99* was chosen as the subject of this research over the Egypt based A.K. or the Jordan based Aranim titles not just because it is the only comic venture out of the three in the Arab world to have become a major phenomenon, both locally and globally (in terms of its sizeable readership both within and outside the Arab world and the critical and commercial acclaim it has garnered worldwide), but also because *The 99* reflects "the struggle within" [15] the post 9/11 Muslim world in ways that its counterparts do not. Launched in 2006, *The 99* has gained the second largest readership in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) and is currently distributed monthly in seven languages all across the U.S., Canada, U.K., France, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and China, apart from the entire MENA region. Hailed by Forbes as "one of the top twenty trends sweeping the world",[16] *The 99* has, apart from spawning in its name games, merchandise, theme parks, and an animation series which is due to hit television screens the world over in late 2010, also entered a tie-up with DC's *Justice League of America* for a comic book miniseries in which Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman will join hands with the 99 to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between the U.S. and the Muslim world. And while A.K., Aranim, and Teshkeel had all primed their superheroes to act as global ambassadors for both Islam and the Arab world, titles from the first two mirror the political turbulence in the Arab world alone, while *The 99* alone attempts to live up to its avowed aim of attempting to "combat both how Islam is seen by the West", and "how Islam is seen by Muslims themselves" [17].

The prime scope of the research is that of looking at the representational, situational, and cultural dynamics that *The 99* entails. How do the comics challenge, subvert, or sometimes fortify the assumptions about Muslims and Islam in the post 9/11 world? How do they fit in within the larger framework of the image building exercise undertaken by the Muslim world as a response to the socio-political narratives arising out of 9/11 and its aftermath? How do they deploy the good versus evil paradigm lying at the heart of the superhero genre to "capture the struggle within"[18] the post 9/11 Muslim world, and to address the "identity crisis"[19] in the said

world? How do they negotiate, using the powerful metaphor of the use and misuse of the superheroes' powers, with the sensitive issues surrounding the interpretations of the *Quran* in the Muslim world in the present times? How does the representation of a Muslim as a villain in the comics assume topical dimensions? How has the superhero been designed as a manifestation of Muslim 'wish fulfillment' in the post 9/11 world? What does the rise of the superhero during troubled times in the world tell us? What parallels can be drawn between the creation of a team of superheroes like the 99 post 9/11 and Superman in the late 30's? How do the 99 fit in with the existing group of American superheroes like Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Captain America, and the X-Men, Japanese superheroes such as the Pokémon and the Digimon, and Arab superheroes such as Aya, Jalila, Rakan, and Zein? What compromises have been made, and what benefits have been received by the comics, in "conforming ideology to profitability"?[20] How has the selective representation of concepts, characters, ideas, and images impacted the image of Muslims/Islam that the comics have attempted to foreground? The research shall attempt to address the aforementioned questions and more, while at the same time recognizing the fact that these are loaded questions and that there cannot be just one way of answering them.

The primary texts that form the basis of this research are all the issues of *The 99* that have been published till date. Co-written by Al-Mutawa, Fabian Nicieza, and Stuart Moore, the comics are published by the Kuwait based Teshkeel Media Group and are currently in publication. The Chandamama Group, the licensed distributor of *The 99* in India launched it here in May 2008. A study of select superhero titles from DC, Marvel, Raj, A.K., and Aranim Comics also constitutes an important part of the research.

The methodology for the research was that of close textual analysis and exegesis. The primary resource material was read and analyzed in relation to the existing secondary resources on the comics and in relation to theories within the field of Comics Studies and upon the dynamics between the superhero genre and religion, and the superhero genre and events of historic and socio-political concern. Internet resources played a crucial role in the research, firstly because the primary resource material was available online, and secondly because the official website of *The 99*, www.the99.org, was accessed for updates related to the comics. The primary resource material was also analyzed in relation to the allied topics of popular culture and those issues in Comics Studies which pertain to the dynamics between comics, religion and ideology.

The research comprises of the following chapters:

Chapter One seeks to understand how the superhero genre constituted an integral part of the fictional narratives created by American comics immediately after 9/11, and how it established, maintained, and sometimes subverted the real world narratives arising out of the event. The chapter also attempts an analysis of the superhero genre's arrival in the Arab world, and its relationship with 9/11 by looking at the Arab superhero comics created in the aftermath of the event, namely the Kuwait based Teshkeel titles, the Egypt based A.K. titles and the Jordan based Aranim titles. Based on Naif Al-Mutawa's comparison between the circumstances of the creation superheroes like Superman in the late 30's and the 99 post 9/11, the chapter attempts to examine how superheroes arise in times of "socio-political necessity",[21] and so concludes, by looking at the 'situational' dynamics of *The 99*, how and why the post 9/11 world calls for ***ninety-nine new superheroes to come to its rescue***. The chapter also looks into the dynamics between the superhero genre and religion and seeks to understand the trend of the growing incorporation of religion in mainstream comics post 9/11, exploring how the latter is visible not just in the examples of new superheroes and villains based on religion, but also in the association of old and established characters with faith based ideas in mainstream comics which have had nothing to do with religion before.

Chapter Two explores, through a detailed study of *The 99*, how the comics have attempted to fulfill their avowed dual aims of providing Arab children with wholesome, 'homegrown' entertainment, and redefining the global image of Islam in the post 9/11 world, the latter aim in particular. The chapter essentially examines the 'representational' dynamics in *The 99*: how the comics "stand as a metaphor for all that is happening in the Muslim world"[22] in the present times. Based in part on an analysis of how the conventions of the superhero genre as it is familiar to American comic readers were set by the creators of Superman, Batman, and others (who were Jewish immigrants in the U.S.) to construct the superhero as a manifestation of 'Jewish wish fulfillment' in the 1930's and 40's, and later on as a reflection of the values upheld in American culture, the chapter also explores how *The 99* subverts the existing conventions of the superhero genre with which comic readers are familiar, not as a deliberate desire to deviate from what is now understood to be the norm, but because the deviations appear to be integral to the construction of a particular kind of a superhero, one who is a manifestation of what could perhaps be termed as 'Muslim wish fulfillment' in the post 9/11 world.

Chapter Three examines the selective representation of concepts, characters, ideas and images

in *The 99* so as to understand the image of Islam that it attempts to foreground. Based on the premise that *The 99* is not just a project highlighting a certain idea of Islam but is a product of popular culture aimed at both the local (Arab) and the global market, the chapter looks at how the creator of *The 99*, Naif Al-Mutawa has negotiated with market forces while at the same time positioning himself ideologically, and examines, in the words of Nandini Chandra, "the contradictions and diversions" (109), and the compromises, or even the convergences "produced in conforming ideology to profitability" (109), and how these compromises or convergences have affected the image of Islam that the comics have attempted to foreground. Furthermore, apart from exploring these 'representational' dynamics in *The 99*, the chapter also takes a look at the 'cultural' dynamics in the comics: how the comics have struck a balance between the 'East' and the 'West' to target a readership belonging to both the local and the global audience, and also how a consideration of the cultural sensibilities of the Arab world has influenced their visual content.

The conclusion ties together the different findings made during the research, and brings the study to a close with certain assertions.

A few interviews were also conducted for the purpose of this research with Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, founder and CEO of the Teshkeel Media Group and the creator and co-writer of *The 99*; the information gathered from the same has been included to substantiate the arguments of the research wherever applicable, and the transcripts of the interviews have been included in the appendix.

Notes

[1]As quoted by Nabil Echchaibi, *International Conference on Islam and the Media*, Home Page, 9 March 2009, The University of Colorado-Boulder, 7-10 January 2010, 27 June 2010 <http://www.nabilechchaibi.com/blog/international-conference-on-islam-and-the-media>.

[2]As quoted by Karine Ancellin, "Hybrid Identities of Characters in Muslim Women's Fiction Post 9/11", *Trans-Journal of General and Comparative Literature*, No. 8, The University of New Sorbonne, 8 July 2009, 26 January 2010 <http://trans.univ-paris3.fr/IMG/pdf_Trans-_Ancellin_RELU-FINAL2.pdf>.

[3]*Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, Interdisciplinary Conference, Issues and Themes Page, University of Pittsburgh, 10-12 October 2008, 25 June 2010 <http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/asc/conference/indonesia/issues.html>.

[4]*Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia.*

[5]The term 'chick-lit' refers to a genre within popular women's fiction which deals with issues pertaining to modern women. The treatment of such works is often humorous. 'Chick' in American slang refers to a young woman, while 'lit' is the short form of literature, and the term has been derived from the term 'chick-flick' which refers to humorous films pertaining to modern women.

[6]As mentioned by Mohamed Elshinnawi, "American Muslim Comic Fights Stereotypes with Humor", *The Muslim Observer*, 8 January 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://muslimmedianetwork.com/mmn/?p=3456>.

[7]As mentioned by M. Scott Bortot, "*Hijabi Monologues* Dispels Stereotypes of Muslim Women", *America.gov*, 25 March 2010, 24 June 2010 <http://www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-english/2010/March/20100325091607smtotrob0.6598627.html>.

[8]As mentioned by Pallavi Polanki, "*Burkha Rapper*", *Open,* 13 June 2009, 28 June 2010 <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/art-culture/burkha-rapper>.

[9]As quoted by Nabil Echchaibi, *International Conference on Islam and the Media.*

[10]Karine Ancellin gives the example of Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, whose writings, as she points out, highlight her discomfort on being identified as 'Muslim'.

[11]As quoted by Karine Ancellin.

[12]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Charles De Simone, "From Mecca to Metropolis: Creating Superheroes for the Islamic World", www.fletcher.tufts.edu, 2007, 28 August 2009 <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/news/2006/10/teshkeel.shtml>.

[13]Peter Coogan as quoted by Joshua C. Feblowitz, "The Hero We Create: 9/11 and the Reinvention of Batman", *Student Pulse: Online Academic Student Journal*, No. 1.12, 30 December 2009, 27 June 2010 <http://www.studentpulse.com/a?id=104>.

[14]As quoted by Josha C. Feblowitz.

[15]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Charles De Simone.

[16]As quoted by Sudeshna Sen, "Islamic Comics Group Ties Up With Chandamama for *The 99*", www.economictimes.indiatimes.com, 21 April 2008, 30 March 2010 <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/News/News_By_Industry/Media__Entertainment_/Entertainment/Islamic_comics_group_ties_up_with_Chandamama_for_The_99/rssarticleshow/2966385.cms>.

[17]As quoted by Naif Al-Mutawa, E-mail Interview. See Appendix.

[18]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Charles De Simone.

[19]As quoted by Jamie Etheridge, "Islam's Modern day Heroes", *Friday Times*, *The Kuwait Times* (weekly ed.), 2 June 2006, 27 April 2009 <http://www.the99.org/include/contn/41.pdf>.

[20]As quoted by Nandini Chandra, "Constructing a 'National Popular': The Hindu India in the *Amar Chitra Kathas* (1971-1991)", Diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1995. 109.

[21]Naif Al-Mutawa. E-mail Interview. See Appendix.

[22]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Nabiha Shahab, "Islamic Superheroes Invade Comic Markets", www.middle-east-online.com. 10 July 2004, 30 June 2010 <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=22507>.

Chapter One

"I believe that having superheroes, or superhuman beings, is an essential need-just like God"- Marwan El Nashar, A.K. Comics' Managing Editor[1]

This chapter seeks to understand how the superhero genre constituted an integral part of the fictional narratives created by American comics in the aftermath of 9/11, which sought to establish, maintain, and sometimes subvert the real world narratives arising out of the event. The chapter also attempts an analysis of the superhero genre's arrival in the Arab world, and its relationship with 9/11 by looking at the Arab superhero comics created in the aftermath of the event, namely the Kuwait based Teshkeel titles, the Egypt based A.K. titles, and the Jordan based Aranim titles. The chapter also studies the creation of Teshkeel's superhero title *The 99* (hailed as the first superhero comic book based on Islam), as it seeks to understand how the creation of superheroes based on Islam constitutes the Muslim response to the socio-political narratives arising out of 9/11 and its aftermath by creating fictional narratives which seek a redefinition of Islam in this context. Based on Naif Al-Mutawa's comparison between the circumstances of the creation of superheroes like Superman in the late 30's and the 99 post 9/11 (see appendix), the chapter also attempts to examine how the creation of superheroes is "often a direct response to a historic event or a social need"[2] as it seeks to understand why the post 9/11 world calls for new superheroes. Furthermore, the chapter looks into the dynamics between the superhero genre and religion and seeks to understand the trend of the growing incorporation of religion in mainstream comics post 9/11, exploring how the latter is visible not just in the examples of new superheroes and villains based on religion, but also in the association of old and established characters with faith based ideas in mainstream comics which have had nothing to do with religion before.

"There Was Right and There Was Wrong, There Was Good and There was Evil, and Into This World Came the Heroes"[3]

Marwan El Nashar's statement that the need to have superheroes is as essential as the need for God establishes the idea that superhero comics are almost "born of the same dynamic"[4] as faith; an idea that is integral to this research and which has been substantiated by Steven T. Seagle, a comic book writer in the following statement:

> I think when I go to superheroes, I see there is a religious metaphor to begin with. That metaphor is most obvious with Superman. He's the one who is better than us, he's more moral than us, he's more pure than us, he makes better choices than us, and therefore he is an example in a way that God or Christ is an example.[5]

The good versus evil paradigm lying at the heart of the superhero genre is primarily a paradigm which holds significance in all religious narratives, an idea substantiated by Greg Garrett, author of *Holy Superheroes!* who states: "With comics, the fact is that we're dealing with ultimate questions of good versus evil---all of those things that we wrestle with in theology---it makes it a natural place for those to be part of any important story".[6] Thus, it is almost a given that the roots of the superhero figure lie in religion. The inception of the superhero genre though, that is, the introduction of superheroes in fictional narratives, lies in war, an idea which has been established by Peter Coogan, as mentioned in Joshua C. Feblowitz's research which cites that "the superhero genre emerged in 1938 with the creation of Superman"[7]; the late 30's, as is known in history, were times of great socio-political upheavals, especially in the U.S., with the buildup to World War Two having begun. The relationship between the roots of the superhero figure and the inception of the superhero genre is by no means arbitrary, but is defined by the fact that during times of conflict, people seek "wish fulfillment" (to borrow Will Eisner's phrase)[8] in the form of elements that symbolize faith; and since the superhero has been understood to be akin to a modern day 'messiah', the creation of new superhero comics or the revival of existing ones is almost a given in such times because the fictional superhero narratives provide a sense of hope and faith to the people, just as it is believed religion does. The best example in support of this argument has been provided by Greg Garrett in *Holy Superheroes!* where he analyzes in detail the creation of Superman to lend credibility to the argument that the popularity of superhero comics during times of conflict is linked to the idea of the superhero as an embodiment of the 'messiah factor'; Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two Jewish teenagers who were immigrants to the U.S., created Superman in 1938, and Garrett gives us an account of the same:

> It was the late 1930's; America was still stuck in the Great Depression. Overseas, Hitler had begun his march of expansion. The Japanese were rattling their swords, and

disturbing stories were coming back from the Jews of Europe about the virulent anti-Semitism they were encountering and their growing dread about the future(18).

The creation of Superman thus took place at a time when, according to Garrett, the Americans in general (due to the impending World War and the Great Depression) and the Jewish community in particular (due to the prevalent anti-Semitism and the beginning of the Holocaust), both needed a powerful figure who could offer a sense of hope and faith to them. The creation of Superman in the 30's then, according to Eisner, may be read as a manifestation of what may be termed as 'Jewish wish fulfillment', a wish he translates as that for "someone who could protect them".[9] Garrett argues in his book that superheroes are nothing but a reinvention of mythological figures, legendary heroes, and leaders from the scriptures; he locates the roots of Superman in Jewish faith, history, culture, and mythology, and makes out a case for him being a reinvention of the *golem*, "a mythical creature that could be summoned to protect the Jews during the persecution of the Middle Ages"[10]. The narrative of the creation of the mythical *golem* itself reads almost as a forerunner of the narratives of the creation of superheroes like Superman; the *golem*, in Jewish legends and folklore, is a creature made of inanimate matter that has been invoked by rabbis time and again (it is believed that writing the Hebrew word "emeth" ["truth"] on its forehead brings it to life) to fight against the injustice and excesses meted out to their people, the most famous being the Golem of Prague created by Rabbi Loew in 1580 (fig. 1) to protect his people against the persecution meted out by Rudolph II, the Holy Roman Emperor. The *golem* has been noted as having powers such as superhuman strength, "invisibility, and heated touch",[11] powers which are often listed on the power roster of most modern day superheroes. And because the *golem's* eternal fight against injustice and persecution is essentially the same fight as that which lies at the heart of most superhero narratives, it could, perhaps be considered a forerunner of the fictional superhero; Eisner, in fact, does label it "the precursor to the superhero", and goes on to label Superman as "the *golem* in tights" [12]. The figure of the *golem* has, indeed found a place of honour in some superhero comic books, which is visible both in the instances where superheroes like The Thing have been likened to it, and in its introduction as a special comic book character in several Marvel titles. The first instance can be found in *The Fantastic Four # Volume 3. Issue 56* titled "Remembrance of Things Past", where Mr. Sheckerberg (a Jewish character) talks to The Thing (who is revealed to be Jewish in the same issue) about the *golem*, and tells him that he too, is a "protector" like it (fig. 2). The second

instance can found in comics like *The Incredible Hulk # Issue 134* titled "In the Shadow of the Golem" (the *golem* as a comic book character made its first appearance in this issue), where the legendary Golem of Prague is invoked by a group of Jewish archaeologists; it saves them from a group of Arab desert robbers in the issue (fig. 3). The idea that superheroes like Superman or The Thing are reinventions of the mythical *golem* alone does not explain the relationship between religion and the superhero though; Garrett makes out a convincing case for another idea that has been explored by preachers of faith as well[13], that superheroes are nothing less than the fictional representatives of the prophets of the scriptures and that the powers they embody are powers belonging to the domain of the divine.

In the case of Superman it is, perhaps, not difficult to establish the aforementioned argument. The real name of Superman on planet Krypton, his place of origin, is Kal-El, and according to Garrett not only is 'El' "a word often used in rendering the names of God in the Hebrew Bible", but "in Hebrew 'Kal-El' translates to 'All that is God' " (19). The similarities do not end with the names either; as Garrett points out, Superman travels from Krypton to the Earth in a special capsule in a journey which echoes the journey of Prophet Moses on a raft on river Nile (19), both are sent from the place of their birth to a distant land. Furthermore, Superman is, like most prophets from the scriptures, an orphan raised by foster parents (no one knows what happens to his parents on planet Krypton, though the planet is known to have exploded, and the capsule he is travelling in is found by an American couple, who raise him as their own son. Garrett, incidentally, also points out that Superman's origins are as reminiscent as those of Prophet Jesus as those of Prophet Moses; he begins the introduction of his chapter on Superman with a paragraph that is worth quoting at length here, as it establishes his origins firmly in the Biblical tradition:

> Long years ago, far from this mortal coil, a wise and powerful father made a fateful decision: to send his only son to a backward planet. There, he was raised by an earthly mother and father, exhibiting signs of the supernatural power he commanded as his birthright, until, finally, he reached adulthood and embarked on his mission: the salvation of the people of the Earth. Then he stepped forward, performing miracles that made it clear that he was someone special. Someone godlike. The year when this saviour began his ministry was not, incidentally, circa CE 25. It was rather, the year 1938. And the

> saviour's name was not Jesus. It was Kal-El. You probably know him better as 'Superman' (17).

Not only does Garrett thus establish the similarities between Superman and Moses and Jesus, he also talks about how Jewish references were replaced in the *Superman* comics with Christian ones, which happened over a period of time in tandem with the control over the *Superman* comics slowly changing hands from its Jewish creators to other people in the comics industry (20). He gives the examples of a storyline in the 90's to prove the increasing influence of Christian ideas in the comics, in which Superman is "killed in saving the world against a threat called Doomsday" and is resurrected like Jesus, and of the 2006 film *Superman Returns*, where Superman is "beaten and brutalized, stabbed in the side as Jesus was, dies, and at last comes back to life, even leaving behind an empty tomb of sorts" (21).

What is noteworthy is the fact that Superman alone is not the embodiment of the 'messiah factor'; almost all superheroes across cultures display attributes that justify their comparison with divine powers. According to Al-Mutawa, Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and most other Western superheroes are orphans like most prophets from the scriptures, who receive a call for service which has echoes of the call for prophet hood, and who answer this call for the benefit of mankind; he states:

> Superheroes are based on Judeo-Christian archetypes. Like the prophets, they all get their messages from above from a messenger. The prophets get it from God through the angel Gabriel. Peter Parker is taking a photograph in Manhattan when the spider comes down from above to give him his message through a bite. It's a metaphor for an angel coming down. Batman gets it when a bat flies over his head, again from above. Superman gets sent from a different planet, from the heavens. But his father says to Earth, "I have sent to you my only son." That's the Bible...[14]

Along similar lines, Giles Rattier points out how Japanese comics "refer to Buddhism and other Asian religions".[15] In the Indian Hindu context, it becomes much easier to trace the influence of religious elements in some superhero comics, as most superheroes in them often have names that establish them as fictional renderings of the divine element in Hinduism. The Hindu religion has a tradition not of prophets but of gods; thus most superheroes are depicted as

the fictional representations of various gods and goddesses, with powers that resemble the powers of the divine entities they are based upon. For instance, Shakti, the female superhero created by Raj Comics in 1998, has been described as the fictional avatar of the Hindu Goddess Kali, and Devi, the female superhero created by Virgin Comics in 2006, has been modeled upon Hindu goddesses too. Several superheroes belonging to the rosters of both DC and Marvel have, in fact, been named after Hindu gods and goddesses, such as Marvel's Agni (1976), Brahma (1980), Indra (1980), Shiva (1980), Kali (1981), Yama (1982), Maya (1986), Ratri (1986), Lakshmini (Lakshmi) (2001), and DC's Brahma (1969), Vishnu (1969), and Maya (1993).

Establishing the influence of religious elements in the case of superheroes based on Islam in a manner similar to the one adopted in the context of all the superheroes discussed above is a difficult exercise, primarily because superheroes based explicitly on God or on Prophet Mohammed do not exist, the reason perhaps being that such representations are believed to be forbidden in Islam. *The 99* is, in fact, the first superhero comic book to mine concepts from the *Quran*, though its superheroes again do not represent God or Prophet Mohammed at all.

Though the names of the 99 are based are based upon the ninety-nine names attributed to Allah in the *Quran* there are no apparent influences either of the divine element or of 'the messiah factor' on them, again for the obvious reason as mentioned before, that such a representation would have courted controversy. Incidentally, Jehanzeb Dar has written about the similarities between the way in which Noora-The Light (one of the 99) receives her *noor*[16] stone (her source of power) and the way in which Mohammed attained prophet hood.[17] It becomes imperative here to spell out the story revealing Noora's transformation into a superhero before delving into Dar's analysis; the story, as has been narrated in *The 99: Of Light and Dark # Issue 1* is as follows: Noora is Dana Ibrahim, the only child of a wealthy businessman in the U.A.E. She gets kidnapped one day, and in trying to escape her kidnappers, she digs a tunnel where she comes across one of the *noor* stones that provide the 99 their powers. The stone gives her the ability to see the 'light of truth' and the 'darkness of falsehood' in people. This new power scares and overwhelms her, for after her escape, she keeps seeing darkness in everyone (fig. 4): in all strangers, in her friends, in her relatives, even in her own father. But over a period of time she soon learns how to channelize her powers to benefit others. Dar writes:

> Although Mohammed wasn't kidnapped, he was meditating in a cave when he first received God's revelation from the Angel Gabriel. Similarly, Noora is in a dark tunnel where she comes across the mystical *noor* stone...When Mohammed runs out of the cave, he is frightened because wherever he turns his face, he sees the vision of Gabriel. He is frightened, but at the same time, realizes that he has reached a transition period in his life – he is making the self-discovery that he is the Prophet of God, to bring the people of the world from the depths of the darkness into the light. When Noora escapes her dark prison, she is frightened by the new visions she sees wherever she looks. She is frightened, but at the same time, realizes that she has reached a transition period in her life — she is making the self-discovery that she is chosen by the *noor* stone, to help bring goodness and light into a dark world. Whether Al-Mutawa intended Noora to be somewhat analogous to Mohammed is unknown, but the similarities cannot be denied.[18]

It cannot, of course, be stated with confidence whether or not Al-Mutawa sought to deliberately introduce these elements from the life of Mohammed into the story of Noora's transformation into a superhero as it is the subjective interpretation of one person; in fact, it appears upon analyzing all the issues of the comics in detail (as has been explored in the other chapters), that elements bearing a resemblance to the lives of the prophets in any way have been excluded from the comics, even if such elements are a matter of convention in the superhero genre. Dar's aforementioned study of Noora's character then, reveals possibly the sole exception to the said findings.

Of Superheroes and Conflicts: The Evolution of the Superhero

When placed in the context of war and other socio-political conflicts, the idea that the superhero is the embodiment of power, goodness, justice, and faith makes one understand why the genre resonates so strongly with the masses; the genre essentially negotiates with issues pertaining to "faith, hope, belief, guilt, justice, redemption"[19], and with 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'evil', and these issues are not just eternal but are central to most socio-political conflicts. Garrett's work, by drawing a link between the Holocaust, World War Two, and the rise of Superman has already presented before us a convincing example of the aforementioned idea: that superheroes are created or reinvented in fictional narratives whenever the real world

undergoes a crisis, because they act as symbolic figures of hope and faith. The case of the creation of Superman alone does not reinforce the strength of this idea though, but as Richa Gulati points out, "the popularity of superhero comics is cyclical, often surging during war"[20], and the case of the "superhero renaissance"[21] post 9/11 in comics and films as Peter Coogan calls it, and the recent creation of superheroes based on Islam in the Muslim world, all are examples that then go on to prove the strength of the relationship of the superhero genre with socio-political conflicts, and all these examples have been explored further in this chapter.

The creation of superheroes in the post 9/11 Muslim world can be explored so as to understand not just the eternal relationship between superheroes and conflict, but also to locate the differences in the attributes of various superheroes in the different nature of each conflict. As the world around us changes and as newer social realities emerge, the world of our superheroes correspondingly becomes more "flexible" (to use John Shelton Lawrence's phrase)[22], leaving behind the rigid dualities of black and white, right and wrong, and absolute strength and absolute evil to adopt subtler perspectives that better reflect the realities around us. Thus, as Lawrence points out, "superhero missions change over time, adopting a "flexible" approach to "heighten our awareness of emerging social realities", and "the changing roles result in changing ascriptions of heroism".[23] Or perhaps, the vice versa holds good; perhaps our "changing ascriptions of heroism" result in the "changing roles" adopted by our superheroes. An important idea established by Garrett in this regard is that the strength of Superman's powers reflected the need perceived by his Jewish creators for a force which could fight against an extremely powerful enemy i.e. Hitler and the Nazis. Garrett explains that since "Jews needed a hero who could protect them against, an almost invincible force... Siegel and Shuster created an invincible hero" (18-19), and so absolute power and absolute goodness were pitted against evil which was perceived as absolute.

Right versus Wrong, Good versus Evil, White versus Black, Us versus Them, these paradigms became an integral part of American superhero comics during World War Two because according to Garrett, doubts regarding the nature of the threat posed by the Germans and the Japanese did not arise among the Americans at that point in time (38). Thus, he points out, "the heroes were good, the villains were bad" (38). Over a period of time though, the distinction

between black and white lessened to create a shade of grey in comics that reflected the increasingly complex nature of the conflicts witnessed by the world, and these conflicts could not be categorized as distinctly as before. Joseph James Darowski reasons in his research on American superheroes that the difference between the superheroes of the 1930's and 40's and the superheroes from the 60's onwards mirrored the shift in America's perceptions regarding itself and the world. He writes:

> The different time periods during which DC comics founded their superhero comic book universe and Marvel actively began to publish superhero stories are reflected in the different natures of the characters. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman were created in the late 30's and the early 40's...As America stepped forward with a new role in the world following the war, these indestructible characters of popular culture represented America's new found confidence and powerful place on the world stage. In contrast... in the time period surrounding the creation of the Marvel superheroes (such as Spiderman, the Fantastic Four and the X-Men) the cold war dragged on, the Civil Rights Act of 1960 was passed, the Bay of Pigs incident occurred in 1961, the Vietnam war officially began when nine hundred military advisors were sent into South Vietnam in 1961, the Cuban Missile Crisis reared its ugly head in 1962 and JFK was assassinated in 1963. These were troubled times in America, less idealistic and less nationalistic than the period when the DC heroes became established as icons. The heroes created at this time reflected the change. The heroes had feet of clay, failing as often as they triumphed (73).

As Garrett also points out, in light of the nature of such crises and other internal troubles such as "the fights for economic justice" and "the excesses of the Mc Carthy hearings", "the simple black and white vision of America seemed increasingly outdated, and the simple black and white morality of its superheroes seemed increasingly outmoded" (38-39).

The complexity of the real world as reflected in American superhero comics post 9/11 and its aftermath once again supported the idea that the world could no longer be looked at through a black versus white duality, and the same has been explored later in this chapter. There were, of course, no ambiguous feelings for the terrorist figure who could easily be categorized as evil, but the unimaginable, unprecedented nature of the attacks evoked feelings which could not easily be

categorized; they were, as Spiderman puts it, "beyond words, beyond comprehension, beyond forgiveness"[24] (fig.5), ranging from disbelief, shock, horror, and anger to guilt and despair, and all of these were mirrored faithfully in the post 9/11 superhero comics. While there could be no ambiguity regarding the attacks, the aftermath of the event saw the rise of conflicts over which no clear consensus could be made, and these were best mirrored in the Batman comics and films that followed. Joshua C. Feblowitz's research establishes Batman as "a fitting figure for an era of moral ambiguity" because the shades of grey in his character best reflected the nation's mood at that point in time.[25] Feblowitz writes:

> Subsequent events (post 9/11) proved to be plagued with moral ambiguity and political challenges. Issues surrounding the war in Iraq, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, domestic wiretapping, "enemy combatants" and torture all bear witness to this troubled aftermath. By occupying an ambiguous moral terrain, Batman symbolizes these modern-day anxieties about the American response to terrorism... His own questionable tactics and the ambivalence he feels regarding them resonate with an audience preoccupied by similar issues...[26]

It may be thus reasoned keeping in mind the aforementioned ideas that Batman's being crowned as "The Greatest Superhero of All Time" in a survey carried out in 2009 by SFX.co.uk[27] proves that a superhero with shades of grey in his character is perhaps the best representative of our times, and the same has been agreed upon by Batman fans, one of whom proclaims that "he represents the darkness which exists in all of us"[28].

The evolution of the American superhero over the years, as has been explored, can thus be described as a process that has worked in tandem with the evolving ethos of the times, and it might now be assumed, after having studied all the examples mentioned before, that the times dictate the kind of a superhero that emerges in a particular culture. If applied in the context of the superheroes based on Islam, this assumption may help us understand how the defining characteristics of the 99 symbolize the real world issues that the Muslim world has dealt with in the wake of 9/11.

The reason why the 99 are not, for instance, as invincible as Superman, is because they are not dealing with "an invincible force" like Superman was. The horrors of the Holocaust and the might of Hitler and his Japanese allies had created conditions which called for the creation of an unbeatable superhero. The socio-political conditions in the present times are of course, not the same as those that were prevalent during World War Two. There is no villain who can really be labeled as the 'other' and be defeated by fictional superheroes based on Islam, though of course, as Al-Mutawa points out, Egyptian films have often constituted such representations as those which Al-Mutawa labels as "reactions", where, based on the idea that "if 'they' can show us to be the bad guys in their movies, we can make movies where they are the bad guys", the villain is often "an American or an Israeli".[29] The issue which has essentially been addressed by the creation of the 99 is the topical issue of Islam being misrepresented and misunderstood, perhaps as much by the Muslims themselves as by the rest of the world. *The 99* does not present any different version of 9/11, nor does it offer any different perspective on it (it does not, in fact, present any version of the event or offer any perspective on it at all). The 99 do not fight any 'Western' villains; the villain they fight is, in fact, a Muslim named Rughal, and neither do the comics negotiate with issues of political concern in as explicit a manner as is found in some of the American comics we have studied. The real struggle which constitutes the basis of the central metaphor in *The 99* is the struggle between two groups of people over the ninety-nine mystical *noor* stones which give the superheroes their powers; the said struggle (as shall be explored in detail in the next chapter, since it can be understood better after getting to know the basic story of *The 99*), metaphorically represents the real world struggle over interpretations of the *Quran* and Islamic ideas between two groups of Muslims-the 'extremists' and the 'moderates' (if one may label them thus). What may be understood so far then, is the idea that *The 99* represents, more than anything else, a section of Muslims who are attempting to present before the world those ideas of Islam which have been perceived to be sidelined in the aftermath of 9/11. As Jamie Etheridge points out in his article on *The 99*:

> Following the spectacularly horrific events of 9/11, the internal dispute between moderate Muslims and radical Islamists over what their religion should stand for morphed into a raging- sometimes even violent debate. Moderates argue Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance, they are sick of radicals hijacking Islam to promote intolerance, repression, and violence.[30]

In the context of such a scenario, Etheridge opines that *The 99* "is more than just entertainment. It can also be viewed as a metaphor for the identity crisis taking place in the Muslim world today".[31] What Etheridge calls the "identity crisis... in the Muslim world" has been explained by Al-Mutawa as the confusion propagated by those who may be labeled the 'self appointed representatives of Islam' about what Islam means and stands for [32]. The comics can then be read as an identity building exercise in the post 9/11 Muslim world, where the Muslim identity is built not at all in contrast with some Western 'other' (the 'other' here, if it may be said so, can be understood to be the idea of Islam as floated by the extremists) but by creating superheroes whose names have been derived from the *Quranic* attributes of Allah to make a statement-'This is Islam according to the Quran'. It is important to note that the 99 are, in the beginning, not as convinced about their powers as Superman, or as determined about their aims as Batman; instead, they resemble the Marvel superheroes whose struggles with internal conflicts mirrored the internal struggles of America in the 60's; thus, the confused nature of the 99 at the onset of the series may be read as a reflection of the confusion among the Muslim youth and the struggles they face regarding the complex issues pertaining to their belief. It must be noted here that though in the earlier issues, the 99 are often weak and fallible, their moral ambiguities, and doubts about their powers and responsibilities all change over a period of time. This change is best documented, as shall be explored in the next chapter, in their transition from a masked to an unmasked state, and in the declaration of their identities to the public (things which, as the next chapter shall explore, have never been done by any superhero, Arab or American, till date) in keeping with their own growing confidence about their self of self, all of which may be perceived as an attempt at the resolution of the "identity crisis in the Muslim world".

9/11 and After: How American Superheroes Rose to the Occasion

The understanding of comics as a form of popular culture that mirrors the concerns of the society it is created in, like all the other forms of popular culture, is an idea integral to this research, as it seeks to explore how a study of the post 9/11 American and Arab superhero comics can aid our perception of the issues surrounding the event in the real world. 9/11 and the events that followed in its aftermath were not only faithfully reflected in comics, but were also given newer, fictional dimensions that sought to aid our understanding of real world issues. "The

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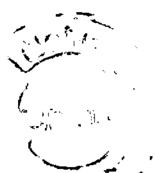

interplay between comics and real world issues" according to Feblowitz, is not a new phenomenon in the post 9/11 world.[33] Comics in general, and the superhero genre in particular, have always played a role in mirroring the concerns of their times and have often established, maintained, and sometimes challenged the socio-political narratives arising out of historical events. Feblowitz believes that the superhero genre is the best positioned to negotiate with the socio-political complexities surrounding such events as 9/11. He writes:

> While the creative interpretations of 9/11 have taken on numerous and varied forms, no genre deals more transparently and explicitly with the themes of 9/11 than the superhero narrative. For decades, figures such as Superman, Batman, and Spiderman have been fighting evil and criminality in fictional words that re-imagine American society and offer clear and unequivocal ideas of justice. The fantastical stories of these superheroes generate frameworks within which endlessly complex social issues can be disentangled to reveal pure and didactic cultural ideals, collapsing moral shades of grey into a black and white duality. The genre's engagement with concepts of justice, evil and terror 'uniquely' positions the superhero to comment on the events of 9/11. Superhero narratives allegorizing 9/11 possess the power to create analytical spaces in which reworked conceptions of terrorism, justice, and 'good and evil' can be examined and tested.[34]

The argument forwarded by Feblowitz in the context of superheroes and 9/11 can in fact be applied in the context of superheroes and all events of socio-political concern; the genre's inherent relationship with ideas of good and evil, its eternal "engagement with concepts of justice...and terror", all these have enabled it to represent such conflicts as 9/11 in its own "unique" manner. The very paradigm of good versus evil lying at the heart of the superhero genre, a paradigm which, as this research has explored, has fortified its relationship with faith, has also enabled it to represent socio-political conflicts because these issues that the genre engages with may be said to be central to any conflict. Since the idea of 'the good guys fighting the bad guys' is the most vital aspect of the genre, superheroes can be, and have always been, used by the cultures in which they have been created to fight whichever enemy the people perceive is 'the enemy of the moment'. The most recent manifestation of the aforesaid idea is exemplified in the two Raj Comics titles that were created in India after 26/11, both featuring superheroes Nagraj and Doga; the first, titled "26/11", features the superheroes, commandos, and

terrorists, all pitched in a battle,[35] and the second, titled "Halla Bol", depicts the superheroes fight with and defeat terrorists from a neighboring country called "Ghuspetistaan"[36] (a suggestive reference to Pakistan in the comics) (figs.6.7.8.). American superheroes like Superman, Batman, and Captain America have similarly dealt successfully with America's enemies over the years: the Germans and the Japanese during World War Two, the Russians during the Cold War, and Muslim extremists post 9/11. The strength of the relationship between the superhero genre and war and conflicts can be gauged by the fact that Captain America, the quintessential symbol of American patriotism, was launched by Marvel Comics in 1941 specifically as "a propaganda tool to fight Hitler" (Darowski 70) (fig. 9). The very inception of the superhero genre in comics in America according to Peter Coogan, as has been mentioned before, in fact took place around World War Two, with the launch of the first superhero, Superman in 1938. The representation of 9/11 and the events that followed in its aftermath in comics is then but a continuation of the "the interplay between comics and real world issues", as Feblowitz calls it, that has occurred over the ages. An event of such an immense magnitude as 9/11 could not have gone unrecorded in our fictional narratives, as has been proven by the spawning of an overwhelmingly large number of responses to the event in the form of films, documentaries, television programmes, theatre performances, songs, poems, novels, paintings, photographs, and comics. This research is specifically concerned though, with the American and the Muslim responses to the event and its ramifications as recorded in comics, in the superhero genre in particular. The 'unique' position of the superhero genre in the context of establishing, maintaining, or challenging the narratives arising out of social and political conflicts has been established by the aforementioned arguments, and the same has been elaborated upon in context of 9/11 by Feblowitz. Since the fictional superhero narratives have faithfully mirrored the socio-political narratives emerging from 9/11, an analysis of the response of the superhero genre towards such a conflict can perhaps push us closer towards an understanding of how the real world responded to the same.

The first American response to 9/11 in the superhero comics, which mirrored the nation's mood, was that of commemorating the victims of the attacks and the people who performed the rescue operations- the firefighters, policemen, doctors, nurses, and the other service people as the real heroes of the nation. Two comic book volumes titled "*9-11: September 11, 2001 (Artists Respond), Volume One*" and "*9-11: September 11, 2001 (The World's Finest Comic Book*

Writers and Artists Tell Stories to Remember), Volume Two" were launched as a joint venture by DC and several other publishers from the comics industry. Marvel Comics launched *Heroes: The World's Greatest Superhero Creators Honor the World's Greatest Heroes* and *A Moment of Silence*. The edition of *Spiderman* following the event bore a black cover (*The Amazing Spider Man # Volume 2. Issue 36*) as a mark of respect for the victims of the attacks, and depicted all the Marvel superheroes, and the super villains too (Doctor Doom, The Kingpin, and Magneto), helping with the rescue efforts at ground zero. These commemorative issues established the average American citizen as the 'real hero', and so, the mantle of the 'superhero' was handed over to the common man, declaring a symbolic shift in America's perception of heroism which is perhaps best reflected on the cover of *9-11: September 11, 2001* (*The World's Finest Comic Book Writers and Artists Tell Stories to Remember*), where Superman is depicted looking up with admiration at the image of the real heroes of America-the people who helped with the rescue operations, and the common man (fig.10). This commemorative response by American superhero comics cannot be looked at through "an institutional perspective alone", according to Henry Jenkins; he elaborates that it was something "personal".[37] Jenkins states that Marvel Comics "felt especially implicated since its stories had always been set in New York City, not some imaginary Metropolis".[38] He further states: "Captain America, Spiderman, Daredevil, The Fantastic Four live in brownstones or sky-rise apartments in NYC; they take the subway; they watch games at Yankee Stadium; they swing past the World Trade Center (or at least, they used to do so); they help out Mayor Giuliani".[39]

The next response to the event was the 'traditional' superhero response, as is exemplified in Jeff Dawson's observation: "After a mourning period for the leading comic-book publishers, who put out commemorative issues showing their principal players humbled by the ordinary-Joe heroism of the emergency services, came the full-on counter-offensive."[40] In the months that followed the commemorative issues, America prepared to go to war against Afghanistan. And so, the superhero comics developed a leaning towards themes of war and a confrontation between the superheroes and the new villains-the terrorists. As Michael Dean observes, the comics began "...setting square-jawed American heroes and superheroes on the trail of Osama Bin Laden and other terrorists -- most notably Frank Miller's much-publicized plans for a Batman-versus-Bin Laden showdown".[41] Dean elaborates:

> Frank Miller told the press that there was once again a need for the archetypal satisfactions of the classic 1940s wartime propaganda comic. The cover of Tightlip Entertainment's *Freedom Three #1*, is a recreation of the *Captain America #1* cover showing the red-white-and-blue hero punching Hitler with Captain America replaced by one of the Freedom Three and Bin Laden substituting for Hitler as the punchee".[42]

As has been explored before though, the simple good versus evil paradigm that was once integral to the superhero genre and which had begun to be questioned in the 60's, began to be perceived as anachronistic because it was difficult to sort the events that followed the attacks into absolute categories. Superhero comics such as Marvel's *Captain America* acknowledged the complexities inherent in the aftermath of the event, which had triggered a chain of reactions, ranging from violence against people of Arab origin to measures like the tapping of phones and e-mails being adopted by the government, which were opposed vehemently by the people. Garrett explores how some such issues were dealt with in the *Captain America* comics in *Holy Superheroes!* and provides examples of instances where Captain America refuses to join forces travelling to Afghanistan (103), and saves an Arab American youth from being murdered by a American who had himself lost a loved one in the attacks (104). A similar situation occurs in Wildstorm Comics' *Ex Machina* according to Jenkins, where the comics depict "a hate crime directed against a Sikh taxi driver by Americans who were themselves victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center"[43].

The writers of *Captain America*, as Jenkins observes, did not want it to be a part of the "jingoistic militarism" which was so integral a part of it in the 40's and the 50's;[44] which is, of course, visible in the examples given by Garrett above, where Captain America chooses not to be a part of the War in Afghanistan and remains back home to help his people. Thus, Jenkins concludes, "as comic book artists and writers re-examined these familiar characters (such as captain America) in the wake of September 11, they became powerful vehicles for re-examining America's place in the world",[45] and, one may add, for re-examining its policies at home, as Marvel's "Civil War" storyline testifies. The "Civil War" storyline saw Captain America stand against the Superhero Registration Act, a metaphorical reference to the USA PATRIOT Act according to Garrett (49), which had been initiated soon after 9/11 as a part of the intensification of the measures adopted for the nation's protection by the government, and which had been opposed by the people on account of its intrusion into their private domain. The "Civil War"

storyline went on to "critique aspects of the War on Terror and the illegal detention and torture of untried enemy combatants" .[46]

According to Greg Garrett, some American superhero comics post 9/11 went on to explore "the unpopular idea" that the attacks were somehow the result of "America's own actions and interventions in the affairs of others over the years" (48), and he gives the example of the *Captain America* comics again, where the superhero speaks about the aforementioned idea at length in one issue:

> I remember a time when it was easy to feel pride in the country... When this country was my country right or wrong- and most of the time it was right. But times have changed, haven't they? The battles are less clear, the wars less noble-the cause less right-even in the shadow of 9/11. Dark men with a 'cause' come at us like thieves in the night...Men who consider their cause 'noble'. Men who consider their cause 'holy'...This government can be wrong. Our politics can be flawed. We are, after all, a complex system run by human beings. But the country is good, and though it's no longer easy-I still feel pride in her. I still love her and I will fight till death to protect her and keep her safe (48).

Captain America is not the only comic that explores this "unpopular idea" though; A reading of *The Amazing Spider Man # Volume 2. Issue 36* reveals that this Marvel title too, talks about the same, albeit in a more explicit manner, as is exemplified in the following lines written by J. Michael Straczynski in the issue:

> What-do-we tell the children?
>
> Do we tell them evil is a foreign face?
>
> No. The evil is the thought behind the face, and it can look just like yours.
>
> Do we tell them evil is tangible? With defined borders and names and geometries and destinies?
>
> No. They will have nightmares enough.
>
> Perhaps we tell them that we are sorry.
>
> Sorry that we were not able to deliver unto them the world we wished them to have.

> That our eagerness to shout is not the equal of our willingness to listen.
>
> That the burdens of distant people are the responsibility of all men and women of conscience, or their burdens will one day become our tragedy".[47]

As these varied responses studied above prove, American superhero comics post 9/11 did more than just mirror the socio-political narratives that emerged from the event and in its aftermath; these comics offered newer dimensions to and often challenged the said narratives. As Jenkins states: "I have been surprised at how few comics have shown us superheroes bopping terrorists and how many of them have encouraged a deep reflection on the nature and ethics of power in the world post 9/11... comic book writers and artists have... provided a more diverse range of perspectives on these issues than can be found within the mainstream media".[48]

The selective representation of Muslims that occurred soon after 9/11 in children's literature merits a mention here because when read in tandem with the representation of Muslims in the post 9/11 comics, children's literature offered to its young readers a constructed identity of Muslims that sought to strategically justify the offensive against Afghanistan that came after a few months. Jo Lampert's research on children's literature post 9/11 highlights the "timeliness" of such texts:

> Paralleling the literature which dealt directly with 9/11 was the publication (or re-publication and rapid sequellling) (sic) of a group of books that seemed timely, in particular, books exposing the oppression of Islamic girls and women (Deborah Ellis's *Parvana* and *Parvana's Journey,* Latifa's *My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story*) and non-fiction which may be related to 9/11. These include... several books for young adults about terrorism, including the British publication *Terrorism* (Hibbert, 2002).[49]

While books for children like *Parvana* (2002) and *Parvana's Journey* (2003) sought to highlight the harsh ways of Muslim life in Afghanistan to indirectly construct for children ways of looking at the Muslim world, and books for young readers like Raymond Miller's *The War in Afghanistan* (2004) sought to directly highlight the reasons for the offensive against Afghanistan, it is the "timeliness", as pointed out by Jo Lampert, of these publications that helped in the active

construction of a narrative emerging from 9/11 that sought to provide meanings to America's war on terror.

The "timeliness" of the launch of perhaps the world's first *burqa* clad superhero (Dust a.k.a. Sooraya Qadir [fig. 11]) in *The X-Men* comics by Marvel (in *The New X-Men # Volume 1. Issue 133*) in 2002 lends itself to a similar interpretation. It becomes necessary though, to highlight the fact that Marvel Comics' *The X-Men* is a series that has always stood in a league of its own among superhero comics in terms of its representational diversity and its positive approach towards the representation of minority groups of all kinds. Nevertheless, the introduction of the female Muslim superhero hailing from Afghanistan into the mutant superhero team a year after 9/11 appears to work its way into the post 9/11 narratives established by the aforementioned texts which constructed a way of looking at Muslim world right before the offensive against Afghanistan. Jehanzeb Dar in his critique provides examples of instances from the comics featuring Dust, where the identity of the Muslim woman is constructed in a manner that highlights the righteousness of the Western male in comparison with the Muslim male; the superhero narrative in the comics works in such a way according to Dar as to position the Muslim female as the victim of Muslim male aggression, who thus needs to be rescued by the Western male. Dar states:

> In the case of Dust, we can make an argument for the *western* male gaze: an 'oppressed' Muslim girl is rescued from Afghanistan by Wolverine, a western male mutant. Wolverine is told that the *Taliban* were trying to remove Dust's *burqa*, obviously to molest her, and since there doesn't seem to be other Muslims around to take a stand against the *Taliban's* perverted behavior, who better to rescue her than Wolverine, or shall I say, Western democracy? The scenario of Dust fighting the *Taliban*, as admirable as it is, occurs enough times in later issues that it makes one question if this is how western male writers, artists, and readers want to see a Muslim super-heroine, i.e. to rebel against her oppressors, the mutual enemy of the U.S. government? (sic).[50]

Dar points out that Dust as a superhero hardly needed "rescuing", an idea which raises questions both about the strength of her characterization and the role her rescue plays in establishing the pre-eminence of the Western male over the Muslim one.[51] Her rescue mission

appears to provide Wolverine with a chance to fight face to face with the *Taliban*, who are, of course, defeated (fig. 12). Apart from highlighting the fact that the issue introducing Dust was launched post 9/11, Dar also brings to attention the name of the Pakistani hijacker who hijacks the Indian plane from which Dust is rescued; the name of the hijacker is Mohammed, the name of the last prophet in Islam.[52] (There have been two other villains named Mohammed who were introduced after 9/11 in American superhero comics- in Marvel Comics' *Elektra # Volume 2 Issue 4* [2001] and in Holy Comics' *Captain Miracle # Issue 0* [2002] respectively). The cover of the issue introducing Dust shows a close of up of her veiled face and her eyes, wide with fear (fig. 13). On reading the responses of a few bloggers in cyberspace towards Dust, it becomes apparent that her character has not been developed to a large extent (which makes one wonder what the real purpose of her introduction into the superhero team was), and that though the incorporation of a *burqa* clad character into the Marvel superhero universe is a step that adds to Marvel's representational diversity, a certain amount of stereotyping of the character defeats the purpose. A few entries have been mentioned below for consideration:

"...Does she even have a personality, or is she just Dust, the Muslim girl who wears a *burqa* and stands in the background saying nothing?" ("The Dosadi Experiment" 24/08/05, 08:20 AM)[53]

"I like the idea of Dust as a character; I just wish she were more fully developed." ("sfrent99" 24/01/06, 9:22 AM)[54]

"Oh, Dust. We finally get a little piece from the Middle East (or in this case, Central Asia), and what do we get? A woman. In a *burqa*. Whose mutant power turns her into...sand. Because, you know, she's from the desert." ("Novaya Havoc" 29/08/06, 05:35 PM)[55]

The characterization of Dust in this manner then appears to have served a specific purpose in the post 9/11 scenario, strengthening specifically the anti-Afghanistan perceptions among people which, as has been observed before, were "timely" given that the offensive against Afghanistan took place around the same time.

Religion and the Post 9/11 Superhero: The Growing Incorporation of Religious Elements in Mainstream Superhero Comics

Feblowit'z research on the post 9/11 *Batman* films explores Peter Coogan's suggestion that the world is "in the midst of a superhero renaissance"[56] and that "9/11 has something to do with this renaissance"[57] by looking at the figures related to superhero films that have been released over the last few years. The figures provided by Feblowitz are staggering:

> According to the Internet Movie Database, there were thirty nine superhero films released during the entire 1990's. In contrast, there have been forty five superhero films released in the last five years, and there are a staggering forty two films planned for the next three. Of the all-time top grossing films in the U.S, eleven of the top hundred are superhero movies released after 9/11.[58]

Given the rise in the popularity of superhero comics post 9/11, it may be assumed that the term "superhero renaissance" applies as much to comics as to films in recent times, and Richa Gulati's statement that "the popularity of superhero comics often surges during war"[59] proves (although there is no war in the real sense of the term) that 9/11 and the subsequent events that followed once again created conditions in which the world perceived a need for fictional saviours. And while it has already been established that the roots of the superhero figure lie in religion, and while the relationship between comics and religion is believed to be an old one, what has been witnessed in recent times is a more explicit incorporation of faith based ideas in mainstream superhero comics, something that was always either sidelined or expressed in a subtle manner before. Not only is this trend (if we may label it thus) exemplified post 9/11 in the creation of superheroes based on Islam, or in the explicit association of villains with Islam (as has been explored before), but also in the growing incorporation of faith related issues in superhero comics which seldom explored these issues before. Since 9/11 has been understood to be an attack waged specifically in the name of religion, it is but obvious that there has been a rise in the number of both heroes and villains based on Islam in the superhero genre (both in Arab and American superhero comics); while not undermining the fact that such characters existed before, this trend highlights the relationship of the conceptualization of such characters to conflicts such as 9/11. The introduction of the devout Dust, the female superhero from

Afghanistan in Marvel's *The X-Men* testifies to the fact that superheroes based on religion are a growing breed within mainstream American comics, as opposed to superheroes who just happen to have a religious affiliation. It is not just the obvious physical depiction of Dust in a *burqa* that could make one assume the aforesaid; Dust's character is depicted praying, invoking the name of Allah more than once, and getting into arguments with other characters because of her religious beliefs,[60] acts which have seldom been so overtly displayed in superhero comics before 9/11. Although it is true that Marvel Comics and *The X-Men* titles in particular have seldom shied away from depicting religion, it is, as it has been analyzed before, the timing of the introduction of Dust in the series which is significant. Another character which merits a mention here is Batman's enemy Ra's Al Ghul. Feblowitz argues that the selection of Ras Al Ghul as the villain in *Batman Begins* (2005) was an obvious choice for the post 9/11 film. Feblowitz writes:

> Although Ra's Al Ghul originated in the *Batman* comics from 1971, the choice to use him as Batman's primary nemesis in the 2005 film is a telling one. Passing over numerous iconic villains including the Joker, the Riddler and the Penguin, the creators of the film chose instead to appropriate an obscure character of Islamic origin for use as the central villain. [61]

Feblowitz also mentions that prior to 9/11 Ra's Al Ghul never had a very significant role to play in the *Batman* comics, which makes his selection as the primary villain in the post 9/11 *Batman* film a move all the more obvious given the film's preoccupation with terrorism.[62]

The growing incorporation of religion in comics post 9/11 can be studied not just in the examples of new superheroes and villains based on religion, but also in the association of old and established characters with faith based ideas in comics which have had nothing to do with religion before. For instance, more than forty years after his creation in 1961, The Thing from *The Fantastic Four* comics has been revealed to be Jewish in 2002 (in the issue *The Fantastic Four # Volume 3. Issue 56* titled "Remembrance of Things Past", and the revelation does not play a 'tokenistic purpose' either, but is revealed to be of importance-The Thing offers a Jewish prayer, "The Shema- Testifying to the Oneness of God"[63] while standing by the side of the grievously injured Mr. Sheckerberg, who recovers (fig. 14). Mr. Sheckerberg then proceeds to converse with him about his faith (fig. 15). This little episode in the world of superhero comics

appears to be such a prime exemplification of the relationship between comics and religion that Garrett chooses begin his book *Holy Superheroes!* using this episode as the introduction to his discourse on comics and faith (1-2), and the revelation itself saw a tremendous response from superhero comic fans in cyberspace. This revelation of The Thing's faith, of course, has nothing to do with 9/11, but it ought to be looked at as a part of a trend which has grown in recent times. Jeffrey Weiss writes in *The Dallas Morning News* that though the people behind *The Fantastic Four* comics had always known "unofficially" that The Thing was a Jew, "to have it actually appear in the plot of the comic book more than four decades after the character was 'born' is a different thing entirely", and is perhaps "a small indication of the shift in the way...culture deals with faith".[64] This revelation of The Thing's faith has been called "a rare moment of pop culture",[65] because although subtle religious elements in superhero comics have always been there, given the genre's roots in religion, comic writers have, according to Weiss, seldom referred directly to a faith so as to avoid creating any issues with the readers.[66] Alex Johnson opines that "comic books from edgier alternative publishers and adult-oriented graphic novels have explored explicitly religious ideas for several decades, but what's striking is how often such themes have been appearing lately in the most mainstream of publications".[67] Johnson cites another example of the growing incorporation of faith in superhero comics-the example of *Spider-Man # Volume 2. Issue 48* titled "The Big Question" (2002), where God speaks to Spiderman; here Johnson points out that though Spiderman's Protestant affiliation has long been known to his fans, the idea of God speaking to the superhero is a first for *Spiderman* comics[68] (fig. 16). In his article on comics and religion, Bill Radford discusses an instance of the open incorporation of prayers in DC's *Infinite Crisis # Volume 1. Issue 5* (2006) where he reports: "DC's superheroes meet in a church to gather their forces - and seek help from a higher power".[69] It is of course, not a matter of coincidence that the comic is titled "Faith". Radford calls this phenomenon "an unusual acknowledgment of religion and faith among the superheroes of the DC universe, and a "sign of how comic-book creators have become more open in exploring religion in the...world of superheroes".[70] As has been talked about before, there have been a plethora of subtle religious references in superhero comics in the past, given the genre's relationship with religion; *Pop Theology* points out for instance, that Captain America's shield is a "Jewish symbol denoting closeness to and the protection of God", that "the white A on the mask of his forehead... is the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet (Aleph)", that the Fantastic Four

"are based upon the special place of four in Jewish traditions", and that Magneto, the Jewish villain in *The X-Men*, "won't fight past sunset on Friday".[71] There is a difference however, in comics including such subtle references, and in the open incorporation of religious elements in comics as discussed above. The explicit revelation of a superhero's religious affiliation, the conversation between God and a superhero, the depiction of superheroes praying in a church and asking God for help, these phenomena then, come at a time when it is widely believed that the mainstream comics industry has grown increasingly comfortable with issues of faith and religion and does not shy away from engaging its characters in debates about religious issues which have seldom been explored in comics before. For instance, a debate takes place between the superheroes Dust and Surge about the *hijab* in *The New X Men: Academy X # Issue 2*,[72] and in *The New X Men: Hellions # Issue 2* Dust converses with her mother about the *hijab* again[73]; it is to be noted that though such issues have been debated upon in the real world prior to 9/11, their incorporation in comics is a new phenomenon, which makes one assume that issues related to religion have gained such importance in the real world in recent times that their incorporation within works of popular culture such as comics cannot be avoided.

Radford discusses the implications of this trend in the context of American culture, and quotes Douglas Rushkoff:

> The growing acknowledgement of religious beliefs reflects a cultural shift. When comic books first appeared in the late 30's, America was supposed to be a melting pot. That was our cultural metaphor. Religion and ethnicity were supposed to be subordinate to our role as Americans. I think now we are much more in a multicultural phase where people are trying to discover their roots. [74]

While Rushkoff attributes the recent gravitation towards religion in comics to a "multicultural phase" and Dan DiDio talks in Radford's article about how religion is an integral element of people's lives and so needs to be touched upon,[75] Preston Hunter's remark on the same issue, that "because religion is such a force in *current events*, it naturally informs comics"[76] throws attention upon the crucial idea that religion is much more in the limelight in the present times than it was before, thus making it obvious that "current events" have something to do with the recent trend documented in comics.

These writers are not alone in talking about the increasing use of religious elements in comics; Academic events such as the *Graven Images* Conference held in 2008, which invited speakers to specifically discuss "Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels"[77] have acknowledged the rise in this trend in recent times. While the umbrella term 'religion and comics' could include comics as diverse as the Jewish *kosher* comics which are meant for religious instruction, or *manga* like Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha*, which is based on the life of the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, or even superhero comics like Image Comics' *Astro City* which features an all Christian superhero team called *Crossbreed* who are based on Biblical characters and who actively evangelize people in the comics [fig. 17]), the discussion here pertains as such to mainstream superhero comics which have grown comfortable enough with religion to incorporate it in their stories.

The assumption which may be made with regard to the growing interplay between religion and mainstream superhero comics, which seems farfetched yet merits a thought, is that post 9/11, which was believed to be a war based on religion, the perceived gravitation towards faith among the American people (which has been documented in surveys as those conducted by *The Pew Research Centre*)[78] has been faithfully reflected in comics through the incorporation of elements of faith. Though the said surveys again acknowledge that the gravitation towards faith as documented in the rise in church attendances immediately post 9/11 among the American people was a temporary phenomenon, one must still recognize that the changing nature of superhero comics could be a reflection of a change in the real world, that, as Preston Hunter has said, religion being such a "force in *current events*... naturally informs comics". George Dvorsky makes out a convincing case for the fortification of the association of superheroes with faith in the post 9/11 world in his analysis of the 2006 film *Superman Returns*. Dvorsky points out that the significance of Superman's 'return' in the film lies in it being a metaphorical suggestion for the 'return' of faith among the people,[79] a telling reference to the assumption that faith among people has strengthened in the wake of 9/11, as discussed earlier. Dvorsky suggests that the fictional editorials in the film on "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman" emerging from Superman's absence refer to people's lack of faith and may be read as "Why the World Doesn't Need God", and that the situation's reversal on Superman's return which generates editorials on "Why the World Needs Superman", may again may be read in terms of the return of faith among

people i.e. "Why the World Needs God".[80] Dvorsky's work ratifies the idea earlier explored in the research, that fictional superhero narratives provide a sense of hope and faith to the people in times of conflict, by once again equating Superman with the 'messiah' and thus foregrounding his 'need' in the post 9/11 world in the following words:

> At first I was puzzled by the script writer's decision to have Superman gone for so long (from 2001 to 2006), but the reason eventually dawned on me. Five years. Not an arbitrary number when you realize that we are quickly approaching the five year anniversary of 9/11. Like the arrival of the extraterrestrials in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Superman's return is a quasi-messianic example of wish fulfillment in popular culture. Five years after 9/11, and deeply intertwined in the so-called war on terror, Americans are most assuredly looking to the sky for help... The return of Superman in 2006 is also reflective of contemporary geopolitical concerns and desperatism. When Christopher Reeve donned the red cape back in the late 70's, Superman had to address the disturbing rise of urban violence and crime. Today, the stakes are much higher. With the United States under the perceived threat of super-terrorism, and with an incompetent and largely ineffective government in place to deal with the issue, defeatism has led to those hopes that can only be realized in religious or science fictional outlets.[81]

The assumption that may be made upon analysis of the aforementioned examples is that while faith has always been an integral part of the superhero narrative, what has been witnessed in recent times is a reinforcement of that faith through an open acknowledgement or the explicit inclusion of faith based elements in the superhero genre, and this has come about primarily because gravitation towards faith is a given in times of conflict. What also emerges from the analysis of the aforementioned examples is the proof that within the "superhero renaissance" as documented in films and comics in the post 9/11 world, the association between faith and the superhero genre has grown stronger.

The Superhero and the Arab World

The popularity of the superhero genre in times of conflict is best understood if one looks at the fact that post 9/11, all the three comic publishers in the Arab world chose this particular

genre and no other to launch indigenous comics in the region. This particular choice may not be considered a mere coincidence because of two factors. Firstly, since the Egypt based A.K. Comics, the Kuwait based Teshkeel Comics, and the Jordan based Aranim Comics all sought to provide positive role models for the children in the region, the superhero figure was the perfect choice because superheroes have long been established as inspirational figures in most traditions, as the successful example of American superheroes has proven. Secondly, the strong association of the 'messiah factor' with the superhero makes it obvious that in the context of the aftermath of 9/11, a symbolic figure of hope and faith i.e. a superhero could perhaps bolster Arab 'wish fulfillment' in the best possible manner. An analysis of the superhero titles from all the three Arab publishing houses- A.K., Teshkeel, and Aranim is imperative for this research as it seeks to understand how the Arab and the Muslim world created its own narratives versus those floated by the 'West' in response to the events that followed in the wake of 9/11.

While American superhero comics enjoy a wide fan base in the Arab world, a serious lack of indigenous comics means that the Arab world did not really have any superheroes of its own prior to the launch of A.K. Comics in 2002. Among the several reasons for this void is perhaps the rigid interpretation of religion, which when coupled with strict censorship does not look favourably upon any physical representation of the Prophet; and so the creation of superheroes based on the Prophet, which would have been a natural idea given that most American superheroes are based upon Judeo-Christian prophets, has never been a feasible idea in the region. Also, unlike India, where comics, children's books, television programmes, and animation films based on gods and mythological characters abound, the Arab world seldom explores such themes because of certain prohibitions, which Hassan Fattah explains in the following words: "Muslim religious authorities reject attempts to personify the powers of God or combine the word of God in the *Quran* with new myths or imaginative renderings more typical of the West".[82] Thus, some of the models upon which superheroes are often based i.e. gods or prophets (as has been explored before) cannot be used in the Arab world. According to Dominic Wells, the prohibition regarding "the depiction of Prophet Mohammed... in some countries extends to a distrust of capturing the human figure in general"[83]; this then makes it difficult to create any pictorial representations of humans at all and may in part explain the absence of

indigenous comics in the region. Roya Hakakian, in an article on comics in the Arab world has talked about the status of comics, cartoons and comic strips in the region. Hakakian says:

> Beyond Miki, the Arab vernacular for Mickey Mouse, and a handful of other celebrated Disney characters and Western superheroes, Arab teenage boys face a paltry reading selection. Unlike the subculture status of comic books in the U.S., Arab comic strips, usually subsidized by governments and produced by the region's leading artists and writers, are generally considered high art and are quite reverent. Void of lightheartedness, they are deemed as pedagogical tools.[84]

The only three names in the comics industry in the Arab world i.e. A.K, Teshkeel, and Aranim all affirm that they launched superhero comics both to fill a void created by the absence of indigenous comics and simultaneously to provide fictional role models to Arab children; the latter need being perceived by Teshkeel's founder Naif Al-Mutawa to be of prime importance, because, according to him, the people in the region could not afford to live with the vacuum created by the perceived lack of heroes, especially in a conflict riddled world where it was becoming increasingly evident that the lack of positive role models was being addressed by 'negative forces'.[85] According to Al-Mutawa, though the Arab world abounds in "historical figures that are revered",[86] it "does not have any modern day heroes",[87] and the full implications of this were understood by him when he spent ten years as a psychologist working with victims of war. His patients included victims of political torture, in particular people who had survived Saddam Hussein's regime. He states: "It hit me that the stories I was hearing were from men who grew up believing that their leader, Saddam, was a hero, a role model – only to one day be tortured by him".[88] And so it appears that while his experiences influenced his understanding of the ways in which negative 'heroes' could affect a generation of people, those experiences also led him to think about the future generation of children growing up without positive heroes. An idea of the 'negative forces' which had come to address the lack of positive role models in the region can be understood upon reading Nora Boustany's article, where she mentions how Al-Mutawa came across people[89] who were selling sticker books to children which depicted suicide bombers, which was the proverbial "last straw" for him.[90] The idea of children being sold such material was disturbing enough for Al-Mutawa's potential investors to "shock" them "into action" according to Boustany, and thus the need for positive role models for Arab children, born

out of a sense of urgency regarding the socio-political situation in the region, was finally addressed. The fact that Al-Mutawa was not alone in thinking about the negative impact of the conflicts in the region upon the children is proven by the ways in which his ideas resonate with those of Suleiman Bakhit, the founder of Aranim Comics, who according to Marco Visscher, saw comics as a way of "tempering the extremism he sees in his part of the world by providing the local youth with positive role models".[91]

Launched in 2002 by Dr. Ayman Kandeel (who is a professor of Economics at Cairo University), Egypt based A.K. Comics (A.K. stands for the initials of its founder and also for "Arabian Knight")[92] gave to the Arab world its very first superheroes. While the fact that the four superheroes belonging to the A.K. universe are purely Arab was always evident; according to an interview given by Marwan El Nashar, the Managing Editor of A.K. Comics to *Newsarama*, their Muslim identity has never been explicitly depicted (although it is obvious), "so that no religion or faith can be perceived as better than another".[93] Though the launch of A.K. Comics comes after 9/11, the comics do not refer to the event in any way, either overtly or covertly, nor can they be read in the same context as their post 9/11 American counterparts, because their narratives do not constitute any evident representation of 9/11 or its aftermath. However, since comics seldom exist in a socio-political vacuum and are mostly reflective of the concerns of their times, it is understandable that the A.K. titles relate with the conflicts within the Middle East, in particular with the Palestine-Israel issue.

Out of all the four Superhero titles developed by A.K. Comics (*Aya-The Princess of Darkness*, *Jalila-The Protector of the City of All Faiths*, *Rakan-The Lone Warrior* and *Zein-The Last Pharaoh*), the titles featuring Jalila are the ones where the allegorization of the real struggles of the region through fictional narratives becomes apparent. Jalila (fig. 18) is the The Protector of the City of All Faiths, which is a clear reference to Jerusalem according to Daniel Williams[94], and the first issue of the comics featuring her- *Jalila # Issue 1* titled "The Sixth Terrorist" substantiates this claim by depicting a city striking in its resemblance with Jerusalem (fig.19). The city, which is contested over by several forces-The United Liberation Force (The Palestine Liberation Organization according to Williams)[95], The Zios Army (The Zionists according to Williams)[96], The Xenox Brigade and The Double Axes, has Jalila, the nuclear scientist cum superhero as its lone protector whose struggles to keep the city out of the hands of

the aforesaid forces constitute the story of each issue. While Jalila's acquisition of superpowers resembles that of Spiderman's, with a blast from a nuclear plant in her case substituting for the bite Spiderman receives from a radioactive spider, the noteworthy point here is that the nuclear plant is named Dimondona, which is a "barely disguised reference to Israel's Dimona nuclear research reactor"[97] according to Williams. References to nuclear powers in the case of both Jalila and Spiderman mirror the real world anxieties surrounding their use in their respective times. According to Darowski, Spiderman's being bitten by a radioactive spider in the 60's was a reflection of America's concerns about nuclear power; and the reproduction of real world concerns in the fictional world of Spiderman became apparent when the 2002 film adaptation of *Spiderman* substituted the radioactive spider with a genetically altered one, which in turn mirrored the obsession with genetics that had gripped the world in the 90's (85). This shift from a radioactive spider to a genetically altered one "demonstrates a change in the concerns of America", states Darowski (85). Similarly, Jalila's acquisition of superpowers from a nuclear blast is but a topical reflection of the Middle East's concerns with nuclear power, and her mission to prevent the nuclear resources from falling into the hands of the wrong people is again a reflection of the same concerns in the real world.

Resemblances to Western superheroes do not stop at Jalila's similarities with Spiderman in respect of the acquisition of powers; Aya-The Princess of Darkness (fig. 20), the other female superhero from the A.K. universe, resembles Batman in the context of powers and abilities, as has been pointed out by Dar.[98] Batman, who defies some of the norms of the superhero genre owing to his complete lack of superpowers, does appear to be the model upon which Aya's characterization has been based. As Dar points out, her lack of superpowers apart, what inches her story closer to Batman's is the way in which she loses her parents at a young age to criminals and her subsequent resolution to fight crime all her life (the only difference being that both Batman's parents were murdered by a mugger while Aya's father is murdered and her mother is framed for the crime by the perpetrators of the murder).[99] Batman was primarily a detective and so is Aya, who is also a law student by day.

The story of Zein-The Last Pharaoh (fig. 21) is uncannily similar to that of Superman's. Born not on another planet but in another time (14,000 B.C), Zein's world is destroyed by a meteor, paralleling the destruction of Superman's planet Krypton in an explosion. Superman's father Jor-

El placed him in a special Earth bound capsule; Zein's father Ra-Ez places him a special chamber that helps him survive the force of the meteor and in which he hibernates for thousands of years, waking up in a new world and a new era (5000 BC). Zein is the last Pharaoh, just as Superman is apparently the last Kryptonian. The task before Zein, who can travel through time, is that of "protecting the ancient lands of his forefathers"[100], and in modern times he assumes the identity of a Professor of Philosophy cum superhero.

The vision of the founder of A.K. Comics, Ayman Kandeel has been quoted by Jordan E. Rosenfeld in the following words: "I always imagined a superhero with ancient Egyptian roots, with all the mystery and mysticism that civilization embodies".[101] Despite the fact that Kandeel's vision reads as a departure from the Western superhero model, his superheroes, Aya and Jalila in particular, conform to it in more ways than one. Rakan-The Lone Warrior (fig. 22) is perhaps the lone representative of Kandeel's vision, embodying mysticism in his persona, "using the techniques of *sheba* (wisdom and peace) that make him an invincible warrior"[102], and "wielding *The Sword of Majeedo*" (a magical sword) as he travels through "ancient lands" (Twelfth Century Arabia and Persia) (*Rakan # Issue 1*).

Three of the superheroes-Aya, Jalila, and Zein, live in a time of apparent peace which comes after what is known as the "Fifty Five Years War" in the comics, and strive to maintain that peace. What is noteworthy is the fact the good versus evil paradigm lying at the heart of these comics does not position the West as the 'evil other' in any way, unlike American superhero comics which have usually placed Arabs on the other side of the paradigm. The villains Aya fights are mostly Arab criminals or monsters, Rakan mostly battles magical creatures like dragons. The titles featuring Jalila though, are the ones that are deeply rooted in the conflicts within the Middle East, as has been mentioned before. According to Jordan E. Rosenfeld, "the characters are symbolic of the possibilities for transformation of the Middle East, drawing on...the very real conflicts that exist in the region today".[103] Given that the comics presented to the world the Arab world's very first indigenous superheroes, they had a chance of adding newer dimensions to the ways in which the world looks at the region; but the apparent lack of adequate representation of the region's socio-political conflicts, (except in the titles featuring Jalila), coupled with the extremely Western look and feel of the comics (except in the titles featuring Rakan), does little more than offer something new in terms of names and places to the readers in

the West. For the Arab readers however, the comics possibly embody their 'wish fulfillment' by providing to them superheroes that are their own.

The obvious inclusion of real world conflicts in the *Jalila* titles has been explained by Marwan El Nashar in an interview with *Newsarama*:

> It's hard not to be inspired by what is going on in the region; the Middle East is after all the most turbulent region in the world. It is a part of our everyday life-it is pretty hard to ignore. We can only hope that even in the tense political climate of the Middle East, our comic books and their heroes can offer an optimistic account of our whole world in the future. People in this part of the world are definitely interested in learning about a better, more hopeful, alternate future. This is why three out of our four characters live after the war of fifty five years, following a period of uncertainty that looks like today's turmoil.[104]

The fact that out of the three indigenous comics in the Arab world, A.K. Comics alone focuses on the socio-political turmoil of the Middle East is noteworthy. However, a heavy reliance on Western art and the need to cater to a Western readership means that the chance to develop a truly indigenous product has not been realized to its full potential by A.K. Comics, the implications of which, along with an analysis of the ways in these comics have reinforced or challenged certain stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims have been discussed in the next chapter. The credit for developing and exploring truly Arab superheroes then goes to the Jordan based Aranim Comics, which was founded in 2005 by Suleiman Bakhit.

Dominic Wells reports that Suleiman Bakhit was one of the victims of the attacks against people of Arab origin that took place in America after 9/11; four men assaulted him one night in 2002 on the campus of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis where he was a student of Engineering.[105] The attack led to his attempt to contribute towards the creation of a better understanding of Arabs and Muslims among Americans, and his first step in this direction was to interact with school children.[106] Tobias Buck reports: "He wanted to explain to these children that the men behind the attacks on New York and Washington four months earlier were a radical fringe, that their atrocities should not stoke fears of the wider Arab world. We, Mr Bakhit was trying to say, are not so different from you".[107] During the course of one of these interactions a

student asked him if there was an Arab Superman; a question which led Bakhit to seriously reflect upon the state of comics in the Arab world, and which then led to the creation of Aranim, a media group which sought to provide Arab children with an 'Arab Superman'.[108] Though the interests of Aranim lie in more than comics and superheroes (animation, toys and games are also being developed), for the purpose of this research a focus on the superheroes developed by Aranim is sufficient.

The Aranim universe comprises so far of a group of warrior Bedouins (fig. 23) (hailed as "the Arab *Ninjas*"[109]), a group of children living in AD 2050 (fig. 24) and surviving on sheer imagination in a world where there are no adults and no reserves of oil, and two characters named Mansaf and Ozi (fig. 25) "whose single-minded pursuit of the country's national dishes (which the heroes are named after) plunges them into trouble"[110]. Aranim's first launch was *Hawk Hunter* (fig. 26), a comic on Muwaffaq Al Salti, an air force pilot hailed as a real life hero in Jordan who died in 1966 while fighting four Israeli air force pilots in one of the longest air battles ever, according to Bakhit.[111]

The comic based on Muwaffaq Al Salti was created with the aim of introducing Arab children to real life heroes, and while according to Bakhit it does not go into the political aspects of the Jordan-Israel battle,[112] it appears to attempt the construction of a certain idea of heroism and thus belongs to the same league of comics as the *Indian War Comics*, which were created by Aditya Bakshi in 2008 to celebrate the lives of Indian soldiers. The concept of the elevation of real life people to a super heroic stature has been mined by the American comics industry post 9/11 too, as has been elaborated upon before. The Aranim comics featuring the super kids living in the future in a world minus adults or oil reserves can be said to be mirroring the fears regarding the energy resource crisis that has gripped the world and in particular the Middle East, where oil translates into wealth, in recent times. The other comics from the Aranim universe appear to have been modeled upon purely Arab concepts, history, culture, and mythology, and since everything that constitutes them has been majorly influenced by Arab concepts, these comics are perhaps the first indigenous ones from the region. The influence of Western comics being minimal in these titles might have negatively influenced their sale outside the Arab world, but the process of tapping into new ideas instead of repackaging Western concepts perhaps matters

more for Bakhit, who had, as he admits to Wells[113], done years of research about Middle Eastern history, mythology, literature and art before coming up with his products.

According to Wells, all Aranim comics "explore what it means to be an Arab hero".[114] Thus, superheroes in the Aranim universe are difficult to categorize under Western norms as the very concept of a superhero as established by Western comics has been redefined in these Arab comics. Bakhit's complex characters defy the black versus white paradigm of looking at the world that once resonated with American superheroes, as he believes that such a paradigm is "out of tune" with Arab "cultural values and... daily experiences".[115] His characters are, as Marco Visscher reports, built on the lines of Sinbad, whose stories highlight the ideas of "overcoming obstacles" and learning through hardship,[116] and thus, according to Bakhit, resonate with Arab readers since their "character development is complicated and...offers value based lessons".[117] The Aranim characters wear regular Arab clothing and do not don superhero costumes, an element which Peter Coogan avers is an "element of identity central to the superhero";[118] Bakhit jokes " we do not like our heroes to wear their underpants on the outside".[119] The characters also defy the norms of the "Mission-Powers-Identity" triad which according to Peter Coogan constitutes the "core of the superhero genre",[120] and thus the Aranim characters defy the idea of the superhero as we know it. This defiance however, does not mean that the tag of a superhero cannot be applied to them, because the creation of such characters is an attempt at creating a new superhero convention which fits in with Arab sensibilities. Local legends like Muwaffaq Al Salti, comic characters like Mansaf and Ozi, warrior Bedouins from history and super imaginative youngsters living in the future all redefine 'heroism' in the context of the Arab world in a way which makes it difficult to place the comics in the *Superman-Batman-Spiderman* canon, but which attempts to create a new Arab canon altogether.

The Creation of Ninety-Nine New Superheroes for the Post 9/11 World

While A.K. Comics created Arab superheroes to focus in part on the conflicts within the region, and Aranim Comics created a whole universe of characters (which unlike their A.K. counterparts, are truly Arab in terms of their execution) in order to explore and redefine the concept of 'heroism' in the context of the region's culture, Teshkeel's vision was different from the others. Teshkeel's comics are the primary focus of this research not just because they have

surpassed the other Arab comics in terms of critical acclaim, international appeal, and popularity among both global and local readers, but also because of the fact that the vision they represent is not centered around the Arab world alone, but on Islam, and it can be said of them that they truly represent the Muslim response to the aftermath of 9/11 in a way that the A.K and Aranim comics do not (which is what this research aims to look at). The very fact that the Teshkeel superheroes are named after the ninety-nine attributes of Allah and are thus the representatives of an Islamic rather than an Arab concept sets their fictional narratives in a context different from that of the others. What cannot be denied is that the decision (A.K.'s, Aranim's, and Teshkeel's) to create superheroes in the Arab world in order to both provide Arab children with positive role models and to act as global ambassadors for Islam was influenced to a major extent by the aftermath of 9/11 in which the image of Islam in general and of Arabs in particular had acquired negative connotations; however, an exploration of the comics from the Arab world has so far revealed a preoccupation with the redefinition of the Arab and not the Islamic image. Though the launch of Teshkeel Comics was based on same dual aim as the one described above, Teshkeel chose, unlike its counterparts, an Islamic rather than an Arab concept, and this choice perhaps places its aim of the redefinition of the image of Islam before its aim of the creation of role models for the Arab world. Nevertheless, it is not as if its second aim was relegated to the background altogether, for the choice of an Islamic concept meant that it would still resonate with the Arab readers, while the same cannot be held to be true in reverse i.e., an Arab concept would not necessarily have resonated with Muslims the world over (as has been proven by the A.K. and the Aranim titles).

The American Muslim standup comedian Azhar Usman (who is of Indian origin) whose standup comedy routines titled "Allah Made Me Funny: The Official Muslim Comedy Tour" (fig. 27), aim for the subversion of prejudices through laughter, has summed up his response to the aftermath of 9/11 in the following words in an interview with *Voice of America*:

> While the Arabic word for God is Allah, in the discourse of many Americans, that sacred name evokes the war cry of violent... terrorists. Muslims have to do a better job of reclaiming the discourse and reclaiming our own voices within that discourse. So part of that is to associate positive and beautiful words from our tradition such as Allah with something beautiful and positive – which is humour and being funny. And for many

people, it had the effect of making them kind of question their assumptions regarding that word. And that is ultimately what we were after.[121]

If applied in the context of the superhero comics from the Teshkeel universe, Usman's words help us understand how the creation of superheroes based on Allah's attributes works towards the redefinition of the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world. What Usman and his fellow comedians Azeem and Preacher Moss do is to associate the word Allah with humour by doing standup comedy routines about Islam, about Muslims, and about the ways in which the West perceives them and thus create a narrative in which people shed their seriousness, their assumptions, and see things in a lighter vein. The reclamation of the word Allah, and subsequently of Islam, from the negative discourse they have come to be associated with post 9/11 occurs in the case of *The 99* by the association of Allah's attributes with something as positive as super heroism. The creation of superheroes who are named Widad-The Loving, or Bari-The Healer, or Noora-The Light (just to name a few) effectively associates Islam with positive attributes and thus helps in weaning people away from their assumptions about it. This is the one reason why it may be assumed that despite the imminent risk of earning the wrath of the rigid interpreters of Islam, Al-Mutawa chose this specific concept and no other (after of course exercising caution in his approach and issuing the clarification that he was not depicting God Himself) because it could effectively aid the redefinition of the image of Islam in the world in the most direct manner possible by the sheer value of its association with something straight from the *Quran*. The attributes embodied by the 99, like foresight, forgiveness, generosity, honour, invention, mercy, reason, strength, tolerance, truthfulness, and wisdom according to Al-Mutawa, "are not the words that were used to describe Islam in the media".[122] In an article by Aarushi Nigam, he elaborates upon his idea:

I wanted to go back to the very sources from which others took violent and hateful messages and offer messages of tolerance and peace in their place. I'd give my heroes a Trojan horse in the form of *The 99*. Islam was my Helen. I wanted her back.[123]

The idea of going back to the "very sources", that is, the *Quran*, is central to *The 99* as it presents to the world the fact that the *Quran* offers messages of peace and tolerance that have been sidelined in the conflicts the world has witnessed. Furthermore, Al-Mutawa's stress upon the fact that the Islamic attributes embodied by his superheroes are universal in nature sends out

the message that Islam is not different from other religions and that it preaches the same ideas as those practiced universally. The full implications of this concept have been discussed in the next chapter.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* begins with a quotation by Karl Marx which merits a repetition here as it can help define the position that Al-Mutawa's project occupies in terms of the representation of Muslims in the media in the post 9/11 context. "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented",[124] says the epilogue to *Orientalism*, and when stretched to accommodate the aforementioned context, the quote can be understood to define *The 99* as a project that represents the people who according to Al-Mutawa seldom find a voice in the media representations of Islam[125]-the moderate Muslims-whose views seldom find favour with extremists belonging either to the pro or to the anti Islamic groups. Sonja Zekri goes so far as to label Al-Mutawa as a person belonging to the "endangered species of moderate Muslims",[126] thus confirming the existence of the moderate group of Muslims and highlighting an assumption that the group is "endangered", probably owing to its underrepresentation in the media. In an interview with *Jazma Online*, Al-Mutawa voices his views against the 'representatives' of Islam: "Through a negative selection process our representatives speak for themselves in a voice amplified so loud by the media that it leaves the rest of us confused about our identities".[127] The phrase "negative selection process" puts the onus on the media which according to Al-Mutawa chooses to sideline the moderate Muslim voice and "amplifies" the views of the extremists, which creates the assumption that the views of a chosen few represent the voice of the entire Muslim world. In the interview with *Jazma Online*, Al-Mutawa has talked about the 'self-appointed representatives of Islam' in no uncertain terms: "Who are these angry vessels of hate, and since when did they become the representatives of Islam? The people who define Islam today are not the people who I want to define how to live my own life".[128]

Al-Mutawa's project can be thus understood as an attempt to provide a voice to the "endangered species of moderate Muslims", a group which, as he has argued in the *Jazma Online* interview as explored above, 'has not been able to represent itself and was thus represented' (in the words of Marx) so far by extremists on either side of Islam. *The 99* then comes across as a project that works towards the redefinition of the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world through the active process of representation by the 'moderate' Muslim, and it has

been described by its creator as an attempt, as Piney Kesting quotes him, "to make a conscious choice not to let the others define who you are. It is about being proactive in choosing the background against which you are to be judged" (the others here can be understood to be the aforementioned extremists).[129]

A comic book like *The 99* was chosen as the subject for this research not so much because it has launched the world's first superheroes based on Islam, but because its attempt to redefine the image of Islam in the topical context it places it within the larger framework of Muslim response to the aftermath of 9/11 in which the image of Islam in general had acquired negative overtones. The interest of the research thus lies not as much in the exploration of how *The 99* is the first to attempt the mining of Islamic concepts for a comic book, as in the timing of such an attempt. In a world replete with fictional superheroes based on almost all faiths, how is it that superheroes based on Islam took so long to arrive? The answer to this question may be addressed by two possible observations, both of which are interlinked. The first observation is that 9/11 and the events that followed had a tremendous impact on the ways in which the world perceived Muslims and indeed, on the ways in which Muslims perceived themselves, and because the image of Islam henceforth acquired negative overtones, the Muslim response to this phenomenon was an attempt at redefining the said image, and *The 99* constitutes a part of that response. Zarqa Nawaz's sitcom-*Little Mosque on the Prairie*, Azhar Usman's standup comedy routines-"Allah Made me Funny", Sahar Ullah's dramatic monologue performances-"The Hijabi Monologues", Sophie Ashraf's *burqa* clad rap performances, Randa Abdel Fattah's 'chick-lit' fiction about the *hijab-Does My Head Look Big in This?*, and of course, Al-Mutawa's superheroes based on Islam are all just some of the varied examples of the attempts by Muslims across the world to create a counter narrative in response to the narratives about Islam emerging from the aftermath of 9/11. The second observation is that in order to create the counter narrative, the Muslim world adopted several such forms of expression i.e. humour (Azhar Usman), art (Al-Mutawa), television (Zarqa Nawaz), theatre (Sahar Ullah), and music (Sophie Ashraf), which are incidentally all believed to be frowned upon by the orthodox interpreters of Islam. Al-Mutawa has aptly summed up the aforementioned situation in the following words: "The Islamic world has tabooed itself out of touch with the rest of humanity",[130] an idea which when understood in the topical context explains why it took so long for superheroes based on Islam to arrive; Al-Mutawa's efforts are a

part of the initiative taken up by the 'moderate' Muslims to do away with the perceived "taboos" in Islam, an initiative which has gained momentum post 9/11 owing to the perceived need to redefine what Islam means. The restrictions that had been believed to be associated with the religion were challenged by the moderate Muslims because it was increasingly being perceived by them, specifically in the post 9/11 world, that in order for their message to be understood, an adoption of diverse forms of expression which could reach out to the people was necessary, and the use precisely of those forms of expression which were believed to be disallowed in Islam (as has been explored above) was a way of establishing the idea that Islam was very much compatible with them; thus apart from the messages which attempted the redefinition of Islam, the media used to spread the messages themselves constituted the redefinition. For instance, Roya Hakakian has talked about the Middle East's "cultural handicap" in the following words:

> For centuries the Middle East has thrived mostly on literature, namely poetry. At a time when the strictest interpretation of Islam would allow few art forms to exist, literature was a grand refuge. But a complex world demands a complex repertoire of expressions, and a continued reliance primarily on literature has now become one of the region's greatest cultural handicaps. Iranians addressed this handicap in the 1990's by turning to the cinema. In the same decade Qatar gave birth to its vision of uncensored media by creating Al –Jazeera. [131]

The launch of comics by Al-Mutawa's Kuwait based Teshkeel Group can be read in the same vein according to Hakakian, as an attempt to "open a space for drawing and illustration"[132] in the Arab world, which, as we have explored before, was a concept that often faced disapproval in the region. That the 99 superheroes have arrived now and not before (i.e., before 9/11), is something that Al-Mutawa himself states is not a matter of "coincidence",[133] but of a perceived socio-political need in the post 9/11 world, to create ambassadors for Islam. And so, Al-Mutawa avers that "the 99 were specifically designed to be the superheroes that rose out of the rubble of 9/11 to combat both how Islam is seen by the West", and "how Islam is seen by Muslims themselves" (see appendix). Thus, if understood in the context of our two observations, superheroes based on Islam may be located as a part of the larger narratives created by the Muslim world in its image building exercise in the aftermath of 9/11, a part of which also constitutes (as has been explored before) of using forms of expression which people assumed were incompatible with Islam. While the use of such media might reveal a tussle between two groups of Muslims over the limits of

what Islam allows or disallows, it might also establish the beginning of the times in which 'moderate' Muslims no longer accept the definitions of what constitutes their identity provided by the extremists on either side of Islam and choose finally, (in the words of Marx) to "represent themselves".

Notes

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<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=fm8mRsBP3YkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+comics&client=firefox-a&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false>. 13.

[3]As quoted by Greg Garret, *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Films*, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. 38.

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[6]Greg Garrett as quoted by Alex Johnson, "At the Comics Shop, Religion Goes Graphic", msnbc.com, 25 April 2006, 22 June 2010 <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/12376831>.

[7]Peter Coogan as quoted by Joshua C. Feblowitz, "The Hero We Create: 9/11 and the Reinvention of Batman", *Student Pulse: Online Academic Student Journal*, No. 1.12, 30 December 2009, 27 June 2010 <http://www.studentpulse.com/a?id=104>.

[8]Will Eisner as quoted in Greg Garrett's *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Films*. 18.

[9]Will Eisner as quoted in Greg Garrett's *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Films*. 18.

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[11]"Golem", *New World Encyclopedia Online*, 22 March 2010

<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Golem>.

[12]Will Eisner as quoted in Greg Garrett's *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Films.* 18.

[13]H. Michael Brewer is a pastor who has drawn similarities between superheroes and the prophets from the Judeo-Christian scriptures in his book *Who Needs a Superhero?: Finding Virtue, Vice, and What's Holy in the Comics* (see Bibliography).

[14]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Rawan Jabaji, "Truth, Justice, and The Islamic Way", *Need to Know on PBS*, 17 May 2010, 28 May 2010 <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/culture/truth-justice-and-the-islamic-way/760/comment-page-1/#comment-1473>.

[15]Giles Ratier as quoted by Florence Villeminot, "Muslims Fighting Evil", *Newsweek*, 5 March 2007, 25 March 2009 <http://www.newsweek.com/2007/03/04/muslims-fighting-evil.html>.

[16]Arabic word for 'light'. 'Noor Stones' when translated literally mean 'stones of light'. The metaphorical 'light' referred to in the phrase 'stones of light' is the light of reason or knowledge. These stones give the 99 superheroes their power.

[17]Jehanzeb Dar, "Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two". *altmuslimah*, 5 August 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3223/>.

[18]Jehanzeb Dar, "Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two". *altmuslimah*, 5 August 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3223/>.

[19]As quoted by Greg Garrett, *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Films*. 7.

[20] As quoted by Richa Gulati, "Wanted: *Superheroes* Seeking Smart & Strong Women", www.richagulati.com, May 2008, 25 June 2010 <http://www.richagulati.com/articles/08Superheroes.html>.

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[26]As quoted by Joshua C. Feblowitz.

[27]Survey as reported in *“Batman is the Greatest Superhero”*, The *Tribune* (Sunday ed., Chandigarh ed.,), 20 September 2009.

[28]As quoted by Abhishek K in reader responses to “Batman-the Greatest Superhero?”, www.idiva.com, 4 September 2009, 25 March 2010 <http://www.idiva.com/bin/idiva/Batman-the-greatest-superhero>.

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[30]As quoted by Jamie Etheridge, “Islam’s Modern day Heroes”, *Friday Times, The Kuwait Times*, 2 June 2006, 27 April 2009 <http://www.the99.org/include/contn/41.pdf>.

[31]As quoted by Jamie Etheridge.

[32]Naif Al-Mutawa talks about extremism and about how he feels that "the people who define Islam are not the people" who he feels should be defining how people like him should live their own lives to Matthew Repka, "Creator of Comic Book Series Speaks at Tufts", *The Tufts Daily*, 27 January 2009, 22 April 2009 <http://www.tuftsdaily.com/creator-of-comic-book-series-speaks-at-tufts-1.1313339>.

[33]As quoted by Joshua C. Feblowitz.

[34]As quoted by Joshua C. Feblowitz.

[35]As reported in "26/11: Games, Comics, Movies Hop Aboard Terror Bandwagon", 26 November 2009, 28 June 2010 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/26/11-Games-comics-movies-hop-aboard-terror-bandwagon/articleshow/5269805.cms>.

[36]As quoted in "Halla Bol" # Issue 2396, New Delhi: Raj Comics, 2009. The term "ghuspetistan" when translated means 'land of the infiltrators', where its root Hindi/Urdu word 'ghuspetiya' means 'infiltrator'. The term denotes Pakistan in the comics.

[37]As quoted by Henry Jenkins, "Comic Book Foreign Policy?- Parts One to Four". www.henryjenkins.org. 27 July 2006. 24 December 2009

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[41]Michael Dean as quoted by Henry Jenkins,

[42]Michael Dean as quoted by Henry Jenkins.

[43]As quoted by Henry Jenkins.

[44]As quoted by Henry Jenkins.

[45]As quoted by Henry Jenkins.

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[52]As observed by Jehanzeb Dar, "Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part One", *altmuslimah*, 3 August 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3218/>.

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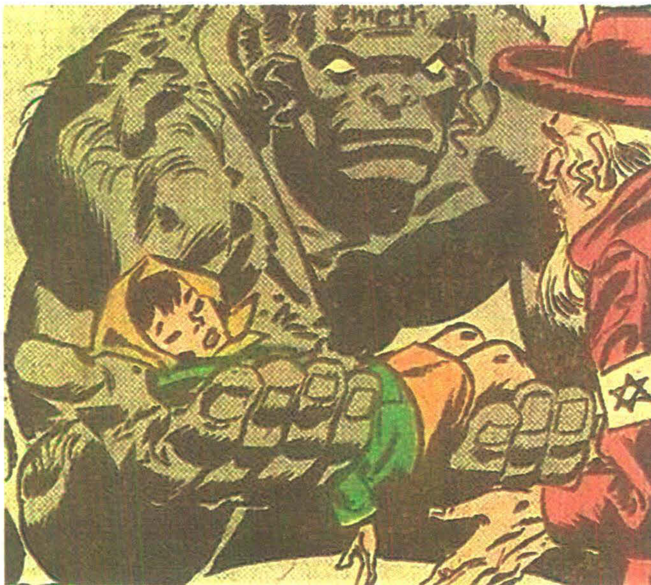

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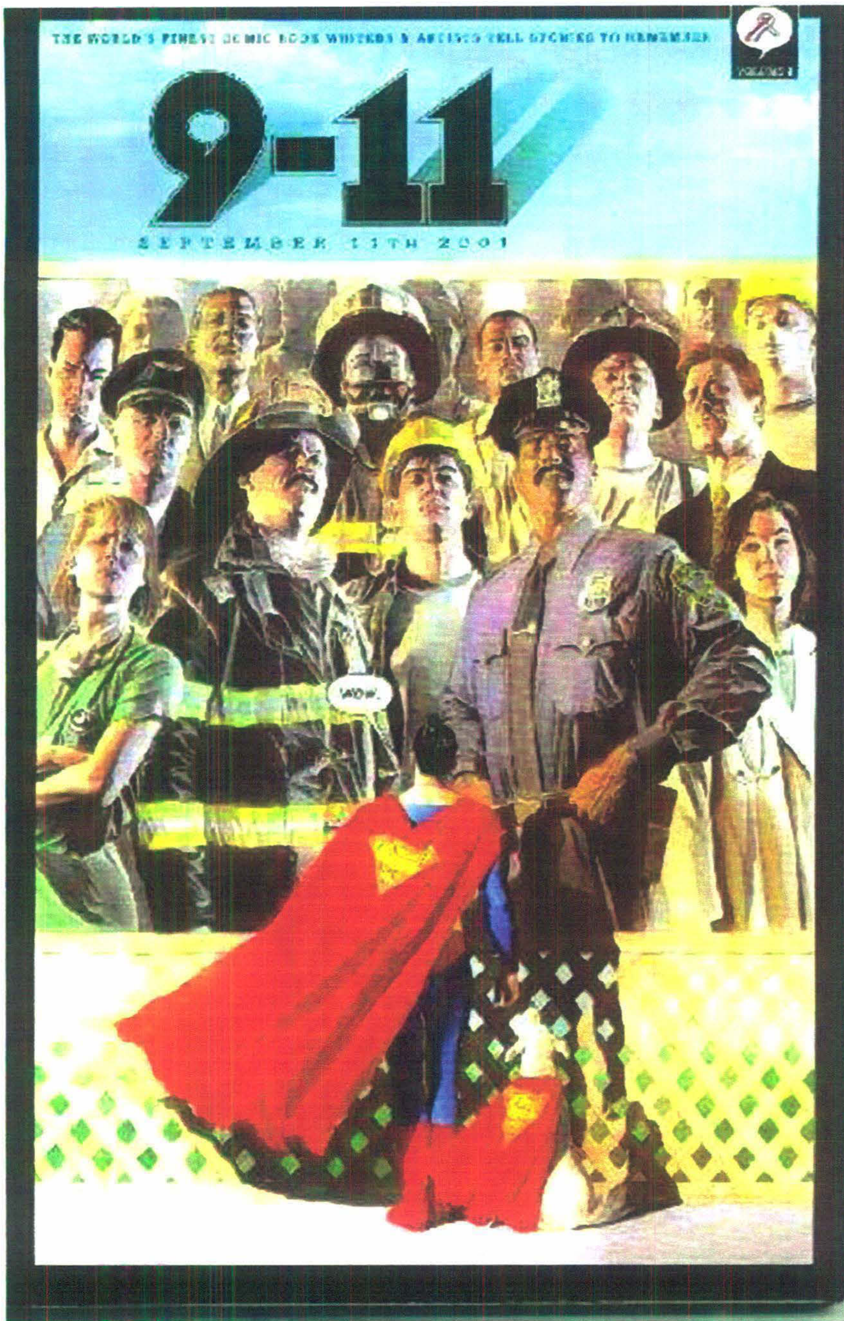

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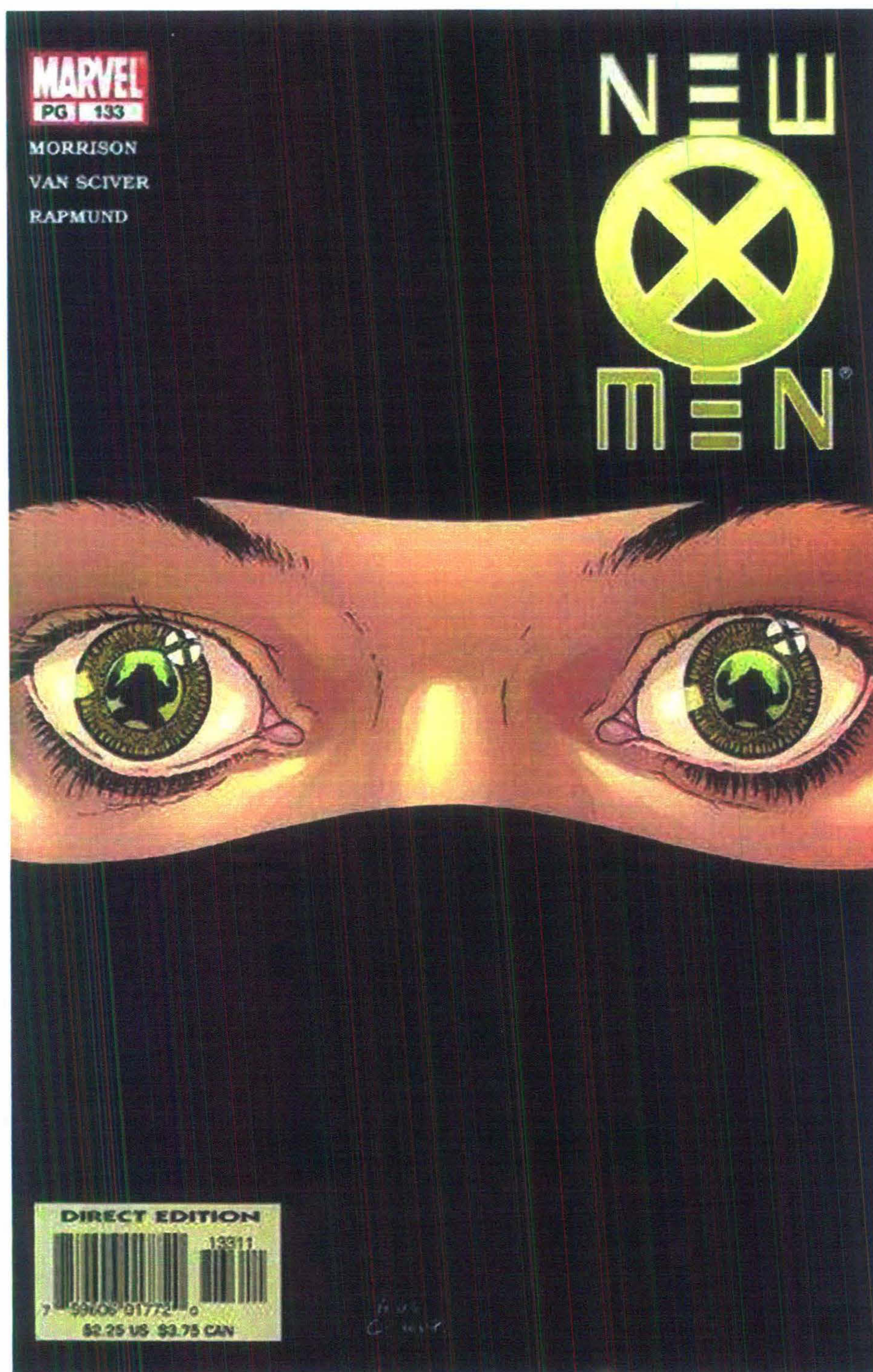

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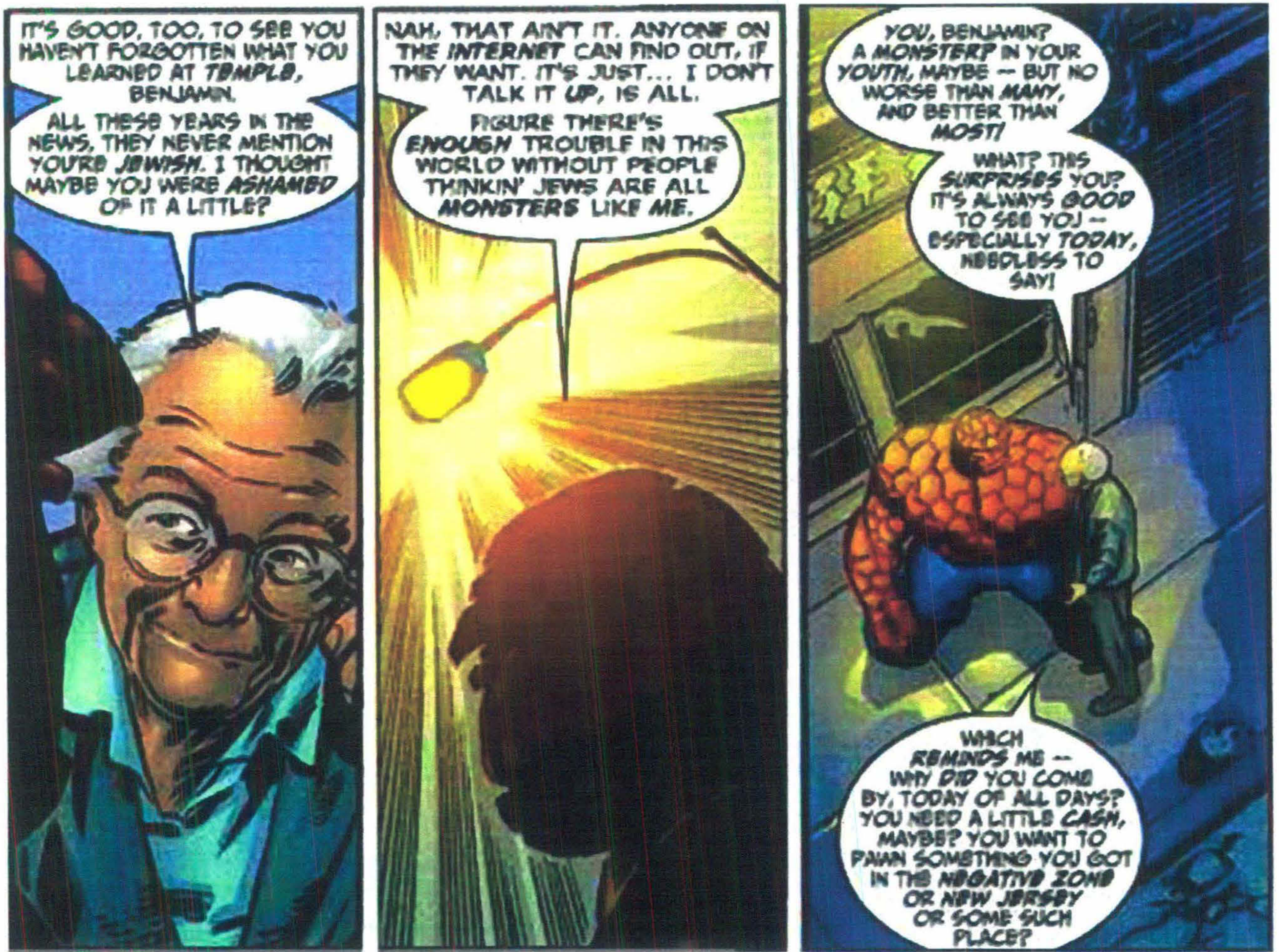

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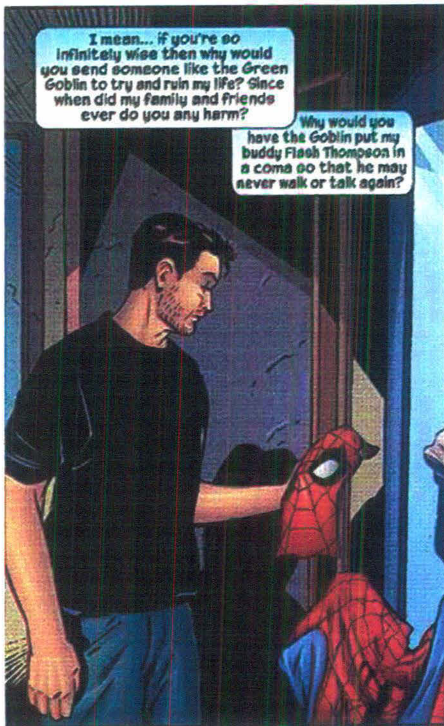

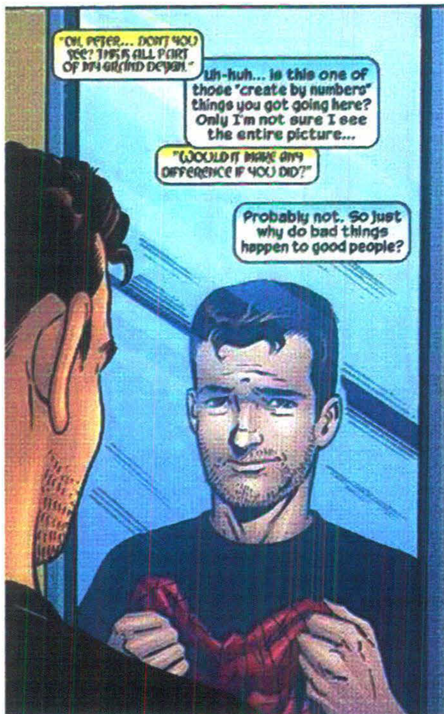

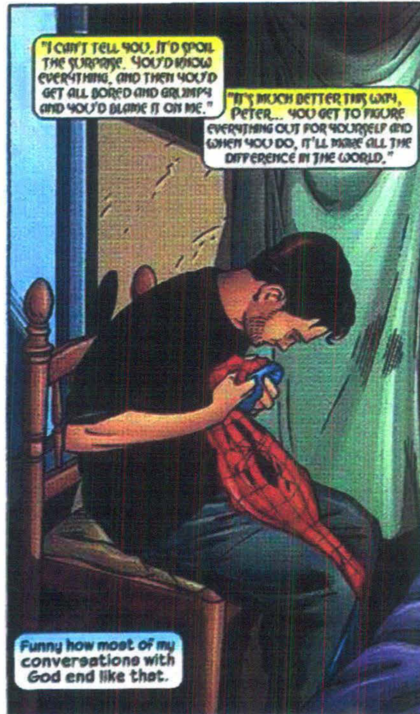

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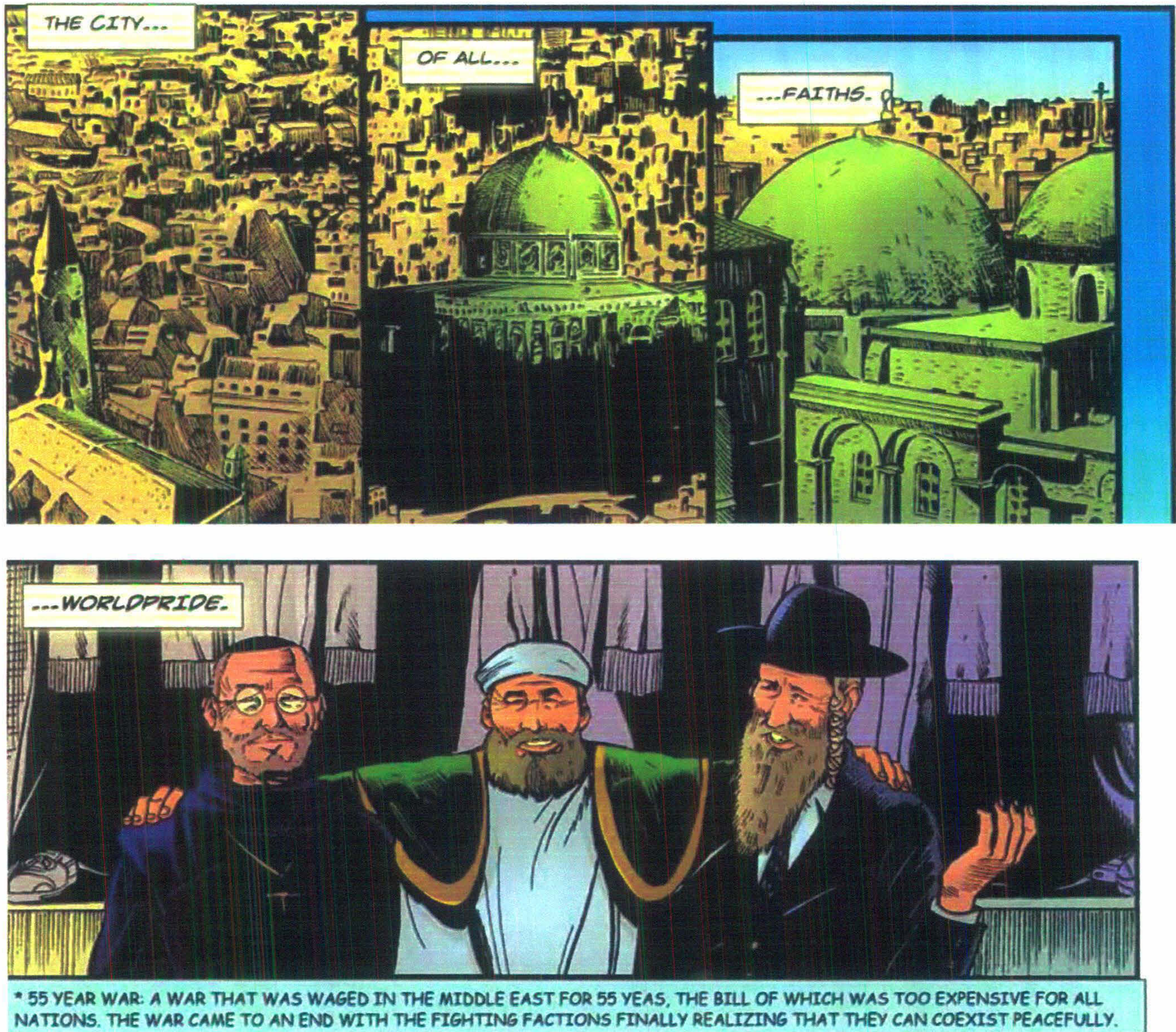

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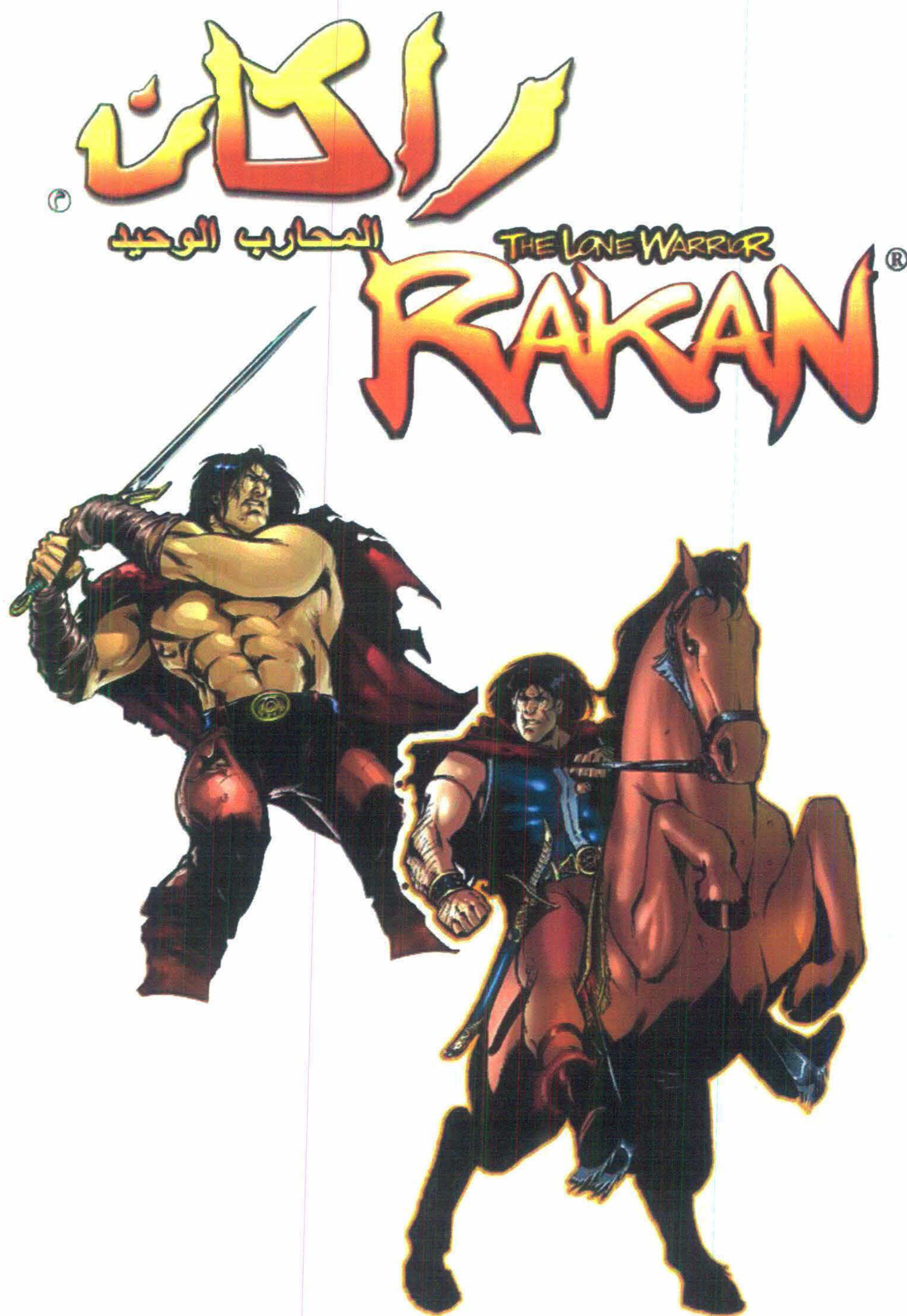

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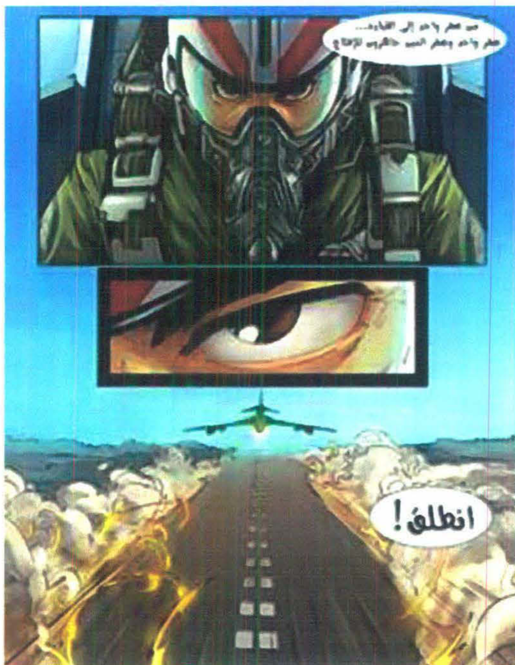

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Chapter Two

The previous chapter sought to locate the creation of comic book superheroes based on Islam within the framework of the larger narratives created by the Muslim world in its image building exercise in the aftermath of 9/11. The chapter also established the idea that the creation of such superheroes served two purposes; it sought to provide positive role models for children in the Arab world, and it attempted a redefinition of the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world. This chapter intends to explore, through a detailed study of *The 99*, how the comics have attempted to fulfill the aforementioned aims, the latter aim in particular. The chapter essentially intends to examine how the comics, in Al-Mutawa's words, "stand as a metaphor for all that is happening in the Muslim world"[1] in the present times by capturing the topical tussle between the 'extremists' and the 'moderates' in its good versus evil paradigm, and how they negotiate, using the powerful metaphor of the use and the misuse of the superheroes' powers, with the sensitive issues surrounding the interpretations of the *Quran* in the Muslim world in the present times. Also, based in part on an analysis of how the conventions of the superhero genre as it is familiar to American comic readers were set by the creators of Superman, Batman, and others (who were Jewish immigrants in the U.S.) to construct the superhero as a manifestation of 'Jewish wish fulfillment' in the 1930's and 40's, and later on as a reflection of the values upheld in American culture, the chapter explores how *The 99* subverts the existing conventions of the superhero genre with which comic readers are familiar to construct the superhero as a manifestation of what may be termed as 'Muslim wish fulfillment' in the post 9/11 world.

The concept of *The 99*, as has been mentioned in the previous chapter, has been derived from the ninety-nine names of Allah as mentioned in the *Quran*, and each of these names is a reflection of His different attributes. The series is based on what Al-Mutawa calls an "Islamic archetype"[2], and the use of a religious archetype as the basis for his superhero concept is, according to him, an inspiration largely derived from the American superhero model where religious archetypes are an integral part of most superhero comics[3]. The same idea has been elaborated upon by Gilles Ratier in an article where he states that "Western-style comics like *Batman*, *Superman*, and *Spiderman* have clear Judeo-Christian religious references, while Japanese-style anime refers to Buddhism and other Asian religions"[4], a theme which has already

been explored in the previous chapter. The Islamic archetype which forms the basis of *The 99* is, according to Al-Mutawa, an idea most Muslims are familiar with: "Muslims believe that power is ultimately God, and God has ninety-nine key attributes. Those attributes, if they all come together in one place, essentially become the unity of God"[5]. Hassan Fattah has further elaborated upon the said archetype in his article on the comics: "By combining individual virtues - everything from wisdom to generosity – the superheroes build collective power that is ultimately an expression of the divine".[6]

A reading of *The 99* makes it apparent that the comics have managed to highlight Islamic values without mentioning religion even once. This has been achieved, as Al-Mutawa states in an interview with *Newsarama*, by doing it "...the same way it is done in Hollywood. It's like communicating the *New Testament* via *The Matrix*, or the story of the *Genesis* in *The Waterworld*, which was the *Genesis* wrapped in secular robes. That's how you do it, you don't talk about religion, but you tap into an archetype. You take that as a start, but your final product is not religious".[7] The comics do not in fact reflect any obvious engagement with political or religious issues. In order to then understand how *The 99* attempts a redefinition of the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world without engaging with the issue in a direct manner, this chapter attempts explore the ways in which Islamic ideas have been implicitly or indirectly represented in the comics through the use of metaphors and symbols. The chapter also takes a look at the deviations in *The 99* from the conventions of the superhero genre as it is known to comic readers familiar with American superhero comics, and the inclusion, or the exclusion of conventional elements of the superhero genre in order to understand how the comics work towards the redefinition of the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world. For instance, it may be noted that *The 99* refrains from the depiction of blood, gore, and, as Piney Kesting points out in her article, the use of weapons unlike as is found in most comic books[8], which is indeed a radical departure from the conventional depictions found in *The 99*'s American or Arab counterparts. This accomplishes two purposes; it attempts to provide Arab children with clean and wholesome entertainment by sending out the crucial message that weapons are evil, and at the same time it highlights the idea that Islam does not approve of violence. In the post 9/11 world where much of global assumption about Islam as a religion of violence is fortified by acts of terror and is

magnified by the media, this message in particular is of prime importance. The 99 thus, according to Marie-Helene Rousseau, use non-violent methods to solve problems, to "counter" the notion of Islam as "inherently violent".[9] As Al-Mutawa says, "Our heroes won't use weapons. They will use their minds, eyes, and ears. Heroes that promote war and violence are not something I want for my children".[10] A reading of the comics indeed substantiates the fact that the 99 strictly obey the protocol of not using any weapons at all times. And in order to highlight the idea that non violent methods are the best when it comes to problem solving, the 99 use the same as opposed to their 'muscle power' wherever possible; Al-Mutawa in an interview talks of an instance where Widad-The Loving steps in ahead of Jabbar-The Powerful to deal with the villains through her power of love rather than let him use force[11]. The said incident, as a reading of the comics substantiates, occurs in *The 99: Hardened Hearts # Issue 8* (25).

The 99 superheroes hail from different countries, different cultures, different races, different religions and all walks of life from all over the world, making their team a diverse one. The comics have thus been conceptualized to be as 'inclusive' as possible. Each of the 99 possesses different powers, and all of them work in teams of three each, depending upon each other to solve problems and thus promoting teamwork. According to Al-Mutawa, the way the 99 work "democratizes the idea of the superhero"[12]; he elaborates: "They come from all sorts of backgrounds…it does not matter where they are from, or if they are a boy or a girl, the only thing that matters is if there is a fit between their skill and the predicament at hand" (see appendix). Though they can use their powers alone when the need arises, none of the 99 work without their teammates, because when combined their powers are magnified triple fold. The powers of the 99 are then, in the words of Al-Mutawa, "an amalgam" of the East and the West, "drawing both on the Western superheroes' tendency to act individually" (like Superman, Batman, and Spiderman) "and the Eastern superheroes' reliance on team work (like the Pokémon)" (Fig. 28) (and the Digimon) (Fig. 29).[13] Each problem requires the powers of a different triad among the 99 (Fig. 30), thus creating infinite combinations of power and promoting among children, according to Al-Mutawa, the message that there are countless possible ways "to solve a problem".[14] The concept of working in trios has the added advantage of dispelling controversial situations according to Marie-Helene Rousseau; since the depiction of a male and a female working alone

together can raise issues among the more conservative readers, a team of two males and one female, or two females and one male, however tokenistic, works for all practical purposes.[15] Furthermore, according to Malini Goyal, the triads "reinforce the significance of the number three in Islam"[16] (the number three is indeed a recurring motif in *The 99* as a reading of the comics substantiates and as shall be explored eventually). Though one cannot pinpoint the exact context through which this number has come to acquire significance in Islam, the pattern of 'three' is visible in everyday practices like the *namaaz* where some phrases and actions are repeated thrice.

Apart from "fighting the evil Rughal, training to increase their powers"[17], and setting out on missions to look for other gem bearers, the 99 work on diverse missions all over the world as a philanthropics, relief workers and crime fighters all rolled into one. The missions they have been involved in so far include rescuing kidnapped relief workers in Philippines (*The 99: Hardened Hearts # Issue 8*), dealing with elephant poachers in Zimbabwe (*The 99: The Blind Men and The Elephant(s) # Issue 10*), investigating the outbreak of a strange disease in Peru (*The 99: True Light and False Part Two # Issue 14*), working on a demining operation in Cambodia (*The 99: Masks # Issue 17*), distributing food to villagers in Afghanistan (*The 99: Sacrifice # Special Issue*), examining the outbreak of strange fires in Iran (*The 99: Fire and Ice # Issue 21*), and looking into the sudden effects of global warming all over the world (*The 99 : Storm Front # Special Issue*). They work for, and live at the *99 Steps Foundation*, a UNESCO funded organization whose headquarters are situated in Paris. The choice of Paris as the headquarters of the 99 places them among the roster of superheroes who live and operate in real world places, like Marvel's Spiderman who lives in New York City, as opposed to superheroes who live in fictional places, like DC's Superman and Batman who operate in the fictional *Metropolis* and *Gotham City* respectively. Furthermore, according to Al-Mutawa, the choice of Paris as the headquarters of the UNESCO funded *99 Steps Foundation* was not a random one, but was meant as a token of gratitude for UNESCO, since the organization had given him his "first real writing recognition" (see appendix).

The 99: Origins # Issue 0 gives the readers the back story[18] of the 99 superheroes, the framework upon which the entire series is based. It becomes imperative here to narrate the said back story because it is the foundation upon which most of the chapter's discussions are based.

The Back Story

The story of the 99 begins from a crucial point in the history of the Islamic civilization: the destruction of the city of Baghdad by Mongolian invaders in AD 1258. In *The 99*'s retelling of the Fall of Baghdad however, there comes a point where the historic legend is given a fictional twist; the fictional premise in *The 99* according to Al-Mutawa is that the armies of Hulagu Khan (grandson of Genghis Khan) which invaded Baghdad sought specifically the destruction of all its libraries[19]. This fictional premise sets the stage for the creation of the mystical *noor*[20] stones which give the 99 superheroes their power. As the story proceeds, the guardians of "Baghdad's greatest library"[21], the *Dar Al Hikma*[22] (*The House of Wisdom*), create an alchemical solution to save their books from imminent destruction, and use ninety-nine *noor* stones to soak in the vast knowledge of the library. The second fictional premise in *The 99* according to Al-Mutawa, is that the knowledge of the books of the *Dar Al Hikma* is saved from destruction, though in the real world the libraries of Baghdad were destroyed.[23] This fictional premise is of importance as it sets the stage for the creation of superheroes powered upon the essence of the said knowledge. After the fall of Baghdad, the 'powered' *noor* stones wind up in Andalusia, where they grace the central dome of a fortress called the *Husn Al Ma'rifa* (*The Fortress of Knowledge*) for a hundred and fifty years (the fortress is a symbolic representation of the Islamic civilization in Spain, as shall be explored eventually). The *noor* stones, being the repositories of the wisdom and knowledge of "collective civilization" (see appendix), hold immense magical powers, which one of the guardians, Rughal, (the super villain in the comics), seeks to harness all for himself. In 1492, when the armies of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella reach Andalusia (a reference to the Fall of Granada, as shall be explored eventually), the guardians, sensing trouble, decide to "dismantle the fortress, remove the dome, and flee"[24]. Aware of the impending events, Rughal hatches a desperate plan to incorporate all the powers of the *noor* stones into his own body, but his attempt fails and results instead in a tremendous explosion which destroys the fortress and apparently kills him (it is revealed later on in the story that he is very much alive). The guardians however, salvage the *noor* stones from the ruins of the fortress, and decide to disperse them all over the world. The *noor* stones are then divided into 'three' groups (the motif of 'three' recurs again) of thirty three each and handed over to 'three' guardians, who then travel to different parts

of the world. Al-Mutawa recounts the fate of the *noor* stones thus: "A third are sent on Columbus's 'three' ships (*The Nina*, *The Pinta*, and *The Santa Maria*) and spread in the New World, a third are shipped to China, South Asia and South East Asia (via the Silk Route), and the remaining third are distributed in Europe, the Middle East and Africa"[25]. The *noor* stones thus get scattered across the world, which is essentially a metaphor for the spreading of Islam in different countries according to Al-Mutawa.[26] The story then moves forward to 2006, where Dr. Ramzi Razem (the protagonist in *The 99* and the leader of the superhero team) (fig. 31), who is a descendant of the original *Huras Al Hikma* (the Guardians of Wisdom) and a scientist working with the *United Nations*, attempts to locate the *noor* stones or the people who now possess them, so as to harness their powers for philanthropic purposes. Rughal, who is still alive (having been hurtled through time by the explosion that had supposedly left him dead), still seeks the *noor* stones, and he wants, as before, to harness all their powers for himself. Dr. Ramzi's quest for the *noor* stones forms the basis of the story of each successive issue of *The 99.* The 99 are essentially ordinary individuals who come across the *noor* stones and obtain powers from them, and these powers make them superheroes. Twenty three attributes and twenty four superheroes have been introduced out of the proposed ninety-nine in the comics so far.[27] It becomes imperative here to introduce here the superhero cast of *The 99* before exploring the comics further. The order of the appearance of the superheroes in the table below is based on the order of their appearance in the comics.

Table

The Superheroes from *The 99*

***Quranic* Name/Attribute of Allah**	**Name of the Superhero**	**Real Name of the Superhero**	**Age**	**Country of Origin/Nationality**	**Powers of the Superhero**
Al Jabbaar-The Compeller	Jabbar The Powerful	Nawaf Al Bilali		Saudi Arabia	Has immense strength
An Noor-The Light	Noora The Light	Dana Ibrahim	18	U.A.E	"Can see inner goodness or evil" in people and make

					them see it in themselves
Az Zaarr-The Afflicter	Darr The Afflicter	John Weller	22	U.S.A	Can give or take away pain
Aj Jaami-The Gatherer	Jami The Assembler	Miklos Szekelyhidi	13	Hungary	Has intuitive engineering and inventive powers
Ar Raqib-The Watcher	Raqib The Watcher	Blair Davis	33	Canada	Has super heightened senses
Al Mumeet-The Life Taker	Mumita The Destroyer	Catarina Barbossa	17	Portugal	Is a "combat expert"
Al Fattaah-The Opener	Fattah The Opener	Toro Ridwan	20	Indonesia	Can teleport himself and others anywhere
Al Haadi-The Guide	Hadya The Guide	Amira Khan	17	Pakistan/U.K	Can track people, things
Al Wadood-The Loving	Widad The Loving	Hope Mendoza	22	Philippines	"Can make others feel love or hatred"
Al Baith-The Resurrector	Baeth The Sender	Fadi Hassem	18	Jordan	Can "transport inanimate objects" anywhere
Ar Raafi-The Exalter	Rafie The Lifter	Esmat Murat Uyaroglu	16	Turkey/Jordan	"Can control gravity"

As Samad-The Everlasting Refuge	Samda The Invulnerable	Aisha Mokhtar	8	Libya	Is invulnerable to almost everything, can lend her invulnerability to others
Al Alim-The All Knowing	Aleem The All Knowing	Naser Ali	8	Qatar/U.S.A	"Can see into the future"
Al Wasi-The All Embracing	Wassi The Vast	Ashok Mohan	11	India	Can change his size at will
Al Bari-The Maker	Bari The Healer	Haroun Ahrens		South Africa	Has "healing powers"
As Saamee-The All Hearing	Sami The Listener	Nizar Babikr		Sudan/France	Has "super hearing and sound manipulating abilities"
Al Baatin-The Hidden	Batina The Hidden	Rola Hadramy	17	Yemen	Has the power of invisibility which she can extend to hide anyone and anything from view
Al Baaqi-The Everlasting	Baqi The Everlasing	Hatem Al Johary	15	Egypt	Has "superhuman endurance"
Al Jaleel-The Majestic	Jaleel The Majestic	Atash Hourmaan	18	Iran	Can cause and control fires

					with his hands
Al Musawwir-The Shaper	Musawwira The Organizer	Abena Liza Dagate	18	Ghana/U.S.A	"Can make order out of chaos"
Al Mujib-The One Who Answers All	Mujiba The Responder	Dayana Samsudin	19	Malaysia	Can literally 'read' all the *noor* stones
Al Mubdi-The Originator	Mubdiayn The Creative Twins	Jassim Al Qabaly and Qmasha Al Qabaly		Kuwait	Can solve all problems and guide other superheroes on the best ways to do so
Al Muqit-The Sustainer	Mukit The Nourisher	Salman Khamis		Bahrain	Has the power to control and shape water

Sources: 1. www.the99.org. 2. *The 99* comics (Issues 0-24 plus four special issues). 3. (all the phrases in quotes) Kyle, Tara. "*Reinventing Superman*". *FlypMedia.* Issue 14. www.flypmedia.com. 25 September – 8 October 2008. 25 March 2009 <http://www.flypmedia.com/search/node/reinventing+superman>.

(see figures 32-53 for the 99 superheroes).

Concept Based on Islam, Superheroes from Diverse Religious Backgrounds

While sections of the media have labeled the 99 as "Muslim Superheroes"[28] or "Islamic superheroes"[29], apparently because they have *Quranic* names, a reading of the individual comics reveals that the 99 comprise of superheroes from diverse religions (though a majority are Muslim). Al-Mutawa states that his superheroes are not "Muslim" or "Islamic" but are "based on Islam" (see appendix); he clarifies: "The 99 are inspired by those elements within Islam that are

shared by the rest of humanity. If the superheroes were Muslim or Islamic we would be identifying their religious affinity. That is not something that I do in the series" (see appendix).

In effect, the difference between the terms "Muslim superheroes"/"Islamic superheroes" and "superheroes based on Islam" is crucial as the latter enables the inclusion of non Muslim superheroes in *The 99*; the said inclusion being crucial both to the concept of *The 99* and to its market value. At one level the inclusion of non Muslim superheroes in the comics appears to be a tactful way of gaining acceptance among the non Muslim readership. At another level the said inclusion appears to be integral to the very idea of Islam being fore grounded by *The 99*, as it attempts to highlight "the transcendent quality of Islamic values" according to Richa Gulati[30]. The roster of the ninety-nine attributes includes foresight, forgiveness, generosity, honour, invention, mercy, reason, strength, tolerance, truthfulness, and wisdom; attributes which Al-Mutawa, in all his interviews, reiterates are not just Islamic, but are universal and are found in all religions. He states: "These are basic human values, whether or not you believe in Islam, and whether or not you believe in religion"[31]. Superheroes from diverse religious backgrounds as representatives of the ninety-nine attributes then effectively drive home the point that the said values are universal and are not confined to Islam alone. The effect might perhaps have not been as substantial had the 99 been a team comprising entirely of Muslim superheroes, though this is of course, an assumption.

By laying stress upon shared values, *The 99* attempts to highlight the idea that Islam is not different from other religions, and this assertion assumes importance in the post 9/11 world where owing to some ideas attributed to Islam (such as the assumption that the religion preaches violence against non Muslims), the religion was perceived to be different from others and was consequently isolated. In the wake of this isolation, almost every image building exercise undertaken by the Muslim community stressed upon the values that Islam shares with other religions, in a bid to minimize perceptions of difference. The approach adopted by *The 99* is then similar in this regard, wherein the very act of naming superheroes like Hope Mendoza (who is a Christian) and Ashok Mohan (who is a Hindu) after *Quranic* attributes as Widad-The Loving and Wassi-The Vast respectively works on two levels-it highlights positive *Quranic*/Islamic values

such as love and diversity, while at the same time asserting that the said values are universal and are common to all religions (Christianity and Hinduism respectively in the given examples).

The Immortal Villain and the 'Insidious Foe': The Metaphor of Abu Rughal

The paradigm of good versus evil lying at the heart of the superhero genre necessitates the presence of a villain against whose evil the goodness of the superhero can be juxtaposed. The very existence of real life 'villains' was what in fact prompted the creation of fictional superheroes in the first place in America, as has been explored in the previous chapter, and the foremost examples which can be cited in this context are those of Superman and Captain America, where the former as a reinvention of the mythical *golem* was created at the height of anti-Semitism in the late 30's, and the latter was created specifically "as a propaganda tool to fight Hitler" (Darowski 70). According to Karline McLain, " comic books can tell us quite a bit about the heroes that are important to a culture, as well as the villains"[32]; thus, a look at the villains being fought in comic books can often give insights into the perceptions of a culture or people regarding those whom they think of as their enemies. So, for instance, a look at the villains American superheroes have dealt with over the ages reveals that most of them are cast as those whom the nation has perceived as the 'other' (the Nazis, the Communists, the Arabs and the Muslim extremists). Likewise, a look at the primary antagonist in *The 99* helps one understand whom the Arab and the Muslim worlds perceive as their enemies in the post 9/11 world.

Rughal (fig. 54), the super villain in *The 99*, is, at first glance, remarkably similar to the super villains in most American superhero comics. Phenomenally intelligent, extremely ruthless, relentless in his pursuit of the *noor* stones and the 99, he harbours a desire to "choke the world into submission"[33], which is not much different from the desires of other super villains in the world of comics. What lends a twist to his villainy however, is the fact that he is not cast as those whom the Arab or the Muslim worlds perceive as the 'other', but rather as the 'insidious foe' or the enemy 'within' the said worlds. According to Al-Mutawa his character is based on a real historical figure, the figure of Abu Rughal[34], who, according to sources of Arab and Islamic history, "is said to have guided the Abyssinian emperor's Yemeni governor Abraha to Makkah in the latter's effort to conquer the Holy City and destroy the *Ka'aba* (in AD 570[35]). Abu Rughal is

cited in Islamic history as a traitor".[36] *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that "Abraha was the governor of the principality of Saba in Yemen for the emperors of Ethiopia".[37]

Most sources of Arab and Islamic history cite that Abu Rughal was indeed the name of an Arab tribesman who guided Abraha's military expedition against the city of Mecca in AD 570. However, according to Jaroslav Stetkevych, the name of Abu Rughal is cited under several different contexts among sources of Arab and Islamic literature and history, out of which he identifies at least three significant contexts of villainy with one striking legend in common-the legend of the "forever-stoned grave" (39) of the "eternally accursed" (42) Abu Rughal. Under one context Abu Rughal is indeed Abraha's guide, whose grave was, "for the abomination of having served Abraha...stoned by the Arabs whenever they passed by it" (41). Another context places him or a person by the same name, in the era of the Thamūd ("a tribe or a group of tribes in Ancient Arabia that seems to have been prominent from about 4th century BC to 7th century AD") [38] where he is supposed to have been a "callous" tax collector who was despised for his heartless attitude towards the poor, and his grave too, is the "object of stoning" (38). Yet another context places him or a person by the same name again in the era of the Thamūd, but here he is supposed to have been the executor of Prophet Salih's legendary camel[39], and his grave again, is the "object of stoning" (40). Arab literary narratives, according to Stetkevych, often conflate the Thamūdic tax collector, the Arab tribesman who guided Abraha, and the Thamūdic executor of Prophet Salih's camel (the last two in particular) as one person and thus create a continuous narrative of the "eternally accursed one" who is "condemned to be stoned in his grave for all eternity" (42). This conflated legend of Abu Rughal and his "forever stoned grave" is invoked time and again in Arab literature and in the Muslim world as an example of all that can be considered villainous. The precise identity of the historic Abu Rughal is, in a way, not really relevant; what is relevant however, is that name of Abu Rughal is now a metaphor often invoked in the present times to refer to those who are considered insidious foes in the Arab and the Muslim worlds. The super villain in *The 99*, Rughal, is an ageless and immortal entity, whose fictional immortality appears to invoke the legend of the immortally accursed Abu Rughal. Just as the name of the historic Abu Rughal lives on as a metaphor for the 'insidious foe', his fictional counterpart Rughal lives through the ages, literally, as the antagonist 'within' the world of the 99. According to Christopher Norlund, it is unconventional for superhero comics to have

one recurring villain. Norlund explores in his paper the example of the *GI Joe* comics and concludes that a "monolithic villain" gives the comics "a sense of connection between the past and the present, enabling the narrative to seem eternal".[40] He refers to the "recurring appearance" of the villain Cobra in the *GI Joe* comics as the construction of a 'consistent foe' who is equally "consistently" defeated by the "heroic" GI Joes.[41] Norlund's statement that it is unconventional for superhero comics to have one recurring villain is not really true though; superheroes do traditionally battle an assortment of villains, but there is always one amongst them who stands out as *the* super villain and who reappears issue after issue. It is not unconventional for superhero comics to have immortal villains either; DC's Ra's Al Ghul is immortal, so is Marvel's En Sabah Nur (also called Apocalypse). Rughal though, is not just a recurring foe or an immortal one; he is, like the historic Abu Rughal, the 'insidious foe', the enemy 'within' the world of the 99, and it is in this regard that he is an unconventional super villain. Whether as the fifteenth century power hungry genius who seeks to misuse the *noor* stones to "reclaim what his people had lost"[42], or as the twenty-first century megalomaniac with an empire built upon petrodollars who once again seeks to misuse the *noor* stones to "choke the world into submission"[33], he is the Muslim extremist misusing religious messages. Rughal's relationship with power is evident in the pattern of his birth and subsequent rebirths, where he surfaces near sources of power each time; the first being the *noor* stones (*The 99: Origins # Issue 0*), the second being an oil field (*The 99: No Pain, No Gain # Issue 2*), and the third being a nuclear reactor (*The 99: True Light and False Part Three # Issue 15*). It is evident that *The 99* has not made a villain out of those who it is believed are perceived as the 'other' by the Arab and the Muslim world, i.e. the Americans or the Israelis, even though American comics have consistently depicted the Arab or the Muslim as the 'other' (as has been explored in the previous chapter), and it appears that Al-Mutawa's selection of Rughal as the primary antagonist in *The 99* might stem from two reasons. The first reason could be his desire, as he explains, to steer clear of representations which he terms as "reactions", and he cites the example of Egyptian films where, as he says, "the bad guy is an American or an Israeli".[43] The second reason could be the significance that the metaphor of Abu Rughal has assumed in the post 9/11 world, where the terrorists and the extremists may be identified as the 'insidious foes' in the Muslim world, the current Abu Rughals. The choice of Rughal as *The 99*'s primary antagonist thus assumes topical dimensions as it is a symbolic representation of the belief that the forces against which the Muslim world must put up a

resistance in the present times are the forces of the extremists, the enemies 'within' the Muslim world, who in the words of Eboo Patel, have "hijacked" Islam[44]. Thus, as has been mentioned in the last chapter, there is no 'other' in the true sense of the term against which the 99 pitch their battles; indeed, if it could be put in this manner, the role of the 'other' is assumed by Rughal.

The Struggle to Control the *Noor* Stones: A Metaphor for the Post 9/11 Muslim World

The struggle to control the *noor* stones between the evil Rughal and the good Dr. Ramzi forms the central metaphor in *The 99*, which when understood in simple terms is merely another manifestation of the eternal conflict between good and evil played out in superhero comics the world over. However, when read in terms of the post 9/11 challenges afflicting the Muslim world, the said metaphor stands for the real world conflict between groups of Muslims-the 'extremists' and the 'moderates' over the interpretations of the *Quran* and thus "captures", in the words of Al-Mutawa, "the struggle within the Muslim world" in the present times[45]. Al-Mutawa elaborates upon the central metaphor in the comics and states that the powers of the 99 are "just like religion", and "can be used for good or for bad. The problem with the villains is not their faith but how they use it".[46] He further adds: "When Islam or the *Quran* are misused, people blame the *Quran*, when in fact they should be blaming the person interpreting the *Quran*".[47] Dr. Ramzi and the 99 are, in effect, people who use religion (the *noor* stones) for work that benefits other people, while Rughal is the extremist who seeks to misuse/misinterpret religion (the *noor* stones) for power. *The 99 Animation Preview* depicts Rughal as having succeeded in manipulating the 99 to use their stones for his evil work, though his success is, of course, short lived. While they work for Rughal, the 99, says Al-Mutawa, "wear cookie cutter uniforms" (see appendix), perhaps as a symbolic representation of the hordes of bombers and terrorists who work for the extremists.

According to Al-Mutawa, "one of the biggest preoccupations of Rughal is his fear that the knowledge on the stones would be updated. If it is limited he can control it. But if it gets updated it is too much for him to handle".[48] Rughal's fears are, in effect, not much different from the fears of the extremists, who are believed to stress on just one solid, absolute, inflexible interpretation of the *Quran* because they can control that interpretation (and because it is their

interpretation). While it is widely believed that Islam allows for interpretations of the *Quran* according to the times people live in and the situations they face, such a belief is understood to be suppressed by the extremists, as it weakens their sense of power. The extremists, it appears, like the fictional Rughal, do not allow the interpretations of the *Quran* to work in accordance with the times people live in, "as it can become too much for them to handle".

There is, interestingly, little difference between the physical appearance of the evil Rughal and the good Dr. Ramzi. Both are depicted to be of the same height, built, and complexion, both dress in a similar manner (in Western suits), and both have strikingly similar facial features. In *The 99 Animation Preview*, the physical distinctions between them are blurred further; the only way to tell them apart is by the look (good or evil) in their eyes. While the image of the suit clad, impeccably dressed Rughal serves as a deviation from the stereotype of the turbaned, long bearded extremist, his physical similarities with Dr. Ramzi seem to suggest that one cannot pass value judgements on whether someone is a 'good' Muslim (liberal/moderate) or a 'bad' Muslim (extremist) based on his appearance. Also, unlike in some comics[49] where the good versus evil paradigm is codified in the form of a white versus black/brown skin colour or is represented through visible external markers such as clothes, one sees in *The 99* no such codification, which may again be taken as an acknowledgement of the belief that differences between good and evil do not necessarily manifest themselves in outer appearances.

The Passing On of the *Noor* Stones: Every Generation to Interpret the *Quran* for Itself

Since the powers of the 99 come from the *noor* stones and are not inherent within the gem bearers themselves, unlike in most other superhero comics where just one individual dons the mantle of the superhero, the title of the superhero in *The 99* can be passed on to other individuals by passing on the stones. Thus, when thirty three year old Blair Davis from Canada decides to give up the stone that makes him Raqib The Watcher (*The 99: Watch The Watcher # Issue 11*), the stone, the name, and the power get transferred to twelve year old Alex Higgins from the U.K., who then becomes one of the 99 (*The 99 Animation Preview*). A glimpse of how the 99 might operate in the future is also presented before the readers in *The 99: Futures # Special Issue*, where a different set of teenagers are shown as the new 99, working side by side with former 99ers, where even Rughal's grandson, Rughal the Third, becomes one of the 99 and takes on the mantle of Hadi The Guide.

The concept of the passing on of the *noor* stones gives the comics ample potential to introduce new and diverse characters. It also opens up the possibilities of rotating the ninety-nine attributes between superheroes from different countries; as Al-Mutawa says, "if Jabbar The Powerful is from Saudi Arabia at present, he could well be from India tomorrow"[50].

The passing on of the *noor* stones further highlights the importance of the ninety-nine attributes over and above the individuals who wield the stones; it implies that while different gem bearers might wield the stones over successive generations, the stones and thus the ninety-nine attributes themselves are eternal, and have remained and will remain the same over the course of centuries, just as the *Quran* itself is believed to be eternal and for all times and places while its followers have belonged to different times and different places. The idea of different generations harnessing the same eternal source of power in their own unique manner in the comics perhaps also serves to highlight the widely held belief that all generations must interpret the *Quran* for themselves in accordance with the times they live in. The stress on the passing on of the *noor* stones to the young is reiterated throughout *The 99*, so that the young gem bearers wield their stones in their own unique manner and "update" the knowledge on the stones, which, as has been explored before, is Rughal's greatest fear.

The 99 though, are not depicted interpreting the *Quran* itself, since there are no references to *Quranic* verses in the comics at all. An episode in *The 99: Different Paths Part Two # Issue 23* depicts three of the superheroes (Noora, Mujiba, and Musawwira) 'reading' their *noor* stones and accessing the knowledge of the ancient *Dar Al Hikma*, the destroyed library of Baghdad, where they come across information which they find "obsolete". The episode is as follows:

> Noora: "That's coming from my gem? But it's wrong. The sun doesn't revolve around the earth, it is the other way around".
>
> Musawwira: "Your gem, all of our gems, were forged in the library of Baghdad. That library was destroyed in the thirteenth century. Back then, they believed that the sun revolved around the earth. Mujiba's power is to read the *noor* stones themselves. They contain the accumulated knowledge of humankind up to the point when they were created. But some of that knowledge is obsolete now" (14) (fig. 55).

While the 99, as the instance above proves, are open to the idea of updating the knowledge on their stones in accordance with their own knowledge, this very idea, as has been explored before, is Rughal's greatest fear. Rughal just "wants to live with the knowledge that was available up until 1492" (see appendix) and thus seeks the stones' power before it gets too much for him to control, not unlike the extremists who insist on just one solid, absolute, inflexible interpretation of the *Quran*. Though the episode above does not refer to *Quranic* verses at all, the message derived from it may be taken as a broad suggestion that each generation must be willing to understand and interpret the *Quran* in accordance with the times they live in. Jabbar aptly sums up the situation in *The 99: Futures # Special Issue* as he passes on the mantle of Jabbar The Powerful to the young Raul: "Times change, and we must change with them. But no matter what...the 99 will forever be a part of me" (19).

Deviation from the Conventions of the Superhero Genre: The Creation of the Superhero as a Manifestation of 'Muslim Wish Fulfillment'

The 99 comics subvert several existing conventions of the superhero genre with which comic readers are familiar. These subversions, however, do not appear to be the result of a deliberate desire to deviate from what is understood to be the norm; rather, they may be read as integral to the construction of a particular kind of a superhero, one who is a manifestation of what could perhaps be termed as 'Muslim wish fulfillment' in the post 9/11 world in much the same way as the superheroes of the 30's and 40's (as has been explored in the previous chapter) reflected the 'wish fulfillment' of the Jewish community.

To start with, *The 99* does not conform to one of the most crucial elements of the superhero genre- the 'dual/hidden identity' phenomenon. The said phenomenon, which according to John Shelton Lawrence became the norm in the superhero genre after the *Superman* comics[51], can be defined as the existence of two separate identities of the superhero, where his/her costumed superhero identity is kept separate and secret from those who are aware of his every day identity, and vice versa. The dual/hidden identity phenomenon often contrasts the persona of the powerful, confident superhero with his average, powerless persona, the most prominent examples of this being the contrast between Superman and his alter ego Clark Kent, and the contrast between Spiderman and his alter ego Peter Parker. It has been noted that the "whole

concept of masks and dual or hidden identities is a strong theme in Kabbalistic teachings".[52] According to Darowski this phenomenon of the powerless, average person being the alter ego of the powerful, invincible superhero may be read essentially as "adolescent wish fulfillment" (Darwoski 21). He quotes Danny Fingeroth's translation of this "adolescent wish" from *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (page 60):

> "IF ONLY THEY (*whoever your they may be*) KNEW THE TRUTH (*whatever that truth may be*) ABOUT ME (*whoever you believe yourself to be*), THEY'D BE SORRY FOR THE WAY THEY TREAT ME" (Darowski 21, author's caps and italics).

Since almost all of the superhero creators were immigrant Jews (Jerry Siegel [Superman], Joe Shuster [Superman], Bill Finger [Batman], Bob Kane [Batman], Stan Lee [Spiderman, the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men], Jack Kirby [Captain America, the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men], Joe Simon [Captain America], Jerry Robinson [the Joker], Will Eisner [the Spirit]), Danny Fingeroth asserts in an interview with *Wired News* that the dual/hidden identity phenomenon may also be read as a reflection of "the immigrant desire, Jewish and otherwise, to both be part of the society and also be separate from it".[53] In the said interview, Fingeroth opines that the whole idea of the dual/hidden identity served as a sort of a subtle way of asserting Jewish identity in the days of rampant anti-Semitism. He explains:

> Historically, the racist caricature of the Jew is of someone who somehow is simultaneously weak and yet controls the world, or significant aspects of it. So one could say that the wimpy secret identity was the Jewish creators' ways of saying that we're powerful, in an individual sense, not wimps, and guided, individually and as a group, by the selfless desire to do good. Of course, this is all reading things into the work... None of the creators consciously thought about this stuff when they were writing and drawing the stories.[54]

The whole phenomenon might indeed be interpreted, exhorts Fingeroth in the interview, as a "metaphorical representation of the need to feel that we are more than the world thinks we are".[55] The said phenomenon might have begun as a manifestation of 'Jewish wish fulfillment', but over the years it has become one of the identifying features of the superhero genre. Peter Coogan has, in fact, included the dual/hidden identity phenomenon as a part of the very definition of the term

'superhero' in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, where he says: "Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret"[56]. Since the phenomenon is now considered such an integral part of the genre, comics that choose to deflect from this norm immediately strike one as odd. Yet, there are examples of some comics that come to mind, which have chosen to do away with the said phenomenon for diverse reasons. For instance, Christopher Norlund cites the example of the *GI Joe* comics and states that the absence of the dual/hidden identity phenomenon in the comics indicates that the GI Joes are confident about their sense of self and where they fit in the society.[57] According to him the singular/open identity of the GI Joes (as compared to the dual/hidden identity of other superheroes) implies that the GI Joes are never in doubt about their sense of belonging to the U.S Military[58]. Likewise, one could interpret the absence of the dual/hidden identity phenomenon from *The 99* comics as an indication that the 99 are open to the world and are confident about their sense of self. The openness with which the 99 operate is highlighted by the absence of masks that are the hallmark of other superheroes, and this openness also implies at some level a desire to be accepted by the people; several issues of *The 99* indicate the same by engaging with the issue directly. It must be noted here that in the initial issues the 99 are not confident about their sense of self, their beliefs, their powers, their identities, or about being accepted by the public; thus, symbolically, they first appear in public wearing masks (*The 99: Exposed # Issue 7*). The masks however, strike fear in the hearts of the people, who shun them (*The 99: Masks # Issue 17*), which prompts the superheroes to shed their masks once and for all so as to be accepted by the public (*The 99: Friends, Enemies and Network Interfaces # Issue 18*). The 99's shedding of their masks may also be taken symbolically as a mark of their growing confidence about their sense of self, their identities. The speech given by Jabbar on the occasion of the public unmasking of the 99 in *The 99: Friends, Enemies and Network Interfaces # Issue 18* is worth quoting at length here because it sums up in simple words the Muslim desire for acceptance in the post 9/11 world:

> "We are the 99. This is our home...And we have nothing to hide from you...It is very easy to be frightened by things we do not understand. Too easy, in this world. We know this to be true, because we have made that mistake too. But we are people. Young people, just like you, your children, and your brothers, sisters, and cousins. We look forward to getting to know you...To working together with you, in the days and months to come...As we try to build a better world" (23-24).

Superheroes traditionally wear costumes while on a mission, and on the concept of the superhero costume, Peter Coogan has the following observations to make:

> The superhero's identity is embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero).[59]

The 99 though, do not wear costumes which "typically express their identity, biography, character, powers or origin". In fact, there is no clear pattern with regard to costumes in the comics: some of the 99 wear them, some do not, some are seldom seen out of their costumes, some wear the costumes when on missions and don ordinary clothes otherwise, and all the costumes of the 99 look, in fact, like every day clothing. The absence of iconic costumes, like the absence of masks perhaps serves to minimize the difference between the 99 and the public and serves to integrate the superheroes better with the people instead of making them stand out. Since iconic superhero costumes like that of Superman's tend to imbue the characters with some sort of a cult status, the absence of such costumes could also be taken as an indication of the opposite-that the 99 are not to be seen as cult figures. Their singular/open identity is thus fortified by the absence of masks and iconic costumes, and this deviation from what is understood to be a convention also serves to create the kind of superheroes with whom the readers can identify more easily.

Another convention of the superhero genre that *The 99* does not adhere to is what John Shelton Lawrence calls the "Orphan Trope" in "Thinking Comics with Danny Fingeroth". Given the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition on the superhero genre, and given the strong resemblance between the figure of the superhero and that of the 'prophet' (as has been explored in the previous chapter), it is not surprising that most of the popular American superheroes like Superman, Batman and Spiderman are orphans like some of the Judeo-Christian prophets. Lawrence however, gives the "Orphan Trope" another interpretation-that of its affiliation with the American value of 'individualism'. He says:

> The Orphan trope is another identity fantasy, with roots as remote as Moses, Oedipus and Herakles (Hercules). Having no or unknown parents suggests a symbolic intensification of the secret identity theme, but it also reflects an existentialist type of

> individualism...the orphan with superpowers becomes both the ultimate American individualist and a kind of Sartrean existentialist, making the self out of acts of personal choice that are ultimately unaffected by the judging gaze of others, unlike for normal humans.[60]

He further quotes Fingeroth in the same article, who elaborates that "without families, we are all alone. We fight our own battles, make our own rules...".[61] Keeping in mind the aforementioned interpretations of the "Orphan Trope", which is almost as integral a part of the superhero genre as the dual/hidden identity phenomenon, one could read a lot into *The 99*'s deviation from the said convention. Given that fictional depictions which are perceived to resemble Prophet Mohammed in any way are considered potentially controversial in the Muslim world, it is possible that the 99 were not depicted as orphans so as to avoid creating parallels with the figure of Prophet Mohammed, who was an orphan like most of the Judeo-Christian prophets. Another interpretation could take into account the perceived difference between the Arab and the American societies; Lawrence's belief that the orphan represents "the ultimate American individualist" is echoed in the words of the founder of the Jordan based *Aranim* comics, Suleiman Bakhit, who opines that the Arab society is "more social, based around the tribe" as compared to the American society[62], which is perhaps why Arab comic book characters seldom work alone. Bakhit's own characters too, always work in a group. The social orientation of the Arab society could thus be a possible explanation for the absence of the "Orphan Trope" from *The 99*. So, instead of fighting their battles alone, the 99 work in groups, and have parents, siblings or relatives who are fully aware of and who support their superhero status; indeed, in most cases it is the parents of the gem bearers who take them to the Dr. Ramzi's foundation where they are recruited as superheroes.

Furthermore, unlike most of their American counterparts who follow the path of 'vigilantism' (the most notable example in this regard being Batman) and work outside the ambit of law in parallel 'institutions' of their own, the 99 work within the 'institution' instead of outside it, never taking the law into their own hands. Indeed, the *99 Steps Foundation* is affiliated with the real world UNESCO, an organization which, in the words of *The 99*'s editor-in-chief Tariq Hosni, "is most importantly, not a religious or a political organization, but a *cultural* one"[63]. This sense of 'belonging' to a 'world organization' such as the UNESCO is crucial as it stands as a symbolic

reaffirmation of the need perceived by the Muslims for a sense of 'belonging' to the world in the wake of 9/11 where a general sense of isolation is understood to have pervaded the community. Thus, these unmasked, non costumed superheroes, working within an institutional framework with the full support of their parents and the public appear essentially different from their American counterparts who are more often than not masked, costumed vigilantes who often take the law into their own hands and work in isolation, their identities unknown to their families or to the public. These differences though, are rooted, as has been explored, in the desire to create a particular kind of a superhero, one whose ready acceptance by the society symbolizes the Muslim desire for acceptance in the post 9/11 world.

The Past as the Foundation for the Future: References to the Islamic Civilization

1258 and 1492, the two dates which form the basis for the legend of the *noor* stones in the 'back story' of *The 99* are dates which are considered crucial in the history of the Islamic civilization, where the former is the date of the Fall of Baghdad, and the latter of the Fall of Granada. By revisiting these dates through the 'back story', the comics perhaps, seek to once more reconstruct the narratives of 'knowledge', 'multiculturalism' and 'progress' that are believed to have been associated with the time period which is generally known as the 'Golden Age of Islam', and revisit the ideas of 'acceptance' and 'diversity' that are believed to have been the hallmark of the said time period. While the recollection of that age is, for Al-Mutawa, a longing for the time when "there was an acceptance of other people...and their ideas"[64], for critics like Christopher Dickey the recollection is but a *jihadi* longing, "a tapping into many of the same themes (as those) exploited by Bin Laden"[65]. Dickey says something to this effect in his article:

> The message that the Islamic civilization was once a mighty realm of learning and science is dear to *jihadi* firebrands, who tend to pine for days of old when Muslim knights were bold.[66]

While Dickey's dismissal of *The 99* as 'Bin Ladenism' seems rooted in his dismissal of the idea of the 'Golden Age of Islam' itself, what the research is concerned with here is with looking into the idea of the said age as presented in *The 99*. Because a longing for one's past in a troubled present is but a universal phenomenon which does not merit concern, what matters perhaps is not the 'longing' per se, but the idea of the past one longs for. So, while Bin Laden's longing,

according to Dickey might be characterized by a sense of wanting to return to the time when Islam was at its peak or when the "Muslim knights were bold" (a longing for a sense of power), Al Mutawa's longing, as he explains it, is a longing for the "acceptance of other people"[67], which, according to him, was seen then but is not seen in the present times (i.e. in the post 9/11 world) [68], a claim which is substantiated by a reading of the comics, as shall be explored. When asked to respond to Dickey's arguments, Al-Mutawa states:

> I would respond by saying that Mr. Dickey is spot on...Yes, Islam was at a golden age but it was precisely because of openness and diversity and multiculturalism that it thrived. *The 99* is not about challenging others' views of the fact that there was a golden age, rather it challenges as to the why there was one, and why there is not one now...(see appendix).

The stress on the 'acceptance of cultural diversity' during the time of the Islamic civilization, indeed, on 'multiculturalism' manifests itself throughout the comics and is highlighted in particular in *The 99: Origins # Issue 0*, where the panels depicting the creation of the fortress which houses the *noor* stones in Andalusia show different men building the *Husn Al Ma'rifa*, the *Fortress of Knowledge* together, using diverse ideas, architectural methods and materials and fitting them together:

> ...building a structure that would know no nails or iron bindings...a structure whose pieces would interlock...fitting together the way things should in order to work their best... like different beliefs, different cultures, different desires, making them fit together is difficult work... but it was finally achieved (14).

The *Husn Al Ma'rifa,* described in the comics as a fortress "symbolic of man's quest for knowledge" (15) flourishes for over a hundred years in Andalusia (it is no coincidence that the fortress is destroyed in 1492 in *The 99*, the same year as the Fall of Granada to the forces of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in the real world), and thus stands as a metaphor for the knowledge and learning that is believed to have thrived for over a hundred years during the Islamic civilization in Spain, knowledge that was, according to Dennis Overbye, built together by "Jews, Christians and Muslims"[69], who "participated in the flowering of science, art, medicine and philosophy"[70]. Elsewhere in *The 99: Origins # Issue 0* when the rays of the sun strike the *noor* stones for the first time to form "letters, words, thoughts, *knowledge*", the rays are

again described as "fitting together the way things should" (16). This reiterated stress on multiculturalism, on acceptance, on "fitting together" diverse things "the way they should" serves as a reminder of what Islam is believed to have stood for in earlier times, which is supposed to stand in contrast to the views of extremists whose lack of acceptance of diverse ideas and cultures is believed to have altered the idea of Islam as it is understood in the world in the present times. As Al-Mutawa opines:

> ...Those behind 9/11 preach an Islam of black and white, conformity and uniformity. The 99 show the colorful, diverse and multicultural elements that were tantamount to the golden age. Without openness to others' ideas and cultures, there is no golden age, only a rusty one (see appendix).

Thus, as has been explored before, since 'The Golden Age' was not a "a mighty realm of learning" based on the knowledge contributed by the Islamic civilization alone, but was believed to be based upon confluence of knowledge from diverse civilizations and cultures, Al-Mutawa's fictional *noor* stones too, "represent", in his own words, "knowledge from collective civilization- Islamic knowledge, Christian knowledge, Jewish knowledge and knowledge from the Greek philosophers"[71], a message that is reiterated at the beginning of every issue of *The 99* in the following words:

> Hundreds of years ago, when Baghdad fell to the forces of Hulagu Khan, the Caliph and the Librarians of the *Dar Al Hikma* captured *the sum total of the knowledge of world culture* contained within their tomes and instilled this information into **ninety-nine gemstones** which had been crafted to absorb the very **light of reason** (*The 99* comics, Preface, bold font in the original, italics mine).

Because "the magic stones that give the 99 their superhero powers come from the collective wisdom of all religions and civilizations"[72], the 99 superheroes are not powered upon Islam alone, but upon a confluence of "world culture", which is part of the reason why the gem bearers belong to diverse religions. And because the 99, according to Stuart Moore " really gain strength and are most effective when they join together",[73] their combined power stands as a "metaphor for cooperation between different cultures"[74] which is supposed to mirror the confluence of cultures that is believed to have existed during the Golden Age of Islam.

Furthermore, the stress laid upon 'knowledge' in the comics is evident not just in the names of the places and the people in the first issue of comics (the destroyed library is called *The Dar Al Hikma/Bait Al Hikma* or *The House of Wisdom*, its guardians are called the *Huras Al Hikma* or the *Guardians of Wisdom*, the fictional fortress is called the *Husn Al Ma'rifa* or *The Fortress of Knowledge*), but also in the very idea of the 99 gaining their superpowers through the 'knowledge' of the *noor* stones (This essentially makes the 99 the first superheroes powered upon 'knowledge', unlike all other superheroes known so far). This reiterated stress upon knowledge in the comics may be read in consonance with the importance which is believed to have been given to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge during the 'Golden Age of Islam'; which, according to Dennis Overbye, owes some of its inspiration to the *Quran's* commandment "to seek knowledge and read nature for the signs of the creator"[75]. The metaphor of the hunt for the *noor* stones in 2006, centuries after their loss then, can be read as a hunt in the post 9/11 world for the knowledge of the past, of the age that 'was', and of what Islam is believed to have stood for in the said age. The idea of a good 'past' is thus the foundation upon which the 99 superheroes set out to build a future.

Notes

[1]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Nabiha Shahab, "Islamic Superheroes Invade Comic Markets", *Middle East Online*, 10 April 2004, 30 June 2010 <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=22507>.

[2]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Richard Vasseur, "JazmaOnline.Com: Exclusive Interview", www.the99.org, 27 March 2006, 30 June 2010 <http://www.the99.org/art-1-33-Articles-1-3-32,ckl>.

[3]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Cameron Archibald, "Above and Beyond: 99 Reasons Muslims Should Read Comic Books", *The Tufts Daily*, 13 October 2006, 30 June 2010 <http://www.tuftsdaily.com/2.5512/above-and-beyond-99-reasons-muslims-should-read-comic-books-1.593623>.

[4]Giles Ratier as quoted by Florence Villeminot, "Muslims Fighting Evil", *Newsweek*, 5 March 2007, 25 March 2009 <http://www.newsweek.com/2007/03/04/muslims-fighting-evil.html>.

[5]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Hassan Fattah, "Comics to Battle for Truth, Justice, and the American Way", *The New York Times*, 22 January 2006, 30 June 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/international/middleeast/22comics.html>.

[6]As quoted by Hassan Fattah, "Comics to Battle for Truth, Justice, and the American Way", *The New York Times*, 22 January 2006, 30 June 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/international/middleeast/22comics.html>.

[7]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Matt Brady, "Inside *The 99* - Talking With *Teshkeel*'s Naif Al-Mutawa", *Newsarama*, 28 April 2006, 25 June 2009 <http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?t=68761>.

[8]As reported by Piney Kesting, "The Next Generation of Superheroes", *Saudi Aramco World* (Vol. 58. No. 1), January/February 2007, 30 June 2010 <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200701/the.next.generation.of.superheroes.htm>.

[9]As quoted by Marie-Helene Rousseau, "In Hot New Comics, Capes Are Out, *Koran* Is In", *IPS News*, 20 March 2008, 30 June 2010 <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41664>.

[10]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted in *Millionaire*, "Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa: Teshkeel Media Group", www.the99.org, 8 November 2006, 30 June 2010 <http://www.the99.org/include/contn/millionairepg1.jpg>.

[11]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Rawan Jabaji, "Truth, Justice, and The Islamic Way", *Need to Know on PBS*, 17 May 2010, 28 May 2010 <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/culture/truth-justice-and-the-islamic-way/760/comment-page-1/#comment-1473>.

[12]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Rawan Jabaji, "Truth, Justice, and the Islamic Way".

[13]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Marie-Helene Rousseau.

[14]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Hassan Fattah.

[15] As reported by Marie-Helene Rousseau.

[16] As quoted by Malini Goyal, "A New League of Superheroes", *business.in.com*, 8 Sep 2009, 30 June 2010 <http://business.in.com/article/briefing/a-new-league-of-superheroes/3672/1>.

[17]As quoted by Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Author Looks to the *Koran* For 99 New Superheroes", *The Washington Post*, 11 June 2008, 30 June 2010 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/10/AR2008061002762.html?hpid=topnews&sub=new&sid=ST2008061002810>.

[18]Superheroes usually have a back story associated with them, which generally narrates their origins and/or details the acquisition of their powers.

[19]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Matt Brady, "Inside *The 99* - Talking With *Teshkeel*'s Naif Al-Mutawa".

[20]'Noor' is the Arabic word for 'light'. 'Noor Stones' when translated literally mean 'stones of light'. The metaphorical 'light' referred to in this phrase is the light of 'reason' or 'knowledge'.

[21]Naif Al-Mutawa and Fabian Nicieza, *The 99: Origins # Issue 0,* Comic Book, Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2006. 5.

[22]*The Dar Al Hikma* was a library and a centre for learning in Baghdad, Iraq. It was destroyed in 1258 during the Mongolian invasion of Baghdad. The fictional *Dar Al Hikma* in *The 99* is based on the real one.

[23] Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Matt Brady, "Inside *The 99* - Talking With *Teshkeel*'s Naif Al-Mutawa".

[24]*The 99: Origins # Issue 0.*18.

[25]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Peter Anthony Holder, *Holder Tonight*, CJAD 800, 15 September 2006, 25 January 2010 <http://www.the99.org/pge-1-33-Articles-3-260.ckl>.

[26]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Reuters, "Publisher Rolls Out Comics With Message For Young Muslims", *Saturday Star* (ed.1.), 9 October 2006, 25 June 2010 <http://www.thestar.co.za/index.php?fArticleId=3476758>.

[27]Two of the superheroes (Mubdiayn or The Creative Twins) that have been introduced in the comics are a brother-sister duo who share a single *noor* stone, and thus the corresponding attribute/ power.

[28]Writers and journalists who have called the 99 'Muslim Superheroes' include Stephen Armstrong for *The Guardian*, Sumayyah Meehan for *The Muslim Observer*, James Calderwood for *The National*, Rhys Blakely for *The Sunday Times* (the Sunday edition of *The Times*), Nicole Lyn Pesce for *Daily News*, and Emdad Rahman for *Mathaba* (see Bibliography for a list of their articles on *The 99*)

[29]Writers and journalists who have called the 99 'Islamic Superheroes' include Hassan Fattah for *International Herald Tribune* (the global edition of *The New York Times*), Jason Szep for *Reuters*, Lawrence Van Gelder for *The New York Times*, Nabiha Shahab for *Middle East*

Online, Camille Agon for *Time*, Sahil Nagpal for *TopNews.in*, Florence Villeminot for *Newsweek*, and Alex Ritman for *Dazed And Confused* (see Bibliography for a list of their articles on *The 99*).

[30]As quoted by Richa Gulati, "Wanted: Superheroes Seeking Smart & Strong Women", www.richagulati.com, May 2008, 25 June 2010 <http://www.richagulati.com/articles/08Superheroes.html>.

[31]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by *First Coast News*, "New Comics Feature Islamic Superheroes", 11 December 2007, Accessed on 25 June 2010. <http://www.firstcoastnews.com/news/strange/news-article.aspx?storyid=95520>.

[32]Karline McLain, *Encounter* with Kerry Stewart, Radio Program, "Comic Book Superheroes", ABC Radio, www.abc.net.au. 9 May 2010, 30 June 2010 <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/encounter/stories/2010/2888658.htm>. Transcript.

[33]*The 99: Origins # Issue 0*. 49.

[34]Naif Al-Mutawa, *Encounter* with Kerry Stewart, "Comic Book Superheroes".

[35]There is no clear consensus among sources of history on the date of this event. Some sources cite the date as AD 550, some as AD 560, and a majority as AD 570, the year of Prophet Mohammed's birth.

[36]As quoted by Abbas Al-Lawati, "Superheroes Created By Kuwaiti Psychologist Prepare To Fight Evil", www.gulfnews.com, 24 October 2009, 24 June 2010 <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/media/superheroes-created-by-kuwaiti-psychologist-prepare-to-fight-evil-1.518397>

[37]"Abraha", *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 10 April 2010, 25 June 2010 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1540/Abraha>.

[38]"Thamūd", *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, 10 April 2010, 25 June 2010 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/589948/Thamud>.

[39]Prophet Salih is one of the Prophets of Islam and is believed to have been sent for the Thamūd. It is believed that he had, as a miracle, produced a camel for his people, which is understood to have been killed by a man called Abu Rughal.

[40]As quoted by Christopher Norlund, "Imagining Terrorists before September 11: Marvel's *GI Joe* Comic Books, 1982-1994", *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies.* The University of Florida. (Vol.3. No.1), 2006, 28 May 2010 <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_1/norlund/>.

[41] As quoted by Christopher Norlund.

[42]*The 99: Origins # Issue 0.* 18.

[43]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Matthew Mosley, "Islam's First Superheroes Taking the World by Storm", www.dailystar.com, 21 November 2009, 27 June 2010 <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=4&article_id=108956#axzz0szYvcfE6>.

[44]As quoted by Eboo Patel, "*The 99*: Reclaiming the Beauty of Islam for a New Generation", *Worldview* with Eboo Patel, WBEZ 91.5, www.chicagopublicradio.org, 14 June 2010, 30 June 2010 <http://www.chicagopublicradio.org/content.aspx?audioID=42572>. Transcript.

[45]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Charles De Simone, "From Mecca to Metropolis: Creating Superheroes for the Islamic World", www.fletcher.tufts.edu, 2007, 28 August 2009 http://fletcher.tufts.edu/news/2006/10/teshkeel.shtml

[46]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Florence Villeminot.

[47]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Nabiha Shahab.

[48]Naif Al-Mutawa, "*The 99* at the United Nations", *The Concert For Pakistan*, United Nations, New York, 12 September 2009, 25 June 2010. <http://teshkeel.com/nl/eng/oct09/3.html>. Transcript.

[49]The immediate example that comes to mind is that of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, where according to Renu Elizabeth Abraham, the good versus evil paradigm is represented through a white/pink versus brown/black colour code (Abraham 68).

[50]Naif Al-Mutawa, "Islamic Superheroes-World", Video, Journeyman Pictures, 21 December 2009, 7 April 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpmfqKC3Ge8>.

[51]John Shelton Lawrence, "Thinking Comics with Danny Fingeroth", *Philosophy Now* (Issue 73), May/June 2009, www.philosophynow.org, 20 June 2010 <http://www.philosophynow.org/contents?issue=73>.

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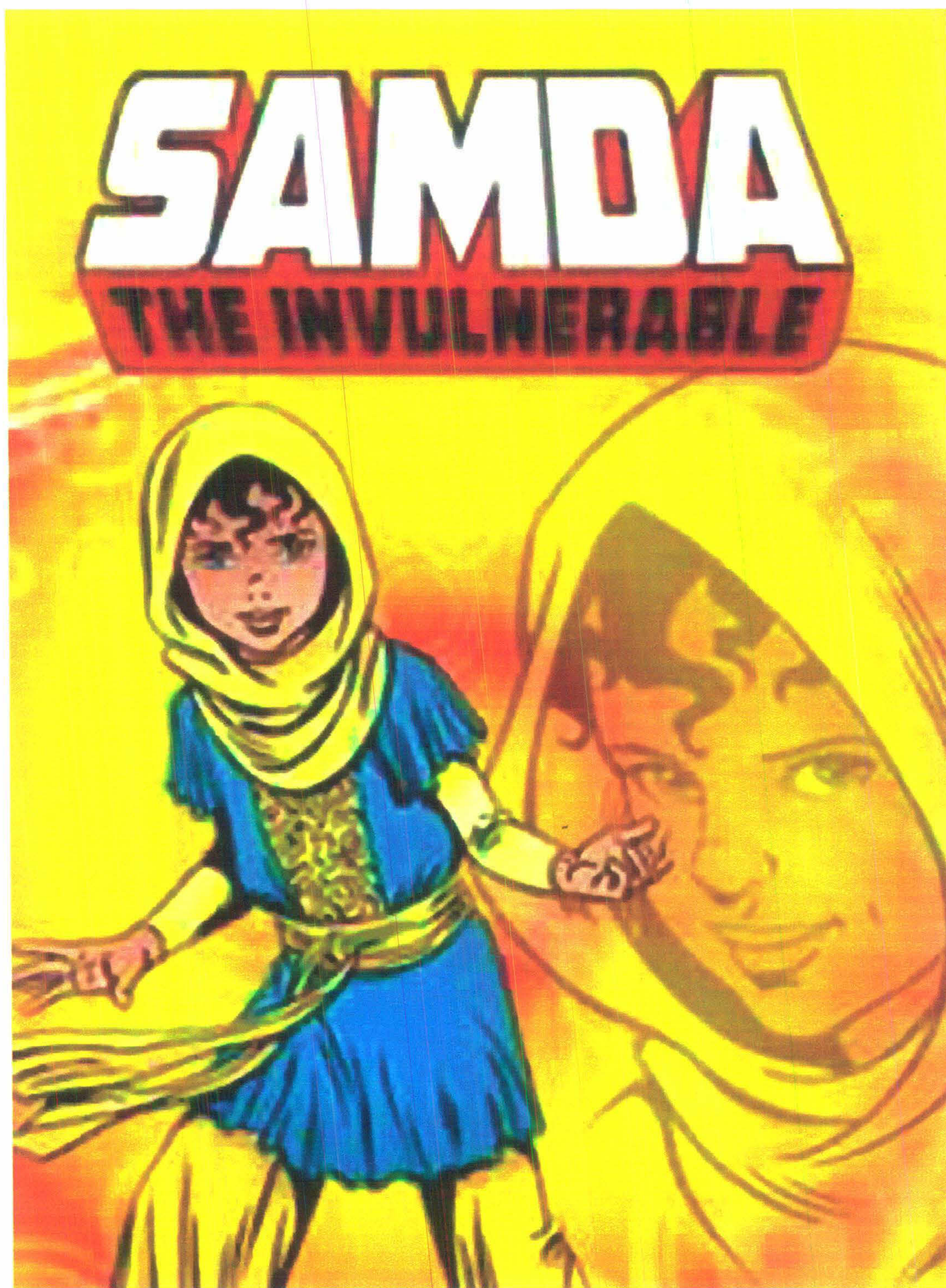

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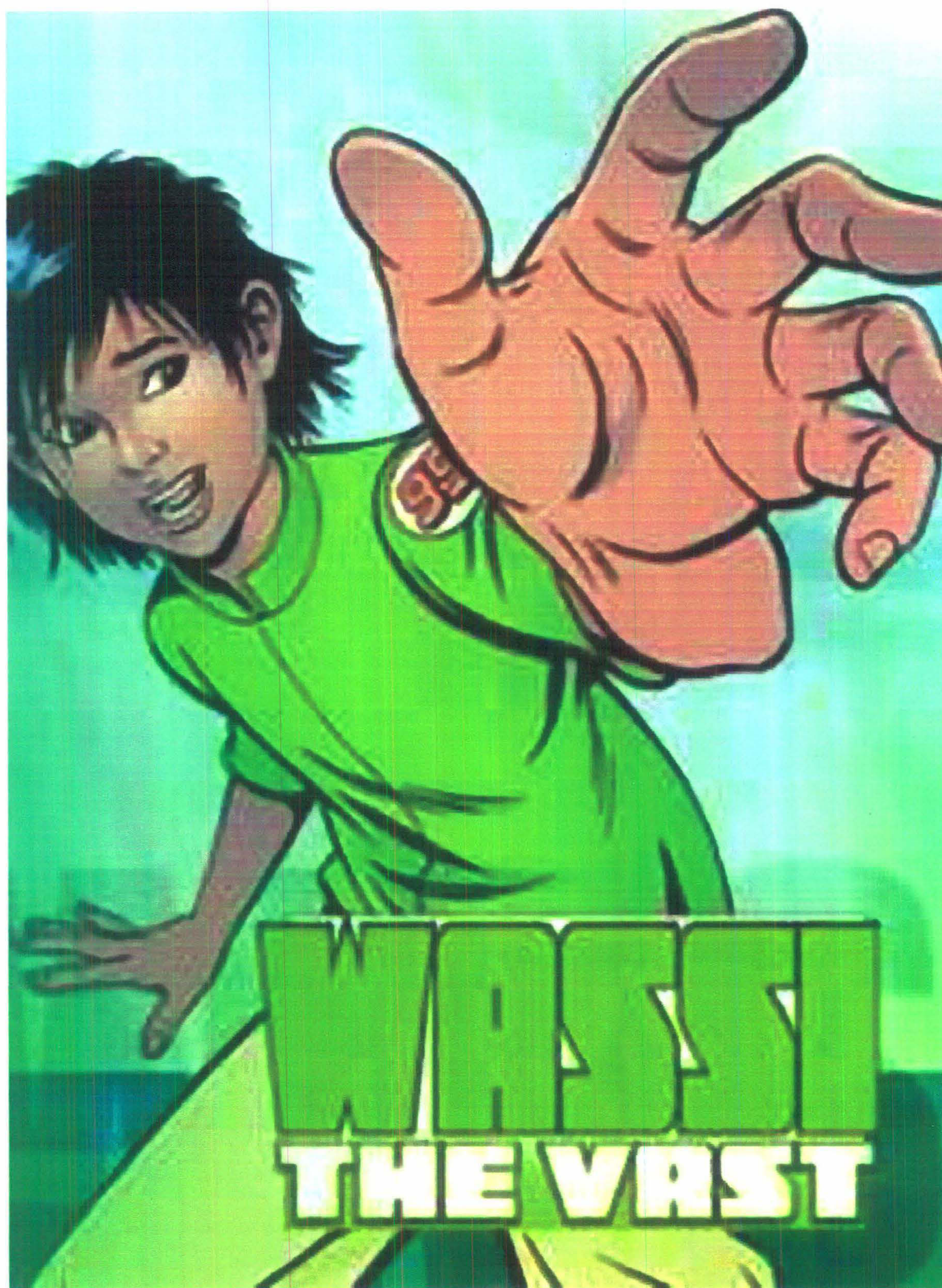

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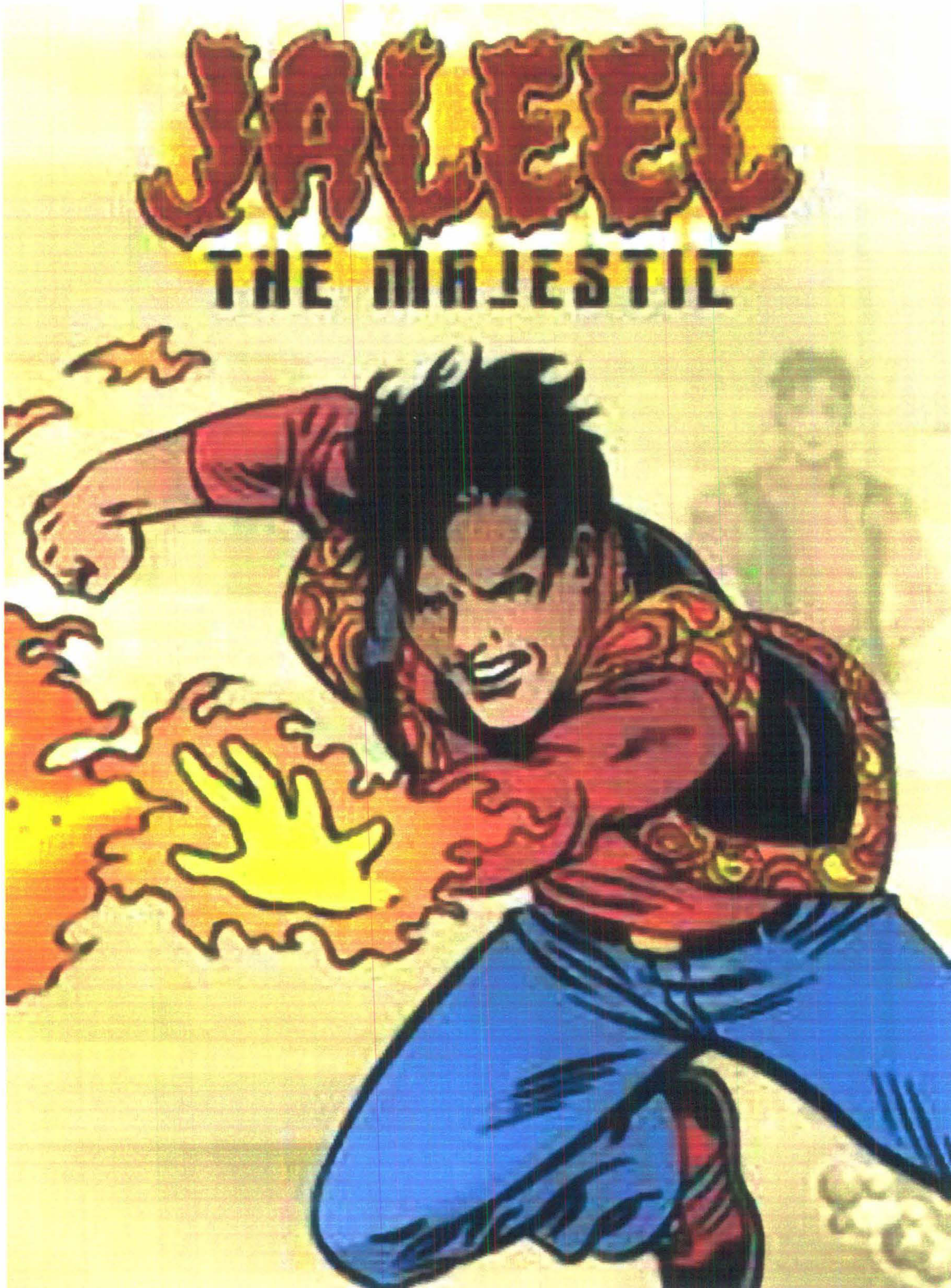

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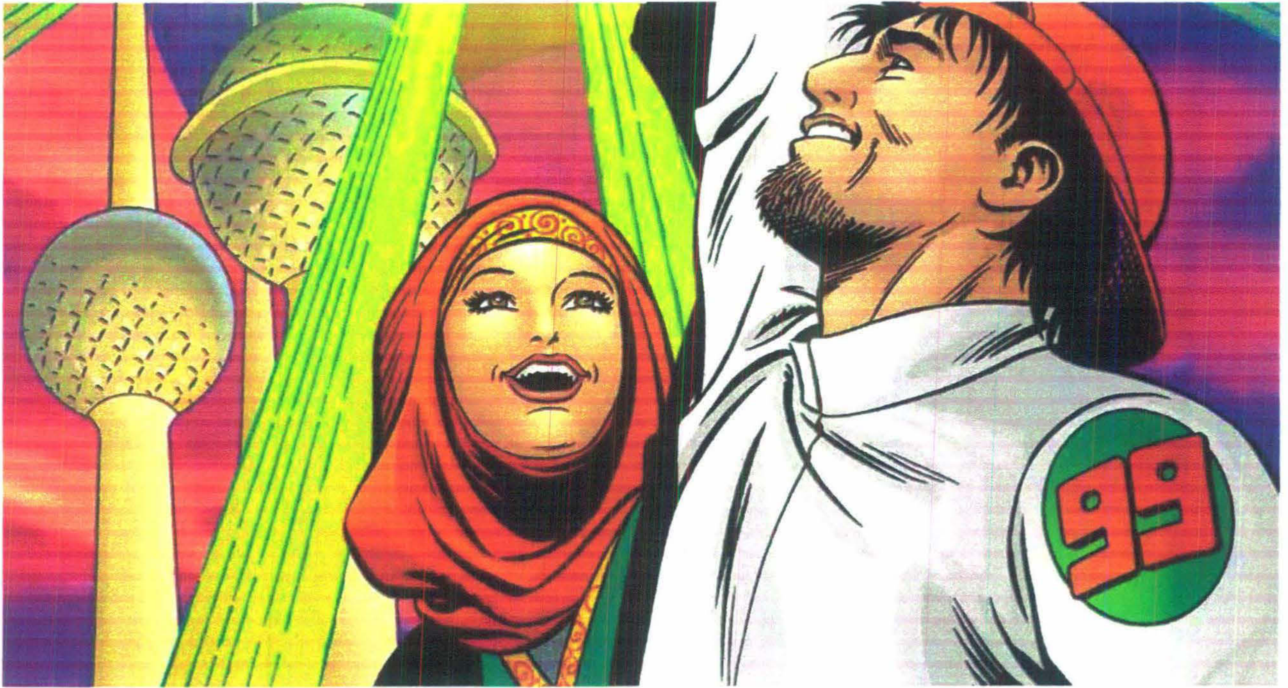

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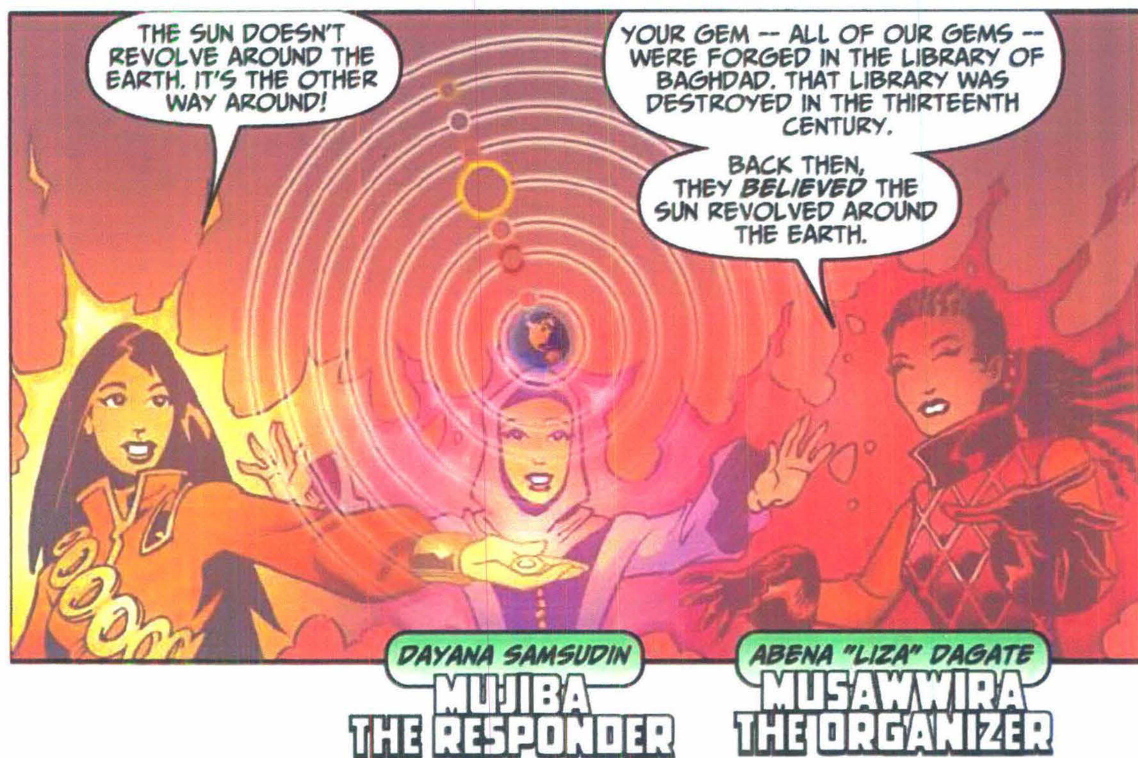

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Chapter Three

The previous chapter sought to explore, through a detailed study of *The 99*, how the comics attempted a redefinition of the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world and worked towards the construction of the superhero as a manifestation of 'Muslim wish fulfillment'. The chapter also attempted to examine how the superhero narrative in The *99* captured the struggle within the post 9/11 Muslim world. This chapter intends to examine the selective representation of concepts, characters, ideas and images in *The 99* so as to understand the image of Islam that it attempts to foreground. Furthermore, since *The 99* is not just a project highlighting a certain idea of Islam but is a product of popular culture aimed at both the local (Arab) and the global market, the chapter also intends to examine how the creator of *The 99*, Naif Al-Mutawa has negotiated with market forces while at the same time positioning himself ideologically; or to examine, in the words of Nandini Chandra, "the contradictions and diversions", and the compromises, or even the convergences "produced in conforming ideology to profitability" (109), and how these compromises or convergences have affected the image of Muslims/Islam that the comics have attempted to foreground. The chapter also takes a look at how the comics have struck a balance between the 'East' and the 'West' to target both local and global readerships, and also how a consideration of the cultural sensibilities of the Arab world has influenced their visual content.

"If You Focus on Religious Behaviour...You Become the Market of One"[1]

As has been explored in the previous chapter, a stress on 'shared values' runs throughout *The 99*; in fact, in a section titled "Naif's Notes" at the end of each comic, Al-Mutawa addresses the idea of shared values directly through his writings. In *The 99: Origins # Issue 0* he says: "Our characters intentionally transcend all language and cultural barriers. They offer the commonly shared ideals of all people as the basis of our heroic figures" (51). In *The 99: Hate to Love # Issue 9* he reiterates his idea again in the following words: "The core of Islam is the core of any religion or way of life. There are basic human values that are shared across the board" (39). This reiterated stress on 'shared values' however, appears to sideline all elements which may be said to be exclusive to Islam. In a way thus, though the concept of *The 99* is based on Islam, what one observes in the comics is a selective representation of those ideas, values and elements that Islam shares with other religions, and the exclusion of elements which may be identified as Islamic.

Such elements include, but are not limited to, prayers, or direct references to the *Quran*. The comics indeed, sidestep elements which may be identified as belonging to any religion for that matter. The non representation of such elements appears slightly problematic, especially in a comic which prides itself on its promotion of the acceptance of diversity, because its elimination of all elements through which 'diversity' may be identified in the first place then appears to contradict its purported aims. Also, the absence of such elements becomes all the more noticeable in the present times given that most mainstream superhero comics now, as has been explored in the last chapter, comfortably include prayers and invocations to God. On the other hand, when one refers to the example of such mainstream American superhero comics as *The Fantastic Four*, it must be noted that when launched by its Jewish creators at a time when some amount of anti-Semitism was still prevalent, the comics were, like *The 99* in the present times, devoid of religious markers. The same comics have only now grown comfortable enough with religion to announce the religious affinities of their superheroes (for instance, more than forty years after his creation, as has been explored in the last chapter, The Thing from the *Fantastic Four* was revealed to be Jewish in 2002), and to incorporate religious prayers and rituals within their stories. Also, given that market forces have, to a large extent, essayed a crucial a role in determining the content of *The 99*, the exclusion of all distinctly identifiable religious elements is understandable. Steve Ross avers that "this trend" of "homogenizing religion" is "tied to commerce"; as he elaborates: "You sell more product if you tread a nice, middle ground".[2] Al-Mutawa likewise explains his decision to exclude what may be termed as markers of "religious behavior" (in his own words)[3] as follows: "If you focus on religious behavior you start segmenting and you become the market of one. On the other hand, when you focus on values you can go universal" [4]. Thus, says Aarushi Nigam in her article on the comics, the 99 "do not pray or read the *Quran*, as they are meant to be identified with by children from all parts of the globe"[5]. Another point to be noted is that because the 99 comprise of superheroes from diverse religions, not all of the superheroes could have been depicted offering the Muslim prayers or reading the *Quran*.

Al Mutawa elaborates in an interview with *Newsarama* that the *inclusion* of prayers in *The 99* would have been equally problematic given that the Muslim world does not conform to any one universal style of praying. When asked about the absence of prayers in his comics in the said

interview, he talks about a potential investor who had asked him the same thing. The incident is narrated in his own words as follows:

> Potential Investor: 'Are your characters going to pray?'...
>
> ...Al-Mutawa: 'Okay then, how are they going to pray?'
>
> Potential Investor: 'The *Sunni* way'.
>
> Al-Mutawa: 'And we should ignore the *Shiite* population and that half of the Muslim world, and suggest that only *Sunnis* can be heroes? That's not what this is about'. [6]

In a radio interview with CJAD 800[7], Al-Mutawa talks about the same incident but substitutes the phrase "*Shiite* population" with "*Shiite* market", thus highlighting his concerns regarding the *Shiia* versus *Sunni* market divide. Thus, given that the comics cater to a heterogeneous global market and an equally heterogeneous local market, the exclusion of all 'markers of religious behavior' seems to have worked in its favour, though the idea of a 'good' Muslim that gets fore grounded in the process is that of someone who does not pray. This might not have been be a cause of concern had it not been for the already floating stereotype of the 'good' Muslim as someone who does not pray and of the 'bad' Muslim as someone who does; thus the exclusion of all 'markers of religious behaviour' from the comics unwittingly tends to fortify the said stereotype.

Also, because *The 99* is, in essence, the first comic based on Islam, Jehanzeb Dar opines that it had in front of it a chance to "share experiences of being Muslim in a post 9/11 world" [8], and an exploration of the comics in light of Dar's statement then makes it apparent that perhaps a partial picture of the Muslim world is presented before the readers owing to the exclusion of all 'markers of religious behavior'. Dar states: "It may be argued that religion would disrupt the universal message of the comic book (since not all the gem-bearers are Muslim), but there's a pronounced difference between preaching religion and engaging in inter-faith dialogue".[9] (It must be noted that if *The 99* does not indulge in the former, it does not indulge in the latter either). It is evident that the comics sidestep not just markers of religious behavior, but issues pertaining to religion too (except in one or two instances as shall be explored eventually), which

strikes a discordant note all the more because the comics did indeed have a chance to explore the complex issues pertaining to religion and identity in the post 9/11 world.

Controversial Subject, Creative Circumvention of Controversies

A project of such a nature as *The 99* was bound to court controversies in countries where a strict interpretation of Islam takes place, owing to its evocation of the ninety-nine attributes of Allah. According to Dustin Andres, "religious censors allege the comic attempts to give a face to God by evoking his ninety-nine attributes".[10] Such an evocation appears to contradict the widely held belief that the physical depiction of God or of the prophets is prohibited in Islam. Al-Mutawa thus took certain steps to ensure that his endeavour steered clear of controversies. To begin with, he clarified that he was not depicting Allah or his powers at all; as he states in an interview with *Kuwait Times*, the ninety-nine attributes of Allah are also "human attributes", but "not on the same level",[11]essentially implying that the manifestation of the said attributes is different at the levels of the human and the divine and that the 99 do not depict divine attributes, but those at the human level (albeit amplified). For instance, one of Allah's names is As- Saamee or The All Hearing, which essentially means that Allah listens to the prayers of His followers. The character named Sami The Listener is, on the other hand, a superhero by virtue of his superhuman sound manipulating powers; he is not at all The Listener in the divine sense that Allah is. Furthermore, it has been stated that "in compliance with the Islamic tradition, the Arabic version of the aliases of each of the 99 is written without the definite articles" ('Al' or 'An' or 'Aj' or 'As' or 'Ad' or 'Ar'), "because the use of these precise forms is exclusive to the invocation of Allah's name. This serves to remind that the 99 are only mortals, and sets them as human role models, with their qualities and weaknesses" [12]. For instance, one of the names of Allah is Ar- Raqib, The Watcher. The superhero who embodies this attribute is called Raqib, and not Ar- Raqib, so as to distinguish him as a human being (albeit one with superpowers). The use of the ninety-nine names of Allah without prefixing them with definite articles is by no means an innovation on Al-Mutawa's part, because names like Jami, Aleem and Sami are common among Muslims. Furthermore, Al-Mutawa makes it clear that his superheroes do not even come close to representing the powers of God when he states: "No one hero has more than a single power, and no power is expressed to the degree that God possesses it"[13]. Hassan Fattah also reports that at least thirty of the attributes "deemed uniquely divine"[14] are bound to be omitted from the list of

the ninety-nine attributes to be represented by the superheroes. Thus, though the series is called *The 99*, the final number of the attributes represented in the comics will, in all possibility, not be more than sixty-nine. The number of superheroes though, could still come up to ninety-nine, as the attributes can be shared between superheroes (as has been exemplified in the instance of a pair of Kuwaiti twins sharing a *noor* stone), or can be passed on to other superheroes (as has been exemplified in the instance of the Canadian superhero passing on his *noor* stone to a British character).

Hassan Fattah states in his article that the toughest challenge the comics could have faced (and did face eventually) was censorship on religious grounds. Fattah says: "The religious dimension is the biggest risk for a product whose main market, like all new products in the region, is oil rich Saudi Arabia, where religion and entertainment rarely mix".[15] Saudi Arabia indeed, was to be (and is) *The 99*'s biggest market in the Arab world; as Al-Mutawa states: "You have places with people (comic readers of a specific age group) and no money, and places with money and no people... there are a zillion million people in the Arab world, but the only place that has money and people is Saudi (Arabia)"[16]. Incidentally, the said market is also the strictest in matters of censorship, where comics like the Egypt based A.K.'s superhero titles have failed to make inroads owing to their sexually explicit portrayal of their female superheroes. A.K.'s *Aya* and *Jalila* titles featuring their female superheroes are, in fact, not sold in Saudi Arabia (only the *Rakan* and *Zein* titles featuring the male superheroes are sold). Al-Mutawa thus has had in front of him precedents of 'what not to do' to ensure a controversy free launch for his comics. Nevertheless, *The 99* was still banned in Saudi Arabia for around two years. The ban was lifted only when Al-Mutawa took another strategic step; he approached Unicorn Investment Bank, a prominent Bahraini bank, for funds. Receiving funds from the said bank essentially meant that he had passed the strictest of censors, because, the bank has on its board authorities who "vet every investment on its religion compliance"[17]. This, according to Malini Goyal, "helped open doors (for *The 99*) in Saudi Arabia and other places",[18] and the comics seldom encountered problems in terms of censorship or controversies in the Arab world after receiving funding from Unicorn Investment Bank. As he tells Faiza Saleh Ambah, "now, when people ask me religious questions, I ask them to go to the board of Unicorn!"[19] It must be stated here that prior to the launch of popular culture products such as comics or films pertaining even remotely to religion, seeking

approval from religious authorities has perhaps become a way of both circumventing possible controversies and gaining the approval of the masses. For instance, as Renu Elizabeth Abraham has talked about in her research, Anant Pai, the man behind the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics "consulted beard experts and even got the copies of the *Kathas* on Sikh heroes and saints approved by the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar" (25).

Though *The 99* still faces occasional criticism from some of its readers over issues such as the depiction of some of the female characters without the *hijab*, such criticism of course, no longer translates into wholesale bans.

'All Muslims are 'Arabs' from the 'Middle East' ': Breaking the Stereotype

Most of the countries from where the 99 superheroes hail are those where Islam is practiced by a majority of the population, but the comics have attempted the inclusion of as diverse a range of countries as is possible, including countries where Islam is practiced by a minority of the population or is not practiced at all. *The 99*'s inclusion of Muslim characters from different countries outside the Arab world and the Middle East is an approach that is significantly different from the one adopted by other Arab comics, such as the Egypt based A.K. and the Jordan based Aranim titles, whose superheroes are pure Arabs[20]. *The 99's* effort to represent Muslims from all over the world is an example of how market forces have at times worked in tandem with the conceptualization of *The 99* as a multicultural, multinational project; the effort has served to both gain global readership and represent the diversity of Islam at the same time. Al-Mutawa states that the said representation "speaks to the metaphor of Islam being a pluralistic, multicultural religion".[21] The significance of the said representation can perhaps be best understood if one first looks at the representation of Muslims in superhero comics (both Arab and American) till recent times. Arab comics, as has just been noted in the instances of the A.K. and Aranim titles, have yet to move outside the Arab world when it comes to the representation of Muslims, and the general representation of Muslims in most American comics till recent times again appears to be limited to their depiction either as Arabs, or as people from the Middle East, almost giving rise to the assumption that Muslims hardly exist outside the said regions. Jack Shaheen's "The Comic Book Arab" reveals that there seldom occurs a distinction between even as diverse groups of people as Arabs and Iranians in some American comics,

making it appear as if one umbrella term sufficiently covers all Muslims- 'Arabs'. Shaheen has in particular highlighted an episode from *Batman: A Death in the Family* (Issues 426-429), in which Batman's arch-nemesis, The Joker meets Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, talks of the similarities between the two of them and is appointed the Iranian ambassador to the U.N. by him. In his analysis of this comic series Shaheen states the following:

> Arabs are equated with terrorists, who are equated with Iranians, who are equated with Batman's insane arch-nemesis, the Joker. (It is clear that the writers of *Batman* do not know the difference between a Persian and an Arab. Batman speaks Farsi in Beirut!) The Joker's insanity is their insanity; his destructiveness is their destructiveness. Batman's arch-nemesis finds his home with 'Arabs/Iranians', America's enemies. This is the most prevalent of the themes involving Arabs in comic books, that is—Arabs [Them] versus the West [Us].[22]

In *The New X-Men # Issue 133*, the issue which introduces the *burqa* clad Afghani superhero Dust in the mutant superhero team, another conflation of terms occurs-this time between 'Afghanistan' and the 'Middle East'. The introduction in the issue states that "...Wolverine, Jean Grey and Professor X are called away on a far away mission in the Middle East" (1), while the stated mission (the rescue of Dust from the *taliban*) actually takes place in Afghanistan, which is not a part of what is understood to be Middle East. The launch of this issue as has been explored in the last chapter, coincided with offensive in Afghanistan, and the conflation of the said terms then perhaps highlights the concerns about Afghanistan being the hideout/supporter of the Middle Eastern perpetrators of 9/11.

It is precisely this stereotype of the Muslim as an 'Arab' from the 'Middle East' that *The 99* ends up breaking by incorporating Muslim characters from diverse countries outside the said regions in its superhero team. *The 99*'s roster of such countries includes Indonesia, Pakistan, South Africa, Malaysia, U.K., U.S.A., and France, all of them places from where Muslim characters have seldom been represented before. There are, furthermore, Muslim superheroes among the 99 from countries outside the Middle East but within the Arab world, such as Libya and Sudan, and from countries outside the Arab world but within the Middle East, such as Turkey and Iran.

The 99's attempted representation of the diversity of Islam is a 'first' in comics and thus merits attention in its own right. However, it is but obvious that market forces have had a substantial role to play in the said representation, as is evident in the choice of countries selected for inclusion in the comics. For instance, given that Indonesia accounts for approximately twelve percent of the world's Muslim population, it was chosen for representation perhaps because as a market it offered great potential. It was indeed, in the words of Al-Mutawa, "a logical progression from the operations in the Middle East and North Africa"[23]. Thus, the launch of the comics in Indonesia (licensed by the Femina Group) coincided with the introduction of the Indonesian superhero Toro Ridwan a.k.a. Fattah-The Opener in the comics. Furthermore, Pakistan being a country currently outside of the ambit of *The 99*'s circulation but being a country which is home to approximately eleven percent of the world's Muslim population, a superhero has been chosen to represent it (Amira Khan a.k.a. Hadya-The Guide), but is depicted as a diasporic character living in the U.K., perhaps so as to keep the options open for targeting the sizeable British Muslim readership (of which Pakistanis comprise a significant percentage). The other diasporic Muslim characters include the Sudani superhero Nizar Babikr a.k.a. Sami-The Listener who is depicted as living in France, where Muslims comprise approximately six percent of the population, and the Qatari superhero, Naser Ali a.k.a. Aleem-The All-Knowing who lives in the U.S., home to a large number of Arab Muslims. These representations have, as Nabiha Shahab reports, helped the comics "make sense of the Muslim diaspora".[24] The strategic marketing of the superheroes in their respective countries has, in the meanwhile, aided the expansion of the comics' fan base. *Kuwait Times* reports that *Nestle* has signed a deal with the Teshkeel Media Group to launch their bottled water in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran with the respective Saudi Arabian (Nawaf Al Bilali a.k.a. Jabbar-The Powerful), Turkish (Murat Uyaroglu a.k.a. Rafie-The Lifter), and Iranian (Atash Hourmaan a.k.a Jaleel -The Majestic) superheroes depicted on them.[25] Elsewhere, as in the case of Indonesia, the launch of the superheroes was significantly timed to coincide with major events. So, the Kuwaiti superheroes, for instance, were created not in 2006 when the comics were launched, but in 2009, to coincide with launch of a theme park based on *The 99* in Kuwait, because Al-Mutawa, in his own words, "did not want to be the Kuwaiti business man with the Kuwaiti comic book with a Kuwaiti superhero, as that would have been too clichéd"[26].

The Representation of Different Countries in *The 99*

Some amount of correlation can be perceived between the countries chosen for representation and the attributes assigned to their respective superheroes in *The 99*. The said representation appears to be based upon a consideration of the countries' expected readership, and at the same time it also reflects a deliberation upon the world's current political state of affairs.

Since all of the 99 superheroes have roles of equal importance in the team, it cannot be said that some countries have been presented in a better manner than the others in terms of the importance of their representative superheroes. However, the relationship between the represented countries and the attributes assigned to their respective superheroes does appear to be problematic in at least some instances. The superhero from the U.S. for instance, who is called Darr-The Afflicter a.k.a. John Weller is the one whose representation appears to be the most problematic given the fact that the attribute he represents is that of giving pain (he can also take away pain though). The fact that he has been depicted as a paraplegic in a wheelchair has also not been kindly taken to by people according to Al-Mutawa, who says that "some have accused me of political motivations in putting the American member of the 99 in a wheelchair"[27]. Al-Mutawa however, also points out that "the U.S has an incredible record of making heroes out of those whose special needs would make them vulnerable in other societies"[28], which is what perhaps inspired him to introduce a differently abled superhero in his comics in the first place. And since the 99 constitute of at least two superheroes who are differently abled (Sami-The Listener a.k.a. Nizar Babikr from Sudan/France is a mute), what is of concern here is not so much the idea of Darr being a differently abled character, but the power which he represents, that is, the power of affliction. The issue which introduces Darr (*The 99: No Pain, No Gain # Issue 2*) gives us the story of how he acquired his powers, which is as follows:

Twenty two year old John Weller's perfect life comes to an end when a drunk driver's car collides with his car, killing his parents and sister and rendering him a paraplegic. To cope with his loss John visits a healer, who gives him a special stone. The stone provides John with the

extraordinary ability to cause pain in any living thing, a power he uses to its full advantage to take revenge upon the drunk driver who was responsible for his accident. From then on John unleashes pain waves upon any person who is guilty of vehicular homicide, stopping only when Dr. Ramzi, Jabbar, and Noora, having heard the news of the "St. Louis pain wave"[29], and suspecting John to be a gem bearer, come to recruit him in their team. From then on John becomes a part of the 99 and learns how to maximize the use of his powers, and he learns furthermore, not just how to give pain, but also how to take it away.

Certain allusions to the world's political state of affairs may be read at the surface level of this story. The very idea of an American character being named 'The Afflicter' and being taught by others how to 'control' his powers may be construed as a comment of sorts by an Arab comic upon America's role in the world's political state of affairs. Furthermore, in *The 99: No Pain, No Gain # Issue 2*, where Dr. Ramzi convinces Darr to join the 99, he tells him: "Only people who understand what you're going through can help you *redeem* what you've done" (25, writers' italics). Darr is not the only American superhero in the comics though; two other superheroes represent the U.S. in the team, Aleem-The All-Knowing a.k.a. Naser Ali (who originally hails from Qatar), and Musawwira-The Organizer a.k.a. Abena Liza Dagate (who originally hails from Ghana). In the long run, Darr's power functions as a weapon of sorts for the 99 who, because they do not use any physical weapons, find Darr's ability to inflict pain from afar useful when confronting enemy forces. Al-Mutawa, when asked about the problematic aspect of the naming of the American character, says:

> The 99 are equal in their abilities and each learns to use their power and follows the same trajectory of misuse of their power for their own selfish reasons to using them for humanity. And today The Afflicter is American, tomorrow he may be Indian. The 99 are not the same for life (see appendix).

A reading of the comics does substantiate Al-Mutawa's statement that all of the 99 misuse their powers for their own purposes before learning to use them to do good; one cannot then single out just the American superhero. Furthermore, nothing else in the comics suggests that the American character is less of a superhero than the others in any way. His character is well developed and is he easily one of the most prominent superheroes among the 99.

The superhero from Saudi Arabia, who is, incidentally, one of the strongest characters among the 99 (the other being a Portuguese female called Mumita-The Destroyer a.k.a. Catarina Barbossa) is called Jabbar-The Powerful a.k.a. Nawaf Al Bilali. Though the other superheroes in the team have equally remarkable attributes, the relevance of the association of this specific attribute with the Saudi superhero is interesting; it is best understood if we look at the significance of Saudi Arabia in the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia, being the birthplace of Prophet Mohammed and the place where Islam is believed to have taken birth is a place which is generally considered central to, and thus 'powerful' in the Islamic world in terms of religious significance. Jabbar is depicted to have acquired his powers in a land mine explosion which embeds thousands of fragments of the *noor* stone in his very skin, which sets him apart from the other superheroes whose stones, unlike his, are vulnerable to loss or theft. Twice in the series (*The 99: Powerless # Issue 12* [3-10] and *The 99: Different Paths Part Two # Issue 23* [17-20]) a situation arises in which the enemy forces manage to obtain the stones from the other superheroes through force or trickery, but since Jabbar's stone is embedded in his skin, it cannot be separated or taken away from him. Since the stones give the superheroes their powers, all the superheroes are rendered powerless without them, except, of course, for Jabbar. One need not, of course, read too much into the significance of this unique depiction of Jabbar and his stone, since the mantle of Jabbar-The Powerful shall eventually be passed on to newer characters from different countries in the future issues. However, keeping the current representation in mind, Jabbar's stone can be taken to be as 'embedded' in his skin as Islam is believed to be in Saudi Arabia.

The naming of the rest of the 99 is based either on a random approach or on some amount of co-relation between the countries and the attributes chosen for their representatives. The Emirati superhero, for instance, is called Noora-The Light a.k.a. Dana Ibrahim, and is depicted as one of the most experienced superheroes in the team. "As a representative of the UAE, Noora epitomizes the country's leadership"[30], opines Al-Mutawa, and since it is believed that the UAE is one of the most enterprising and progressive countries in the Arab world, Noora's depiction as a rich, young girl with a modern outlook and strong leadership qualities appears an almost apt representation of her country's perceived attributes in the Arab world. The Indian superhero is named Wassi-The Vast a.k.a. Ashok Mohan, and the attribute of 'vastness' in his case perhaps

best describes India's cultural diversity. The Egyptian superhero, who is called Baqi-The Everlasting a.k.a. Hatem Al Johary, has been described by Al-Mutawa as "a testament to Egypt's endurance as the longest continuous civilization on earth"[31] and "to the resiliency of Egypt of which the library of Alexandria is a great symbol"[32]. When asked about the criteria for the selection of the countries represented by the 99, Al-Mutawa says the following:

> Initially it was random. Then we grew up and put a lot of thought into it. For example, Fattah-The Opener is our Indonesian character. Why Fattah? Because Islam spread through *fath*[33] and Allah is *Al-Fattah* (The Opener), and the largest place over 'opened' to Islam is Indonesia so it made sense! Fattah does not open anyone to Islam, but metaphorically he opens portals that the 99 travel through from place to place.... (see appendix).

Ten out of the sixteen Middle Eastern countries get their fair share of representation in the comics, with superheroes from Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Yemen included in the 99. Lebanon, Oman, and Syria apart, the notable exclusions from the Middle East include Iraq, Palestine, and Israel. It is, of course, no coincidence that the Middle Eastern countries included for representation in the 99 are also the countries where *The 99* is currently distributed. *The 99* is, at present, not distributed in Iraq, Palestine, and Israel, and it might not be distributed in Israel in the near future too, perhaps because the strained Arab-Israel relations essentially mean that there might not be a market in Israel for the comics. Al-Mutawa has talked about the difficulties he has experienced in distributing his comics in the region, citing the following example:

> As a Kuwait-based publisher, when I send books to Egypt, I lose money. I have to send it by air because I can't send it any way else. I can't send it by car – not with Israel in the way – and number two, I have to sell it at such a low price because it's Egypt versus Kuwait. I still do it ... I lose money but I do it. I do it to be in the market.[34]

If the 99 are to achieve the aim of international understanding in the true sense of the term however, a superhero from Israel ought to be included in the team, because such a step could be a 'first' in the world of superhero comics in establishing stronger Arab-Israel ties. Since *The 99* has, to its credit, an American superhero working together with his Iranian counterpart, and an

Indian superhero working together with his Pakistani counterpart, the inclusion of an Israeli superhero might indeed be a welcome addition to the 99. When asked about the absence of the aforementioned from the roster of the 99 superheroes, Al-Mutawa cites the examples of several other countries, such as "Kenya", "Mauritius", and "Korea" whose representatives have yet to be included among the 99, and states that the possibility that the 99 might include an Israeli member in future cannot be ruled out (see appendix). And since just twenty four superheroes have been introduced among the 99 so far, there is indeed ample room for the representation of other countries in the comics in future.

Interestingly, while the countries represented by all of the 99 superheroes and the other supporting characters at the *99 Steps Foundation* are known (Buran Shirazi [fig. 57], the executive director, is from Iran, Zoran Kryzneski [fig. 58], the 99's training officer, is from Serbia, and Dargi Mambo [fig. 59], the operations manager is from Nigeria), the leader of the 99, Dr. Ramzi is never identified in the comics as belonging to any particular nation. The omission of this little piece of information does not appear to be incidental though; it appears in fact, that Dr. Ramzi has been represented as a sort of a 'citizen of the world', an apt leader indeed, of a group of global superheroes.

The Representation of Female Characters: The Making and Breaking of Stereotypes

Using the concept of the 'male gaze', introduced by Laura Mulvey in the essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Jehanzeb Dar, in "The Objectification of Women in Graphic Novels" analyzes the visual representation of female characters in American comics to explore how the said representation complies with the demands of comic readers. Mulvey has talked in her essay of the existence of sexism "not only in the content of a text", but also "in the way the text is presented; through its implications about its expected audience"[35], and based on this idea, Dar in his exploration of the visual representation of some of America's iconic female superheroes such as Wonder Woman, Bat Woman, Spider Woman, and She Hulk opines that their 'sexualized' delineation is influenced largely by the fact that the expected readers of comics are teenagers, mostly males.[36] The explicit 'objectification' of female superheroes according to him, subverts the very idea of the 'empowered female superhero'.[37] He quotes Michael Lavin on the issue of this subversion:

> Powerful super-heroines like DC's Wonder Woman or Marvel's She-Hulk may easily overcome the most overwhelming threats and obstacles, but they are invariably depicted as alluring objects of desire, wearing the scantiest of costumes.[38]

Nandini Chandra's research on the *Amar Chitra Katha* points out how pictures can invariably be used to dilute the ideas presented by words in comics; though Chandra's statement is in context of her research on the *Kathas*, it can be applied to again explore Lavin's argument as to how the idea of the 'powerful' female superhero as presented through words is subverted through her visual delineation in superhero comics. Chandra states:

> In *Amar Chitra Katha* mythic speech works at the dual level of picture and word. But picture being more imperative than writing, it inserts itself with instantaneous and primary significance. Thus even if the word bubble were to deploy a woman in a militant and active role, at the level of imagery, it is her delineation as the coy heroine-eyes lowered in a posture of erotic submission and anticipation...that leaves a mark on the subliminal imagination (69).

Upon examining selected comic panels to look into the verbal and the visual delineation of Arab female superheroes from the A.K. titles such as *Aya* and *Jalila*, one indeed notices how Chandra's idea holds good; there are an extraordinary number of panels depicting the female superheroes in postures that can at best be described as sexualized, even as the words written alongside the panels attempt to highlight their strength, power, and superhero status. For instance, in *Aya # Issue 2*, Aya is shown to be brave enough to be stalking a horrific monster, walking in bold, unafraid, confident strides and calling out: "Something wicked this way comes. All right Romeo, which way did you go?" while the panels give a full close up of her curvaceous profile (fig. 60). Similarly, in *Jalila # Issue 3*, Jalila fights simultaneously with four men, proclaiming: "Face it, you're not gonna wear me out boys", while the panels in question again focus on close ups of her curves (fig. 61). As Mila Bongco points out, because comics comprise of "both graphic and verbal signs...the key to understanding comic art does not lie in the words or the pictures alone but in the interaction between them".[39] Thus, the analysis of the A.K. titles reveals that their words may send out the message that the female superhero is the embodiment of power, but it is, to borrow Chandra's phrase, "her delineation" as a 'curvaceous' woman,

depicted through the 'male gaze' and thus sexually objectified that ultimately subverts any idea of her empowerment.

Dar points out that Arab superhero comics like the A.K. titles have conformed to precisely the same sort of visual representation of their female superheroes as their American counterparts.[40] The makers of A.K. Comics might have indeed attempted to construct the image of an 'empowered' Arab woman by giving their female superheroes strength rivaling that of their male counterparts, but their attempt aimed at subverting stereotypes about 'oppressed' Arab women, because it is combined with sexualized visuals, might have perhaps reinforced stereotypes of another kind according to Dar, who questions whether the sexualized delineation of superheroes like Aya and Jalila really 'empowers' the Arab woman or whether it fortifies stereotypes about 'hot Arab babes' as he calls them in his critique. [41]

This then, is perhaps another area where the *The 99* attempts to deviate from what now appears to be the 'convention' i.e. the 'sexualized' representation of female characters. *The 99*'s female superheroes look substantially different from both their American and Arab counterparts in that they do not appear to be sexualized or objectified; nothing about their outfits or their postures appears to be suggestive or explicit. Their verbal and visual representations, in fact work in tandem to create the image of a truly 'empowered' female superhero; panels depicting them in combat focus on their fighting prowess and on their respective powers, and not so much on their curves (fig. 62) (unlike in the DC, Marvel, or the A.K. titles). Furthermore, Al-Mutawa has incorporated an equal number of male and female superheroes in his superhero universe, as he states in an interview conducted for this research (see appendix). He further elaborates: "The 99 have a *Yin* and *Yang* to them. There are attributes like The Destroyer, ...and The Powerful, and there are The Kind, The Generous, and The Wise. I made sure that not all the roles were stereotypical. . ." (see appendix). Thus, "rather than giving the women typical 'feminine' attributes such as Karim (generous) or Latif (gentle)"[42], he has given, as he says in an interview with *Newsarama*, some of those attributes one perceives as 'masculine' to females; and so "the physically strongest of them all" is a girl called Mumita-The Destroyer from Portugal.[43] Both the male and the female superheroes have equally crucial roles to play in the team, and both engage in roles of combat.

The 99 thus succeeds where the A.K. titles fail i.e. in presenting Arab and Muslim women as strong, empowered entities as opposed to weak or oppressed ones, without either 'sexualizing' or 'objectifying' them in the process. However, once again one can trace the reasons behind the said representation of the female characters in *The 99* as much to a consideration of market forces and Arab sensibilities as to ideological positioning. The female superheroes among the 99 are depicted in outfits which can at best be termed "modest", to use Dar's term[44], as compared to their American counterparts (the term 'modest' is, of course, subjective) not just because Al-Mutawa sought to deviate from 'conventional' depictions, but also because he might have wanted to avoid offending the conservative readers in the Arab world. Given the precedents set before *The 99* by A.K. Comics- the *Aya* and *Jalila* titles are not distributed in Saudi Arabia, and in Egypt these two titles undergo strict censorship, the steps taken by Al-Mutawa to ensure sales and a controversy free run for his comics in the Arab world certainly seem informed ones.

"It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's . . . a Superhero in a *Burqa*?"[45]

The *hijab*[46] has almost always been a debate worthy issue both within and outside the Muslim world, raising perhaps far more voices within the Muslim world than outside it. While it has been at the centre of several controversies prior to 9/11 too, post 9/11 the debates surrounding it are believed to have renewed and intensified. Much of the image building exercise by the Muslim world post 9/11 has consequently touched upon the issue of the *hijab*, albeit in diverse ways which have often highlighted the divide that exists in the Muslim world regarding the issue. For instance, the Indian "*burqa* rapper",[47] Sophie Ashraf, (fig. 63) wears the *burqa*[48] (without the face covering *niqab*[49]) and uses rap music to sing about Islam, to stress upon the idea that the *hijab* is compatible with elements that denote a 'liberal' outlook (like rap music) which are often perceived as being incompatible with the idea of the *hijab* by Muslims and non Muslims alike. The Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (fig. 64), created by the British-Canadian Zarqa Nawaz, uses humour to tackle issues like the *hijab*, which works because it helps people see the lighter side of things and thus deal with prejudices in a humorous manner, which subsequently paves the way for the acceptance of the 'other'. For instance, in the episode "Wheat Week", the Muslim women in the sitcom debate over the merits and demerits of wearing the *hijab* to deal with a 'bad hair day'.[50] In the same episode, a stingy father advises his *hijab* wearing daughter not to "waste money on a haircut that no one shall ever see".[51] In the very

same episode a priest asks two of his female Muslim friends out of sheer curiosity why and how they get their hair cut if "no one is supposed to see it", using for the word 'hair' a hushed, respectful tone of voice, almost as if he fears that hair is sacred for Muslim women and that he might be offending them by speaking about it.[52] In the episode "Public Access" a young Muslim girl makes a hasty decision to wear the *hijab*, but only to escape her father's wrath over a bad hair dye job, while the unsuspecting father celebrates his daughter's sudden 'religious' leanings. [53]In the episode "Ban The *Burqa*" a *burqa* clad, *niqab* wearing stranger throws the town of Mercy in a turmoil, with a hardliner falling in love with the 'modest' Muslim woman, a liberal invoking a law banning the veil which accidentally gets her own daughter and herself arrested, and a lunatic going around the town convinced that he's been hypnotized by the *burqa* clad, *niqab* wearing stranger.[54] Though the use of humour as an approach to deal with potentially controversial issues is generally considered debatable as humour is regarded as subjective, sitcoms like *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, just like standup comedy routines such as those of Azhar Usman's (as has been explored in the last chapter) manage to create an atmosphere of understanding between people perhaps far more effectively than the other, direct approaches used to tackle issues such as the *hijab*. "The Hijabi Monologues" (fig. 65) likewise, employs a combination of humour and seriousness to talk about issues pertaining to the *hijab*. A project begun by University of Chicago students Sahar Ullah, Zeenat Rahman, Leena El-Arian and Dan Morrison in 2006, "The Hijabi Monologues" (a name derived from Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues" [1996]) uses the medium of the dramatic monologue to 'perform' stories about the experiences of *hijab* wearers in the U.S. [55] Randa Abdel Fattah has, likewise employed the medium of 'chick-lit' fiction to talk about the experience of wearing the *hijab* in Australia in her humorous novel *Does My Head Look Big In this?*.

It appears upon reading *The 99* that although Al-Mutawa seems to have excluded any overt reference to the debates surrounding the *hijab*, there are instances where humour has been used to dispel potentially controversial situations. For instance, in *The 99: Problem Solving # Issue 3*, Noora (who is an Emirati citizen), Jabbar (who is a Saudi citizen), and Darr (who is an American citizen) are taking a walk on the streets of Paris when they come across mannequins dressed up in short skirts, leggings and body hugging shirts (basically clothes that *hijab* wearing women do not wear in public). Noora's exclamation upon seeing them, "I'll tell you, these clothes are

interesting" evokes a surprised reaction from Jabbar, whose response is, "You *couldn't* wear that!"[56] Noora counter's him with the reply, "I *wouldn't*".[57] The difference between Jabbar's shocked "*couldn't*" and Noora's emphatic "*wouldn't*" may be taken as the essential difference between the approach of a Saudi citizen and an Emirati one when it comes to the *hijab*, Saudi Arabia being a country where the *hijab* is compulsory by law, and the U.A.E. being a place where there is no law in place for it and where it is looked upon as a matter of choice or cultural conditioning. After her strongly emphasized "*wouldn't*", Noora diverts the whole emphasis of her argument and says in jest "Not my style. You don't think it would look good on me?" which confuses Jabbar. He ends up fumbling for words, "No...yes...I mean, it would...you would look great...I... but you...", clearly torn between the desire to express his views clearly and his fear that Noora might get offended. Before he can say anything further, Noora pulls him away from the mannequins and wraps up the conversation, saying, "C'mon, before you pull all the muscles around your brain", eliciting an "ugh" from Jabbar. Throughout this little episode, Darr stays oblivious to the proceedings. The episode is actually nothing more than a merry exchange of words between two friends, but it lend itself to such an interpretation as the one discussed above, perhaps because of the "*couldn't-wouldn't*" debate which brings to mind the divide in the Muslim world over the issue. It might not strike one as being particularly funny, but it borders on the edge of humour at least for the regular readers of *The 99*, because they know that the spirited Noora often confuses Jabbar, who is often described in the comics as 'stupid', with verbal banter and little tricks. Had the approach adopted by *The 99* regarding the same situation been direct and confrontational, it might not perhaps have gone down well with the Saudi or the Emirati readers of the comics. As it appears, Noora's spirited diversion takes away the main thrust of the conversation and diffuses a situation that might have turned awkward, making it light hearted instead.

The 99 does approach the issue of the *hijab* on a serious note in at least one instance though, where it takes into consideration the element of hostility that the *hijab* is supposed to have generated around the world post 9/11. In *The 99: Friends, Enemies and Network Interfaces # Issue 18*, the *burqa* clad, *niqab* wearing Batina The Hidden arrives at the headquarters of the 99 where her powers unwittingly interrupt the security system of the foundation, which goes haywire (whether this instance refers to the security concerns the *hijab* raises at places like

airports is possible). Consequently, when the 99 first meet Batina, they instantly assume that she is an enemy, and it is only when Noora senses 'light' inside her using her powers that they think otherwise. Batina then addresses the 99 in the following words: "You don't understand any one of you. You assume that anyone different from you is an enemy" (21), where the phrase "different" may be understood to refer to her *hijab* as there are no other 'differences' between her and the other superheroes. Perhaps saddened by her initially hostile welcome, she further says, "It (the foundation) wasn't ready for me. For a different kind of gem bearer. One who isn't like all of you. And you're not ready either" (21). Dr Ramzi admits that everyone "did jump to conclusions" and adds that the day has been a rather "trying" one for them (22). Batina, who by then has taken a hostile stand herself, turns to leave and says "I don't care. I don't *belong* here" (22) (fig. 66).

This encounter with Batina serves as a sort of a learning experience for the 99, who consequently decide never to judge people prematurely. When addressing a press conference later in the day, Jabbar uses Batina's very words to get the people of Paris to accept them: "It is very easy to be frightened by things we do not understand. Too easy, in this world. We know this to be true, because we have made this mistake too" (24).

This episode is built primarily upon an approach that takes into consideration the perceived hostile attitude adopted by some sections of people towards *hijab* wearers. The episode however, also addresses in a subtle way the perceived hostile attitude adopted by some sections of *hijab* wearers themselves towards other people, a phenomenon which has perhaps seldom been explored before. Batina's statement: "you don't understand, any one of you..." can indeed be taken to be almost as big an assumption as she believes the others are harbouring. Her swift departure from the foundation, along with her parting words "I don't belong here" mirror the very charges that are usually leveled against *hijab* wearers i.e. their reluctance to integrate with other people because of their own assumptions about their 'difference'.

It appears upon reading the comics though, that the character of Batina The Hidden seems to have been created along the lines of the assumption of *hijab* wearing women as isolated and distant entities who do not feel comfortable with the idea of interacting with people. Indeed, Batina's first words upon entering the headquarters of the 99 are "too many people!"[58]. In the

issue where the 99 and the readers meet her again (*The 99: Different Paths Part Two # Issue 23*), this time at a place called *The Retreat* in the Himalayas, she is depicted as a reserved sort of a person, seeking to be as far away from the others as possible. In a conversation she holds with two other superheroes, it almost appears as if she truly has not had much exposure to people, which again fortifies the assumption that *hijab* wearers seldom integrate with other people. Her conversation with two other superheroes goes as follows:

> Hadya: 'Batina, are you all right?'
>
> Batina: 'Yes Hadya. I'm...I'm still just not so accustomed to being around so many people. Even here, in the retreat, I tend to keep to myself.'
>
> Jabbar: 'You do not have to fear us, Batina. We are teenagers and gem bearers just like you.'
>
> Hadya: 'Jabbar is right. And any time you want to come visit us in Paris, you are welcome. *The Retreat* is very peaceful...wonderful, in its way. But this is a big world, with many other wonders in it.'
>
> Batina: 'I...I know. And I want to see it...all of it. But my power creates the screen that hides *The Retreat* from outside view. If I were to leave for more than a few days, Madame Denevue's peaceful enclave would be shattered.' (9-10) (fig. 67).

One learns at the end of this conversation that one of the reasons Batina seems to have had little exposure to the outside world is because her powers are always needed at *The Retreat,* but this little piece of information does not do much to assuage her primary image as that of an isolated person who almost fears people, and has to be told by the others not to fear them. Though she is told about the "big world with many wonders in it" because she has never stepped out of *The Retreat* and not because she is restricted due to her *hijab*, because of the nature of Hadya's advice and Batina's response ("I...I know. And I want to see it...All of it"), the episode wittingly or unwittingly fortifies once more the image of a 'poor, oppressed veiled woman who has never seen the world'. She is further described in the same issue by Madame Denevue (another character) as a "loner" to whom "openness does not come naturally" (6). The attribution

of such characteristics as those described above to a superhero might not be a cause of concern otherwise, but when read in tandem with the image of a *burqa* clad, *niqab* wearing woman, such a representation might add fuel to the image of the *hijab* wearing women as subdued entities. The delineation of Batina (which is along the same lines as Marvel's Dust), as that of a silent, reserved, and isolated woman who does not or perhaps cannot interact with people might possibly annul chances that the readers might have of viewing the *burqa* clad, *niqab* wearing woman in a positive light. Al-Mutawa may have on his part set out to subvert the stereotype of the 'oppressed veiled woman' by creating a *burqa* clad superhero, just as Marvel had apparently set out to do the same when they had created Dust; in both cases however, one has to admit that the stereotype may have been fortified rather than subverted because of the manner in which their respective characters have been presented.

It must be added here that much of the critical attention received by *The 99* prior to its launch focused vastly on the *hijab* wearing superheroes among the 99, not just because the very idea of a *hijab* clad superhero was perceived to be unique, but also because it was believed that making a superhero out of the *hijab* wearing woman was perhaps the best way to empower her image. It would be premature however, to pass a verdict on whether or not *The 99* has lived up to such expectations as those described above, especially since the *hijab* wearing characters have been depicted in combat as true superheroes only as recently as in the latest issue (*The 99: Different Paths Conclusion # Issue 24*); they have been depicted so far as living amidst the silent and mystical environment of *The Retreat* in the Himalayas, instead of living in the midst of all the action at the 99's headquarters, and the only *hijab* clad superhero who has till date been depicted as a participant in missions is just eight years old.

The *hijab* is, incidentally, the lone identifiable 'marker of religious behaviour' which has been included in *The 99*, and here it is to be noted that not all of the nine female superheroes introduced so far don it (The non Muslim females obviously do not, and out of the six Muslim females, the ones from the U.A.E. and Pakistan do not, while the Libyan, Yemeni, Malaysian, and Kuwaiti ones do). Here again, it is possible that the reasons for its 'semi' inclusion stem from both a consideration of the sensibilities of the Arab readers, and a desire to depict the Muslim world as it is in real life-where some Muslim women wear the *hijab* and some do not.

The Politics of Being Apolitical

The engagement with the political state of affairs in the Middle East which is evident in the A.K. titles is missing in *The 99.* While American superhero comics have consistently dealt with America's foes over the years, and Arab superhero comics like A.K.'s *Jalila-The Protector of the City of All Faiths* have explored the Israel-Palestine conflict, *The 99* may be considered almost apolitical in comparison, owing to its lack of reference to socio-political conflicts which is unusual for superhero comics given the genre's relationship with the same. For a comic born in the aftermath of 9/11 in particular, the lack of reference to the event or its aftermath might indeed be considered surprising. There are references though, albeit stray ones, about places like Afghanistan or Iran in the comics. The sole reference to Afghanistan occurs in *The 99: Sacrifice # Special Issue*, where the 99 visit a village called Nim in Afghanistan to distribute food to the villagers, and are greeted by an Afghani called Ihsan who exclaims "it is a pleasure to meet strangers who do not carry guns" (32). A group of armed mercenaries which looks like the *taliban* at first glance also makes an appearance in the same issue; called the "Madi Brigade", the group asks the 99 to leave the village, fights with them, and is defeated (33-41). The sole mention of Iran that occurs in *The 99: Fire and Ice # Issue 21* comes not with reference to its political conflicts, but with reference to its ancient city of Bam which was struck by an earthquake in 2003; the 99 visit the city to investigate a series of inexplicable fires, and end up finding a new team member.

A brief reference to American visa norms and immigrant screening procedures, which are believed have become stringent post 9/11 also occurs in two issues, albeit in passing. In *The 99: No Pain, No Gain # Issue 2*, where Dr. Ramzi visits the U.S with Jabbar (a Saudi citizen) and Noora (an Emirati citizen), Raqib (a Canadian citizen) writes in his diary: " Just how did Ramzi get these kids into the States?" (30). A similar sentiment is echoed by Dr. Ramzi's friend, Buran Shirazi (an Iranian citizen) in *The 99: Best Intentions # Issue 5* when she writes in her diary: "seriously, with such high security at passport control, shouldn't America be the last place Ramzi takes Dana (Noora) and Nawaf (Jabbar)...I don't even want to know how he got them visas" (34).

Apart from these stray references, as has been mentioned before, the comics seem almost apolitical, which leads us to understand that even though the distortion of the image of Islam itself is believed to have arisen out of events of socio-political concern, and even though the comics themselves were born out of the need to address this distortion, their concern lies more with the image of Islam per se than with the politics behind distorting or rectifying it. In an interview with *PBS*, Al-Mutawa says something to this effect:

> When you start getting into politics you start getting into definitions — you know, when you start getting into things like the Arab-Israeli conflict, or the Arab-Iran thing, you start tapping into a quagmire of predefined political ideals. I'm basically side-stepping all that and talking about the underlying issues... When you start saying things like Israel and Palestine and Iran and Afghanistan ... those have meaning based on the last hundred years of indoctrination. It's so easy to forget that for a thousand years the only place to be Jewish and safe was in the Arab world. Nowhere else in the world! I chose to create an alternative universe where we're talking about real issues no two people would argue about.[59]

Daisy Hernandez though, opines that the 'apolitical' stance adopted by *The 99* might prove to be a point where the comics "stumble", as she believes that a superhero's strength "does not come from avoiding conflict or 'imagining' respect". She elaborates:

> It will be hard to identify over the long term with a Black superhero or a Pakistani one that walks in a world where their race and religion never matter. [60]
>
> (Hernandez's use of the word 'religion' for Pakistan I believe, is incorrect here. The word should have been 'nationality')

When asked about the 'apolitical' outlook of *The 99*, Al-Mutawa states that his comics "are about what the world can be like tomorrow", and "not about what it is like today". "For everyone's sake", he further wishes, "I hope we can imagine a tomorrow where it (political issues) would not matter" (see appendix).

Because being political in the world of superhero comics essentially translates into taking sides, as has been generally observed in both DC and Marvel comics and in Arab comics such as the A.K. titles, *The 99*'s apolitical stance on the world's political state of affairs might then

perhaps be understood as a refusal to be polarized into an 'Us versus Them' duality. Superhero comics have, over the years floated nationalistic narratives because superheroes essentially belong to nations or regions (the American Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Captain America, and Captain Marvel, the Canadian Captain Canuck, the Indian Doga and Nagraj or the Arab Aya, Jalila, Rakan and Zein), and thus wittingly or unwittingly endorse their nation's/region's political beliefs. Because the 99 were born, as Al-Mutawa has made clear, out of the desire to create a breed of superheroes who belong to the world rather than to a specific nation/region, the apolitical stance fits in with the concept. As Eboo Patel puts it, the story of *The 99* is not a story about "Islam Versus America or Muslims Versus The Rest of the World", but a story about "Heroes We All Admire Versus Violence We All Deplore".[61] At the same time it is also obvious that because the comics were targeting a global market comprising the U.S., the Arab World, South Asia, South East Asia, and the Far East, a consideration of the political sensibilities of each of the targeted places essentially means that excluding references to issues of political concern works in the comics' favour, and this is in part substantiated by Matthew Repka who quotes Al-Mutawa as explaining to one of his lecture audiences that he "consciously keeps the themes of *The 99* away from politics and overt religious expression, hoping to keep the appeal of the series as broad as possible".[62]

'Western' Packaging, 'Eastern' Sensibilities: Catering to the Local and the Global Readership

Because Al-Mutawa's team comprises of veterans from the American comics industry, *The 99* "looks and reads like a typical Marvel (or DC) comic" according to David Brittan.[63] Al-Mutawa's project thus, does not appear to be an attempt to create an indigenous Arab comic, but seems like an adaptation of a Western comic tweaked in several ways to suit Arab sensibilities. "I wanted to take Western know-how and wed it with Islamic culture to create and promote a new popular culture", Heidi Mac Donald quotes Al-Mutawa.[64] The team behind *The 99* comprises of the same names that have worked for DC, Marvel, and others in the American comics industry for several years- June Brigman, Roy Richardson, Ron Wagner, Sean Parsons, Dan Panosian, John Mc Crea, Monica Kubina, Marie Jarvins, Sven Larsen, and Stuart Moore and Fabian Nicieza, both of whom are the co-writers of the series along with Al-Mutawa. His decision to work with stalwarts from the American comics industry essentially gives his project a

'Western' orientation in terms of its visuals and content, and thus increases its acceptability among Western readers. Tara Kyle opines that while the institution and the medium of Al-Mutawa's project is 'Western', the makeover and the motif is "decidedly" 'Eastern'.[65] Nathaniel Naddaf-Hafrey on his part raises concerns about the project being "compromised" because it "draws... on an American form that embodies numerous American values", [66] but a reading of the comics gives one no reason to believe the same.

The involvement of Western artists in the project, and the use of Western stylization have most importantly, helped establish *The 99* firmly within the tradition of the iconic DC and Marvel comics. Since the format, and most importantly, the artwork of *The 99* is very similar to the artwork of any DC or Marvel comic, it helps its Western readers in immediately taking to the comics, and thus catapults the 99 within the continuum of the league of Western superheroes such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, The X-Men, and The Hulk (Jabbar even resembles him). Even the special effects, according to David Brittan, are effects one typically finds in DC or Marvel titles, "with machine guns going *Brakka Brakka Brakka*, and helicopter blades going *Wusp Wusp Wusp*!".[67] The stress on the Western stylization does not, most importantly, alienate the readers in the Arab world in any way, for they are as familiar with DC and Marvel comics as their Western counterparts (since there are few indigenous comic titles available in the region, most Arab comic readers are familiar with DC and Marvel titles). However, experimenting with some indigenous artwork could have been an interesting exercise for *The 99* (just as it was for Aranim which, as has been explored in the previous chapter, has consciously tried to develop an 'Arab' product), and it may have likewise contributed towards the development of an indigenous comic art form in the Arab world; but then again, it might not have translated into sales outside the region.

To suit the sensibilities of his Arab readers however, Al-Mutawa does make certain changes in the way the 99 are presented. For instance, tells the viewers of "Islamic Superheroes" how every time he gets a scene in a bar, he changes it to a café in his comics[68]. The outfits of the 99, especially the female characters, can at best be described as "modest" (to use Dar's words)[69] as compared to those of their American counterparts, as has been explored. Marie Jarvins, the editor

of *The 99* has talked about she often edits the drawings of her team's Western artists to minimize the 'curves' of the female superheroes[70]. There is, furthermore, no mention of dating, sexual innuendos, sex, alcohol, or drugs in the comics, unlike in their American counterparts; though Al-Mutawa says that this does not have to do with "preaching about using or not using them", but more to do with "simply keeping away", perhaps for the sake of avoiding controversies.[71] *The 99* furthermore, as has been explored in the previous chapter, refrains from the depiction of blood, violence, and the use of weapons, both to make it a clean and wholesome product for all children, and to highlight the idea that Islam does not approve of violence. This lack of blood, weapons and gore though, which is a radical departure from the conventional depictions found in most American superhero comics, makes it difficult for *The 99*'s writers, as Jarvins admits, to inject interest into the stories[72]. Thus, violence is replaced by natural disasters or emergencies "which pose a threat", such as floods or landmine explosions, "to inject some action into the comics", says Jarvins, who also makes sure that "the thin line between action and violence" is never crossed in the comics[73]. Elaborating upon the reasons for his coupling of a 'Western' medium with 'Eastern' sensibilities, Al-Mutawa says the following in an interview for *America.gov*:

> One of the things I learned in business school is that when you are developing a new product, you can't have too much that is 'new' about it. If there's too much new about your product, you'll end up with a market of one, and that's you. I needed to find a medium that was accepted, and both the animé and the superhero comics are languages that have been spoken for decades...I wanted this to be something that could stand on its own as a business, even though it has very clear social messages. I'm a big believer in the market.[74]

And thus is created a hybrid product that suits Arab sensibilities and which the Arab readers can identify with because of their familiarity with the 'Eastern' concept and the motifs, and which the Western readers can accept because of their familiarity with the Western 'packaging' and stylization.

***The 99* Meets the *Justice League of America*: " 'The Alliance of Civilizations' in the Comic Book World"** [75]

U.S. President Barack Obama's address to the Muslim world held in Cairo on June 4, 2009, which was generally hailed across the world as a historic event with the potential to significantly alter the ties between the U.S. and the Muslim world is set to be incorporated in a comic book miniseries jointly featuring the 99 and superheroes from DC's *Justice League of America* (fig. 68). Not only does this collaboration between DC and Teshkeel mark the onset of a range of adventures featuring Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman together with the 99, it also, in the words of Al-Mutawa, holds the potential to "facilitate meaningful cross cultural interaction" [76]. According to Al-Mutawa, the joint miniseries holds promising possibilities of the exploration of how two worlds generally perceived to be different see each other. For instance, the very idea of the American Wonder Woman working together with the Yemeni Batina The Hidden holds possibilities for each person to see the perspective of the 'other' with respect to the *hijab*, according to Al-Mutawa, who says: "Imagine the good that can come from a frank conversation between *The 99*'s *burqa* clad superhero Batina The Hidden and *Justice League of America*'s Wonder Woman, the well, the not so hidden"[77]. According to Paul Levitz from DC Comics, "it is a long-standing tradition for characters to meet others in the fictional world".[78] However, he believes that "while comic book crossover is a regular occurrence, this cross-cultural project is unprecedented"[79], because it is for the first time in the history of comics that a collaboration is taking place between two of the biggest names in the comics industries of two different countries. Expectations are high that the joint miniseries might truly provide the readers with different perspectives on the issues it decides to explore, not only because it will be penned by Fabian Nicieza and Stuart Moore, both of whom have written both DC and Teshkeel titles previously, but also because this being a collaboration, no one side will be trying to imagine what the 'other' thinks, unlike in comics which offer the perspective of the 'other' based on their own imagination. Al-Mutawa has written the following about the impending collaboration:

> *The 99* and DC's *Justice League of America* have joined forces. By working with their American counterparts such as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, the 99 will work hard to implement President Obama's recent message of cultural tolerance. The 99 and the Justice League heroes are never identified by religious orientation, but it is clear what archetypes they are based on. Together, they will likely explore issues of trust,

> multiculturalism, and how people, real and super, perceive one another...If we can show how perceptions are unfairly formed, we can take great leaps in a single bound towards transforming them. And what better characters to explore such issues than Superman and Batman who were created by Jewish young men...at the height of anti-Semitism and The 99 who were created by a Muslim during the height of Islamophobia ("Naif's Notes". *The 99: Fire and Ice # Issue 21*. 35)

Barack Obama lauded *The 99* and its joint venture with *Justice League of America* as "the most innovative response to his initiative to bridge the understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world"[80] at the *Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship* held in Washington D.C on 26 April 2010. While some readers, according to Riazat Butt, have lauded the joint venture and are already speculating about how the Arab world will receive Wonder Woman, a few have called it "Muslim pandering" and a forgetting of "9/11".[81] However, whether the miniseries proves to be a serious exploration of issues that affect the ties between the U.S and the Muslim world, whether it proves to be a tokenistic gesture launched with the aim of expanding the readership base of *The 99* in the U.S, or whether it proves to be a mix of both can only be answered once the miniseries is actually launched.

"They Are a New Breed, Birthed From the Old, and the Future is in Their hands. They Are the 99 and Their Time Is Now"[82]

Expectations that the comics might radically alter the world inhabited by Arab children are idealistic at best, and Al-Mutawa himself is aware of this fact according to Aarushi Nigam, who says that "he does not harbour any illusions of changing anything in their lives, nor does he want to preach to those who are growing up in a world where everything is routinely torn apart".[83] Despite this belief, the comics are expected to play as important a role in the Arab world as Superman played in America, the role of providing hope. Tara Kyle writes, "*The 99* still taps into the same relationships with religious motifs and archetypes that comics have explored since the Depression-era in America", where, according to Christopher Sharrett, "comics were kind of dime store versions of the Gods", "giving hope in a hopeless world"[84]. Al-Mutawa reiterates the idea of "giving hope in a hopeless world" in the context of the Arab world through his comics with his belief that "if you can lift a child out of a situation for even five minutes and give them the ability to hope and dream, it can make a world of a difference"[85]. Judging by the readers'

reactions in the Arab world, one sees that *The 99* has indeed captured the imagination of Arab children who, prior to these comics, did not really have options when it came to interesting reading material. Global news reports[86] have talked much about how *The 99* has captured the attention of readers and critics alike with its positive Islamic messages. Most importantly perhaps, the success of projects like *The 99* which aim to redefine the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world reinforces the belief that for change to come about, it must be catalyzed by the new generation of Muslims, a generation of "artists and activists" in the words of Yasmin Moll[87], and a generation which can "create the new" by "tapping into the old" in the words of Hassan Fattah. A generation which, like the 99 using an eternal source of power in a new manner, can interpret the *Quran* in accordance with the times it lives in, and which, like Dr. Ramzi, is willing to "work to better understand... (its) role in a strange new world"[88].

Notes

[1]Naif Al-Mutawa, "Islamic Superheroes-World", Video, Journeyman Pictures, 21 December 2009, 7 April 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpmfqKC3Ge8>.

2Steve Ross as quoted by David Moran, "Graven Images: Religion in Comics", CBR News, 8 May 2008, 27 June 2010 <file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Admin/My%20Documents/Graven%20Images%20%20Religion%20in%20Comics%20-%20Comic%20Book%20Resources.htm>.

[3]Naif Al-Mutawa, "Islamic Superheroes-World".

[4]Naif Al-Mutawa, "Islamic Superheroes-World".

[5]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Aarushi Nigam, "The First Ever Superhero Comic Book from the Islamic World Joins Hands With Batman and Superman", *Delhi Times*, *The Times of India* (TOI Mobile edition), 24 July 2009, 28 August 2009 <http://mobiletoi.timesofindia.com/mobile.aspx?article=yes&pageid=31§id=edid=&edlabe=CAP&mydateHid=24-07-2009&pubname=Times+of+India+ +Delhi&edname=&articleid=Ar03101&publabel=TOI>.

[6]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Matt Brady, "Inside The 99 - Talking With Teshkeel's Naif Al-Mutawa", Newsarama, 28 April 2006, 25 June 2009 <http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?t=68761>.

[7]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Peter Anthony Holder, *Holder Tonight*, CJAD 800, www.the99.org, 15 September 2006, 25 January 2010 <http://www.the99.org/pge-1-33-Articles-3-260,ckl>.

[8]As quoted by Jehanzeb Dar, "Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two", altmuslimah, 5 August 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3223/>.

[9]As quoted by Jehanzeb Dar, "Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two", altmuslimah, 5 August 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3223/>.

[10]As quoted by Dustin Andres," "The Hero Complex", *Venture Magazine*, October 2007, 25 June 2010 <http://www.the99.org/pge-1-33-Articles-3-200,ckl>.

[11]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Munifah Akasha, "Kuwaiti Comic *The 99* Set To Become Global Sensation", *Kuwait Times*, 11 December 2008, 26 January 2010 <http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read_news.php?newsid=MTE1NTY2ODI0Mw>.

[12]This is stated under the Wikipedia entry for The 99, and a reading of the comics indeed substantiates this statement. "The 99", Wikipedia, Last Updated on 8 June 2010, 27 June 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_99>.

[13]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Piney Kesting, "The Next Generation of Superheroes", Saudi Aramco World (Vol. 58. No. 1), January/February 2007, 30 June 2010 <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200701/the.next.generation.of.superheroes.htm>.

[14]As quoted by Hassan Fattah,"Comics to Battle for Truth, Justice, and the American Way", *The New York Times*. 22 January 2006. 30 June 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/international/middleeast/22comics.html>.

[15]As quoted by Hassan Fattah,"Comics to Battle for Truth, Justice, and the American Way".

[16]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Ed Lake, "A League of Their Own", The National, 16 August 2009, 27 June 2010 <http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090817/ART/708169962/1007>.

[17]As quoted by Malini Goyal, "A New League of Superheroes", business.in.com, 8 Sep 2009, 30 June 2010 <http://business.in.com/article/briefing/a-new-league-of-superheroes/3672/1>.

[18]As quoted by Malini Goyal.

[19]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Author Looks to the *Koran* For 99 New Superheroes", *The Washington Post*, 11 June 2008, 30 June 2010 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/10/AR2008061002762.html?hpid=topnews&sub=new&sid=ST2008061002810>.

[20]However, it must be noted that those behind the A.K. and Aranim titles may have primarily created their comics for their own market, which could be the reason behind their pure Arab superhero universe. Nevertheless, since these comics, primarily the A.K. titles, do have a readership base in the West, concerns may be raised over the role they play in reinforcing stereotypes such as the one under consideration.

[21]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Matt Brady, "Inside The 99 - Talking With Teshkeel's Naif Al-Mutawa".

[22]As quoted by Jack Shaheen, "The Comic Book Arab", *The Link* (Vol. 24. Issue. 5), November-December 1991, 28 January 2010 <http://www.ameu.org/printer.asp?iid=142&aid=186>.

[23]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Philip Schweier, "Who are The 99?", *The Comic Book Bin*, 14 August 2007, 27 June 2010 <http://www.the99.org/art-1-33-Articles-1-3-469,ckl>.

[24]As quoted by Nabiha Shahab, "Islamic Superheroes Invade Comic Markets", *Middle East Online*, 10 April 2004, 30 June 2010 <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=22507>.

[25]As reported by Munifah Akasha, "Kuwaiti Comic The 99 Set to Become Global Sensation", Kuwait Times, 11 December 2008, 26 January 2010 <http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read_news.php?newsid=MTE1NTY2ODI0Mw>.

[26]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Munifa Akasha,"Kuwaiti Comic The 99 Set to Become Global Sensation".

[27]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Alex Ritman, "Islamic Superheroes The 99 Are Fighting Alongside The Justice League", *Dazed And Confused*, 1 February 2010, 28 June 2010 <http://www.the99.org/include/contn/dazed.pdf>.

[28]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Alex Ritman.

[29]As quoted in "Darr The Afflicter", *The 99*-Characters-Summaries, www.the99.org, 27 January 2009.

[30]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Alex Ritman.

[31]Naif Al-Mutawa in "Naif's Notes", *The 99: New Blood # Special Issue*, Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2007. 45.

[32]Naif Al-Mutawa in "Naif's Notes", *The 99: New Blood # Special Issue*.45.

[33]Arabic word for 'opening'.

[34]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Ed Lake.

[35]As quoted under "Gaze", subsection "The Male Gaze and Feminist Theory", Absolute Astronomy, 26 June 2010, <http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Gaze>.

[36]As observed by Jehanzeb Dar, "The Objectification of Women in Graphic Novels", Fantasy Magazine, 26 August 2008, 27 January 2010 <http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/2008/08/the-objectification-of-women-in-graphic-novels/>.

[37]As observed by Jehanzeb Dar, "The Objectification of Women in Graphic Novels", Fantasy Magazine, 26 August 2008, 27 January 2010 <http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/2008/08/the-objectification-of-women-in-graphic-novels/>.

[38]Michael Lavin as quoted by Jehanzeb Dar, "The Objectification of Women in Graphic Novels", Fantasy Magazine, 26 August 2008, 27 January 2010 <http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/2008/08/the-objectification-of-women-in-graphic-novels/>.

[39]As quoted by Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comics.* New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000. Introduction. xv. Google Books. <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=dJjoVFiAbnUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=mila+bongco&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[40]As observed by Jehanzeb Dar, "A Critique of Muslim Women in Comics — AK Comics' Jalila and Aya", Fantasy Magazine, 19 August 2008, 27 January 2010 <http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/2008/08/a-critique-of-muslim-women-in-comics-ak-comics-jalia-and-aya/>.

[41]As observed by Jehanzeb Dar, "A Critique of Muslim Women in Comics — AK Comics' Jalila and Aya", Fantasy Magazine, 19 August 2008, 27 January 2010 <http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/2008/08/a-critique-of-muslim-women-in-comics-ak-comics-jalia-and-aya/>.

[42]As quoted by Farzina Alam, "Move Aside, Batman", Egypt Today, November 2007, 27 June 2010 <http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=7747>.

[43]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Matt Brady, "Inside The 99 - Talking With Teshkeel's Naif Al-Mutawa".

[44]As quoted by Jehanzeb Dar, "Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two", Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two", *altmuslimah*, 5 August 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3223/>.

[45]Beckie Supiano, "It' s a bird, It's a plane, It's ...a Superhero in a Burqa?", The Baptist Standard, 16 November 2007, 27 January 2007 <http://www.baptiststandard.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=7220&Itemid =131>.

[46]The word 'hijab' has been derived from the root Arabic word 'hajaba', which means 'to cover' or 'to conceal'. According to Katherine Bullock, "it is a complex notion encompassing action and apparel" (*Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. London: Biddles Limited, Guildford, King's Lynn, 2002. Introduction. xli.). As such, one 'observes' the hijab because it is a state of being, though most people are familiar with the idea of 'wearing' the hijab, as it is believed to refer to clothing alone. But because writing about 'observing' the hijab might confuse the readers, I shall stick to the familiar idea of the hijab as referring to clothing and shall thus write about 'wearing' the hijab and not 'observing' it in this research. The word 'hijab' as it is used in the present times is often understood to refer to the headscarf alone, but for the purposes of this research, it has been used with reference to its original usage as a term encompassing all types of garments-the headscarf, the burqa, the abaya, the niqab, the chador etc.

[47] As quoted by Pallavi Polanki, "Burkha Rapper", Open, 13 June 2009, 28 June 2010 <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/art-culture/burkha-rapper>.

[48]The word 'burqa' is understood to refer to a garment covering women from head to toe, sometimes revealing only the eyes, but covering the face, though as I understand it, the burqa refers to a head to toe covering garment in which the face is left uncovered, and this is the usage the research shall stick to. The "Burqa Rapper" Sophie Ashraf, as can be seen in her photographs, is indeed wearing a burqa (she has her face uncovered), though most people assume that she is not wearing what they understand is the burqa because the idea of a burqa as is generally believed is that of a garment which includes a face covering. Wherever I've had to talk of a covered face, I've used the terms burqa plus niqab in this research, except for where I have quoted someone else.

[49]The word 'niqab' refers to a piece of cloth that covers the face, sometimes revealing only the eyes.

[50] "Wheat Week". *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. CBC Television. Canada. Episode 23. Season 2. 30 January 2008.

[51] "Wheat Week". *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. CBC Television. Canada. Episode 23. Season 2. 30 January 2008.

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[58]Naif Al-Mutawa and Stuart Moore, *The 99: Friends, Enemies and Network Interfaces # Issue 18*, Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2009. 6.

[59]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Rawan Jabaji, "Truth, Justice, and The Islamic Way", *Need to Know on PBS*, 17 May 2010, 28 May 2010 <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/culture/truth-justice-and-the-islamic-way/760/comment-page-1/#comment-1473>.

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[65]As observed by Tara Kyle, "*Reinventing Superman*", *FlypMedia*, Issue 14, www.flypmedia.com, 25 September – 8 October 2008, 25 March 2009. <http://www.flypmedia.com/search/node/reinventing+superman>.

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[67]As quoted by David Brittan.

[68]Naif Al-Mutawa,"Islamic Superheroes-World", Journeyman Pictures, 21 December 2009. 7 April 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpmfqKC3Ge8>.

[69]As quoted by Jehanzeb Dar, "Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two", Female, Muslim, and Mutant: Muslim Women in Comic Books Part Two", *altmuslimah,* 5 August 2009, 27 January 2010 <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3223/>.

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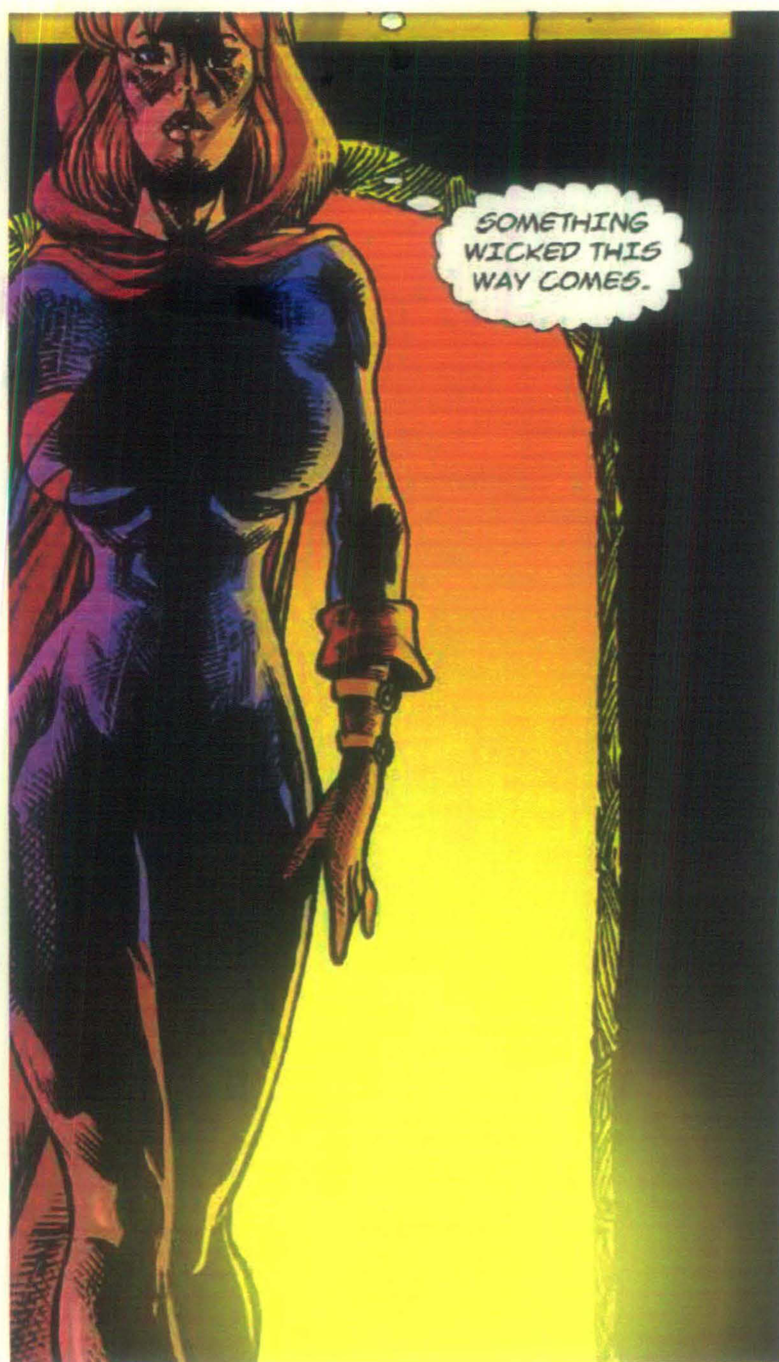
[88]Naif Al-Mutawa and Fabian Nicieza, "The 99: Hardened Hearts # Issue 8, Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2007. 12.

Fig. 57. "Buran Shirazi". Comic Book Character. *The 99*. Al-Mutawa, Naif and Stuart Moore. *The 99: Different Paths Part Two # Issue 23*. Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2010.34.

Fig. 58. "Zoran Kryzneski". Comic Book Character. *The 99*. Al-Mutawa, Naif and Stuart Moore. *The 99: Different Paths Part Two # Issue 23*. Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2010.31.

Fig. 59. "Dargi Mambo". Comic Book Character. *The 99*. Al-Mutawa, Naif and Stuart Moore. *The 99: Different Paths Part Two # Issue 23*. Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2010.33



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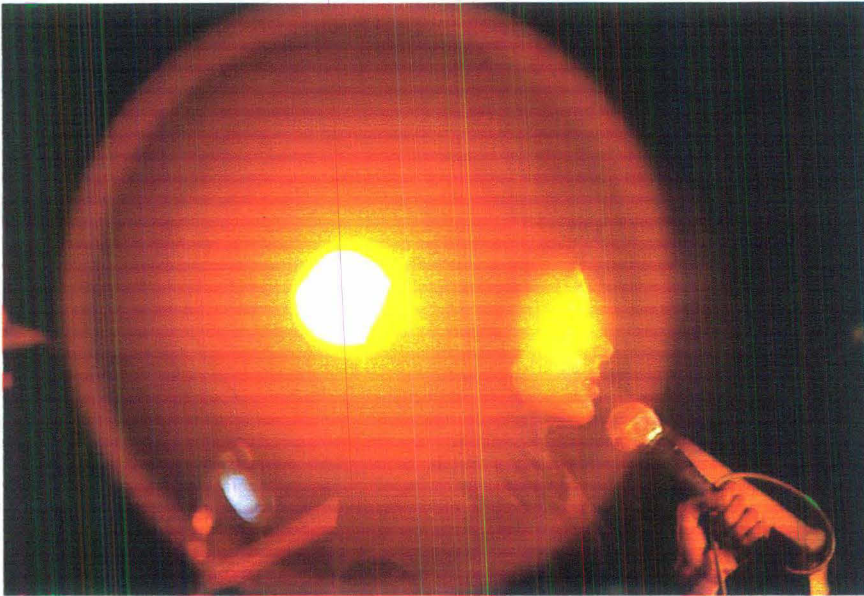

Fig. 63 (a). "The Burqa Rapper-Sophie Ashraf". Photograph. Benmoktar, Anisa. "A Burqa by Any Other Name?" 24 December 2009. 26 June 2010

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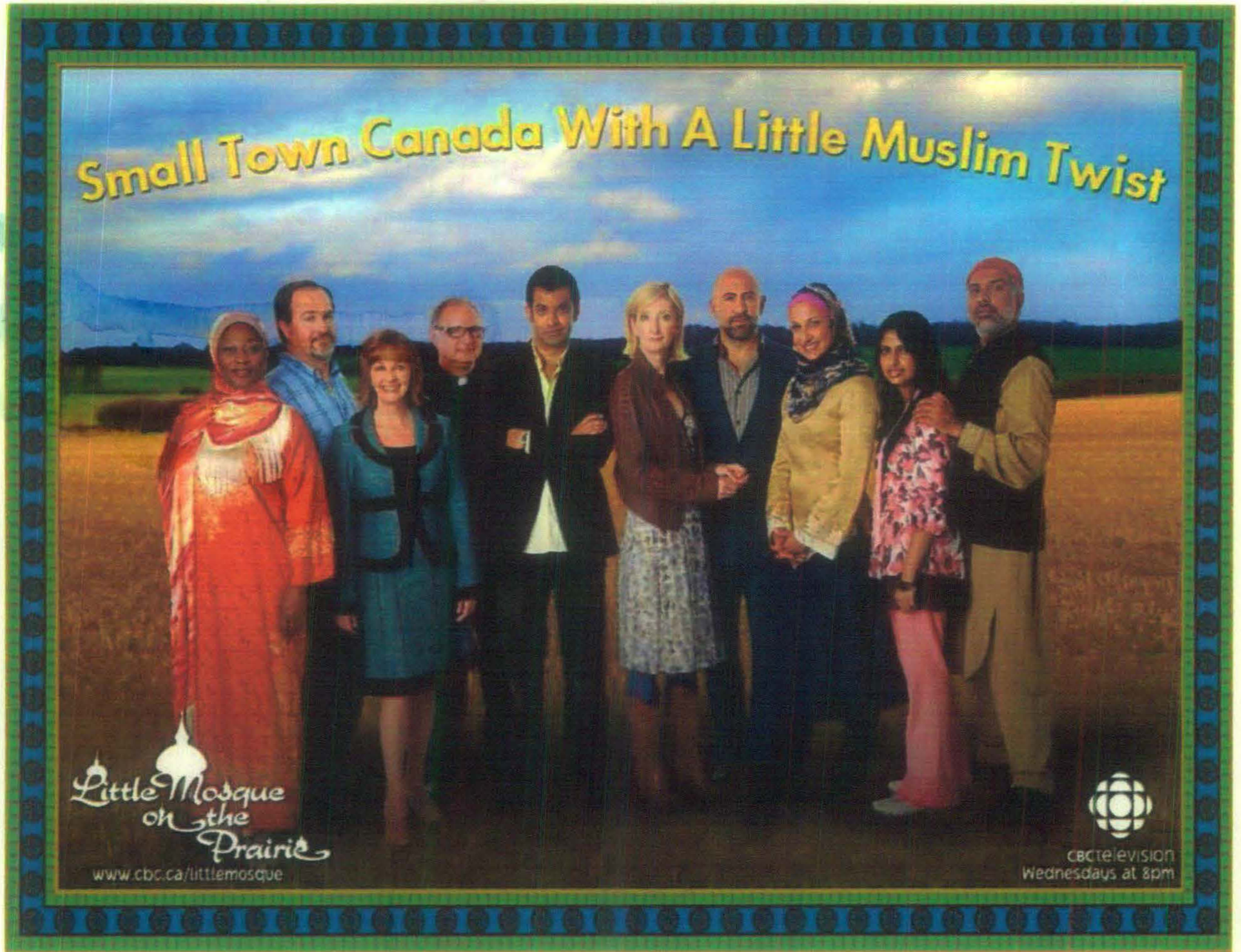

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Conclusion

"A perfect world doesn't need a Superman"

-Superman from Earth Two in *Infinite Crisis*.

The creation of Superman, the quintessential superhero was perhaps both the symptom of, and the solution to (albeit a fictional one) the troubled socio-political environment of the 1930's. Just like its mythical predecessor, the *golem*, who could be summoned to protect its people in times of need, the superhero figure has, over the ages, been 'summoned' in all societies and all cultures in times of socio-political turbulence. It is then, no coincidence that the post 9/11 world has witnessed a revival of the superhero figure in America, and the creation of the first superheroes based on Islam in the Muslim world. And because the superhero is but a manifestation of the 'wish fulfillment' of the people who create him, the post 9/11 superheroes based on Islam are, tellingly, figures which work without masks, without iconic costumes, and without secret identities-a reflection perhaps, of the Muslim desire for acceptance in the post 9/11 world. And because the villains the superhero fights with (and defeats) are but fictional proxies of the real forces his people perceive as their enemies, the enemies of the post 9/11 superheroes based on Islam are, again tellingly, not the forces of some evil 'other', but those of the insidious foes within their own world-a reflection perhaps, in the words of their creator, of "the struggle within the Muslim world" in the present times. The source of power of these new superheroes is, again, not an element from an alien planet, nor a bite from a spider, nor some ancient magic, but the power of the knowledge of "collective civilization"- a symbolic reflection of the desire for cooperation between cultures, and their manner of working together, deriving their strength from their team mates is, likewise, a call for the same. Because the superhero figure has to evolve with the times to faithfully reflect the concerns of the people who need it, it is but understandable that when the post 9/11 world called for its own superheroes, the call was duly answered not only by the established American superheroes whose black versus white paradigm of looking at things evolved into an ambiguous one to better reflect the ambiguities of their world, but also by ninety-nine new superheroes based on Islam who were, according to their creator, "specifically designed to be the superheroes that rose out of the rubble of 9/11 to combat both how Islam is seen by the West", and "how Islam is seen by Muslims themselves". The post 9/11 world needed

superheroes who could address its own particular concerns, and so, ninety-nine new superheroes came to its rescue.

Because *The 99* mines the *Quran* to highlight Islamic values which are perceived to have been sidelined in the aftermath of 9/11, captures "the struggle within the Muslim world" over the interpretations of the *Quran* in its central metaphor of the struggle over the *noor* stones, mirrors the topical tussle between the extremists and the moderates through its paradigm of good versus evil, and also appears to offer the productive suggestion that each generation must be willing to interpret the *Quran* in accordance with their times, it can be said to constitute a successful exploration of the concerns of the post 9/11 Muslim world. It deploys its fictional narratives to attempt a redefinition of the image of Muslims and Islam, and to do so it highlights the universal appeal of Islamic values, attempts to negate assumptions that the religion promotes violence, and attempts to fore ground a diverse, multicultural, and pluralistic Islam. *The 99* can then be positioned within the larger framework of the image building exercise undertaken by the Muslim world as a response to the socio-political narratives arising out of 9/11 and its troubled aftermath. Naif Al-Mutawa adopts a form of popular culture as a site for the negotiation of the concerns of the post 9/11 Muslim world, and in doing so participates in a discourse created by a generation of post 9/11 Muslims which is, in the words of Yasmin Moll, "all about defining the Self both for itself and for the Other" (Moll. "Beyond Beards, Scarves, and *Halal* Meat: Mediated Constructions of British Muslim Identity").

Since comics seldom exist in an ideological vacuum, it was crucial for this research to focus in particular on the dynamics of the selective representation of the post 9/11 Muslim image in *The 99*. And since comics are also, in effect, commercial, profit driven enterprises influenced to a large extent by market forces, the research also attempted to understand whether the process of creating a balancing act between a consideration of market forces and ideological positioning influenced the final outcome of the comics. In this context, it must be noted that while a consideration of the idea of the 99 being from diverse religious backgrounds, coupled with a consideration of the heterogeneous market forces led to the exclusion of all identifiable markers of religious behavior from the comics, the end result unwittingly fortifies the stereotype of a 'good' Muslim as someone who does not pray, and is also unwarranted in a comic which prides itself on its celebration of diversity but eliminates all elements through which the said diversity

may be identified in the first place. It must also be noted that while a consideration of the political sensibilities of its global readers and a desire to refrain from making it an 'Us Versus Them' phenomenon might have shaped *The 99* into an apolitical superhero comic (which is something of an oxymoron given the genre's relationship with socio-political conflicts), the apolitical stand adopted by the comic appears somewhat escapist and is again unwarranted in a comic which brings together superheroes from diverse politically turbulent backgrounds but does not address the issues pertaining to the turbulence. One finds in the comic a careful balance between Arab and Western sensibilities, a balance which admittedly keeps the project out of controversies, but which nevertheless benefits its local (Arab) and global readers alike. It also appears that though the reliance on a Western team and Western stylization to give the comics a global appeal does not alienate its local readers (who, owing to lack of indigenous comics, are as familiar with Western comics as their global counterparts), the project nevertheless, in favour of profitability, gives up a chance to develop an indigenous Arab comic.

Because *The 99* comics are just four years old, a lot of potential exists for future research. This research has adopted a primarily ideological approach towards a study of the comics, though one believes that a formalistic approach dealing primarily with the visual aspects of the comics might also yield interesting insights. Also though the research has touched upon the relationship between 'religion' and 'comics' mostly in context of how faith has always been an integral part of the superhero narrative and how the dynamics between faith and the superhero narrative have been reinforced in recent times through an open acknowledgement or the explicit inclusion of faith based elements in the mainstream superhero comics, and through the creation of 'religious' characters as opposed to characters who happen to have a religious affiliation, with the growing exploration of issues pertaining to religion in comics and graphic novels, this particular field in comics studies is open to exciting possibilities for research.

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Appendix

First E-Mail Interview with Naif Al-Mutawa[1]

HA (Hiba Aleem): Your superheroes are possibly the world's first and only superheroes powered upon 'knowledge'. How did you go about choosing this unique source of power for the 99? What, if any, are the implications of the 99 being powered upon the knowledge of the 'Golden Age of Islam', especially in the post 9/11 world?

NA (Naif Al-Mutawa): The books of the *Dar Al Hikma* that the 99 are powered by are books of collective civilization. It was the Golden Age of Islam specifically because there was openness to everyone's cultural contribution. Those behind 9/11 preach an Islam of black and white, conformity and uniformity. The 99 show the colorful, diverse and multicultural elements that were tantamount to the golden age. Without openness to others' ideas and cultures, there is no golden age, only a rusty one.

HA: Why did you choose specifically the medium of comics for your project?

NA: When things go horribly wrong in the West people say, "Sounds like a job for Superman". When 9/11 happened, there was no Superman (in the Arab world). I decided I would create him (his Arab equivalent).

HA: You have talked about how a project like *The 99* "is all about making a conscious choice not to let the others define who you are". [2] Please elaborate.

NA: I grew up in a place where Islam was defined in black and white terms. I gravitated between practicing that which I was not convinced of to feeling guilty about that which I thought I should be doing. It wasn't until I was older that I understood the concept of Islam being perfect despite the imperfection of Muslims and that those preaching black and white were in fact genetically color blind. There was nothing wrong with me for seeing color. *The 99* is about showing those colors to the world to juxtapose against the black and white of others.

HA: You have talked about how it is not a coincidence that the world's first superheroes based on Islam have been created post 9/11 and not before.[3] Would you say that real world crises prompt the rise of the superhero? Why did you, for instance, turn to the superhero figure for your project?

NA: Superheroes are oftentimes born and succeed out of sociopolitical necessity. Batman[4] and Superman[5] were created by Jews at the height of anti-Semitism. The 99 were specifically designed to be the superheroes that rose out of the rubble of 9/11 to combat both how Islam is seen by the West, but also, more importantly, how Islam is seen by Muslims themselves.

HA: While American superheroes have traditionally battled with those whom the nation has perceived as the 'other' over the ages, your super villain has been uniquely cast, in that he does not represent some 'other'. How did you go about creating Rughal (the antagonist in *The 99*)?

NA: Consider this. Rughal's main preoccupation is that he does not want Ramzi (the protagonist in *The 99*) to update the knowledge on the stones of the 99. He wants to live with the knowledge that was available up until 1492. Consider this, Rughal manipulates the 99 to work with him and when they do, they all wear cookie cutter uniforms and he is essentially their manipulator.

HA: Christopher Dickey opines that *The 99* comics tap into the same themes as those exploited by Bin Laden[6] by talking about the 'Golden Age of Islam', because according to him "the message that the Islamic civilization was once a mighty realm of learning and science is dear to *jihadi* firebrands, who tend to pine for days of old when Muslim knights were bold"[7]. How would you respond to such statements?

NA: I would respond by saying that Mr. Dickey is spot on. It is the multi finality of the same course that will save Islam from itself. Yes, Islam was at a golden age but it was precisely because of openness and diversity and multiculturalism that it thrived. *The 99* is not about challenging others' views of the fact that there was a golden age, rather it challenges as to the why there was one, and why there is not one now...

HA: What are the criteria upon which you based the selection of the countries represented by the 99? Did market forces influence the said selection in any way?

NA: Initially it was random. Then we grew up and put a lot of thought into it. For example, Fattah-The Opener is our Indonesian character. Why Fattah? Because Islam spread through *fath*[8] and Allah is *Al-Fattah (The Opener)*, and the largest place over 'opened' to Islam is Indonesia so it made sense! Fattah does not open anyone to Islam, but metaphorically he opens portals that the 99 travel through from place to place....

HA: How did you go about assigning the ninety-nine attributes to different countries? You have, for instance, talked about how you chose to call the Egyptian superhero The Everlasting "as a testament to Egypt's endurance as the longest continuous civilization on earth"[9]. But if the attributes are to be correlated to the countries in all cases, the fact that the American superhero has been named The Afflicter appears problematic. Please Comment.

NA: It is not problematic at all. The 99 are equal in their abilities and each learns to use their power and follows the same trajectory of the misuse of their power for their own selfish reasons to using them for humanity. And today The Afflicter is American, tomorrow he may be Indian. The 99 are not the same for life.

HA: One sees an Indian and a Pakistani superhero, and an American and an Iranian superhero work side by side in your comics. However, the absence of an Israeli 99er is rather conspicuous. Please Comment.

NA: There is also an absence of Kenya and Mauritius and Korea for now. Who knows what the future may hold.

HA: While American superhero comics almost always touch upon political issues, *The 99* is almost 'apolitical' in comparison. However, Daisy Hernandez opines that this is problematic, because, as she puts it, it is difficult to imagine "a Black or a Pakistani superhero walking around in a world where their... (identities) do not matter"[10]. Why did you choose not to touch upon political issues in the comics?

NA: *The 99* is about what the world can be like tomorrow. Not about what it is like today. And for everyone's sake, I hope we can imagine a tomorrow where it would not matter. The 99 are aspirational...

HA: You've succeeded in creating role models for Arab children who appeal to the global readership at the same time. However, the sensibilities of both the readerships, one would assume, are rather different. Were there any compromises, or even benefits, in this process of creating a balancing act between the 'local' and the 'global'?

NA: Values. Values. Values. As human beings we share the same innate values. By focusing on those things that tie us together, storylines can be compelling for all.

HA: Was the choice of Paris as the headquarters for the 99 a random one[11]?

NA: No. It is Paris for UNESCO. I got my first real writing recognition by UNESCO in 1997. It is a thank you.

HA: What languages has *The 99* been translated in so far?

NA: We have done deals in seven languages including Chinese, Turkish, Indonesian, Hindi, Urdu, English, and Arabic.

HA: What are the annual sales figures for *The 99*? Which are your largest markets, inside and outside the Arab world?

NA: One million copies a year get distributed. 250,000 of those are distributed in the Arab world.

HA: Apart from the tie-up for a comic book miniseries with DC's *The Justice League of America* and the upcoming animation series based on *The 99* that shall be hitting U.S. television screens, what else is in the pipeline?

NA: We opened a theme park a year and a half ago, and a second one is in the pipeline. The animation series is a global one, not just in the U.S., so stay tuned! Oh, and there is a rumor that the 99 are in talks for a movie…but it is only a rumor at this stage…

Second E-Mail Interview with Naif Al-Mutawa[12]

HA: When, why, and how did you first think about *The 99*? Why did you decide to mine the *Quran* (the 99 names/attributes of Allah) in particular, for this project?

NA: I was sick and tired of those that had mined it for negative messages, and just very disappointed in all the declarations of "This isn't Islam" from various leaders every time something terrible happened in the name of Islam. It was time for someone to be proactive instead of reactive. Others have used the *Quran* to justify all sorts of horrendous acts. This puts the ball back in their court saying it is not the *Quran* that's the problem…YOU…you are the problem…because if the *Quran* can inspire *The 99* then surely it can't be to blame for the violence that has been spun in its name.

HA: You describe your superheroes not as 'Muslim' or 'Islamic', but as 'based on Islam'. Please Elaborate.

NA: The 99 are inspired by those elements within Islam that are shared by the rest of humanity. If the superheroes were Muslim or Islamic we would be identifying their religious affinity. That is not something that I do in the series.

HA: Please tell us about some of the global and local assumptions about Islam in the post 9/11 world which you have tried to tackle through *The 99*.

NA: We have gone back to the same sources that others have pulled out negative, hateful messages from and have come up with pluralistic, multicultural ones. We have created theme parks and comic books and fun entertainment inspired by Islam which forces the world to see the Emperor without his clothes on. Those that have cloaked their ambitions in violent interpretations of Islam are nothing more than violent people first. If Islam can inspire both violent acts and fun acts, then the focus cannot be Islam, rather it becomes the person and their agenda.

HA: You have talked about "democratizing the idea of the superhero"[13] through *The 99*. Please elaborate.

NA: The 99 are from ninety-nine countries. They come from all sorts of backgrounds and have ninety-nine different ways of solving problems. The stories call for the best three skills that are most likely to solve a problem. So it does not matter where they are from, or if they are a boy or a girl, the only thing that matters is if there is a fit between their skill and the predicament at hand.

HA: You are the licensed distributor of American comic titles such as *Archie* in the MENA region, and Roya Hakakian has written about how "in a culture that views American youth as the embodiment of decadence"[14], *Archie* offers a different, indeed, a normal perspective on American culture[15]. Likewise, what are the 'different' perspectives on Muslim youth which you hope to offer to your global readers (those in the West in particular), through *The 99*? What is your take on comics as "conduits of cultural transmission"[16]?

NA: I think comics have been "conduits of cultural transmission" since the first cavemen drew on the walls of caves thousands of years ago. The different perspective is that we are all the same at the values level. When a comic book is read, or an animated episode seen, and kids of all faiths can self identify with the characters, it is a powerful message that what we all share as human beings is a lot more than what we do not.

HA: What was the 'comics culture' in the Arab world prior to the launch of *The 99*? How have your comics transformed the same?

NA: There has been some tradition of Disney comics and some homegrown ones that have come and gone but nothing sustainable and certainly nothing that has been able to go global.

HA: The 99 were created, as you've mentioned in your interviews, both to provide Arab children with homegrown superheroes to address the lack of positive role models in the Arab world, and to address the global assumptions about Islam in the post 9/11 world. It appears though, that your comics are, perhaps, more 'global' than 'local' in appeal as compared to comics from the Egypt based A.K. or the Jordan based Aranim groups (who also aimed to create 'homegrown superheroes'), whose superheroes are all Arabs and who mine Arab culture and politics for their stories. Hasn't your stress upon priming the comics for a global readership diluted the local elements (Arab influence) in *The 99* in some ways?

NA: A.K. Comics hasn't published an issue in more than three years. To my knowledge Aranim has only published one and they have not updated their website since the fall of 2009. *The 99* is one of those "Think Globally and Act Locally" type of ventures. The reality is, if all you have are Arab heroes, then once you hit Europe in the North, Africa in the South, and Iran in the East...no one will care about the product! And since there is no developed market here it's a losing proposition. That is why I was careful to give *The 99* global legs...

HA: How did you subvert stereotypes about Arab and Muslim women (and women in general) through your comics?

NA: The 99 have a *Yin* and *Yang* to them. There are attributes like The Destroyer, and The Powerful, and there are The Kind, The Generous, and The Wise. I made sure that not all the roles

were stereotypical. For instance, Mumita, our female Portuguese character is The Destroyer. Also, I made sure there were equal numbers of boy and girl superheroes in *The 99*.

HA: President Barack Obama has specially lauded *The 99* as "the most innovative response to his initiative to bridge the understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world"[17]. What does the tie up between the 99 and the Justice League of America entail?

NA: It entails two group of superheroes that distrust each other's motives until a realization that when there is distrust, the 'bad guys' win. We are especially proud of both President Obama's endorsement as well as the fact that DC Comics are collaborating with us in a crossover. The fact that Jabbar, Noora and Mumita will be working cape to shoulder with Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman is just amazing!

HA: What are the challenges you have faced during the execution of this project?

NA: My biggest challenge was myself. When I first had the idea I was worried that people would think I was crazy the minute the idea left my lips. But the compulsion was too strong. Other challenges involved raising financing, finding the right talent, battling the cultural gatekeepers and ultimately, the biggest challenge of all now is...the global marketplace.

Notes

[1]This was an e-mail interview conducted by the researcher with Naif Al-Mutawa on 13 June 2010.

[2]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by Piney Kesting, "The Next Generation of Superheroes", *Saudi Aramco World*, Vol. 58. No. 1., January/February 2007, www.saudiaramcoworld.com, 30 June 2010 <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200701/the.next.generation.of.superheroes.htm>.

[3]Naif Al-Mutawa as quoted by CTV, "Superman Meets Jabbar The Powerful In New Comic Series", CTV News, www.ctv.ca, 19 July 2009, 30 June 2010 <http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20090717/comic_series_090719/20090719?hub=Entertainment>.

[4]Batman was created by Bob Kane (Robert Kahn) and Bill Finger (William Finger) in 1939.

[5] Superman was created by Jerry Siegel (Jerome Siegel) and Joe Shuster (Joseph Shuster) in 1938.

[6]As quoted by Christopher Dickey, "Jihadi Cool", www.newsweek.com, April 15 2008, 25 June 2010 <http://www.newsweek.com/2008/04/14/jihadi-cool.html>.

[7]As quoted by Christopher Dickey.

[8] Arabic word for 'opening'.

[9] As quoted by Naif Al-Mutawa in "Naif's Notes", *The 99: New Blood* # Special Issue, Writer: Fabian Nicieza, Safat: Teshkeel Comics, 2007. 45.

[10]As quoted by Daisy Hernandez, "Trauma, Politics And Heroes: A New Comic Book Paints Kids of Color As Superheroes With Powers From Islamic Knowledge", *Color Lines Magazine*, www.thefreelibrary.com, 1 September 2007, 30 June 2010 <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Trauma,+politics+and+heroes:+a+new+comic+book+paints+kids+of+color+as...-a0168908739>.

[11]The 99 superheroes live at and work for *The 99 Steps Foundation* situated in Paris in the comics.

[12]This was an e-mail interview conducted by the researcher with Naif Al-Mutawa between 26 June and 3 July 2010.

[13]Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Rawan Jabaji, *Truth, Justice, And The Islamic Way*, www.pbs.org, 17 May 2010, 25 June 2010 <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/culture/truth-justice-and-the-islamic-way/760/comment-page-1/#comment-1473>.

[14]Roya Hakakian, "Archie and Jughead, U.S. Envoys", *The Wall Street Journal*, www.the99.org, 22 April 2006, 25 June 2010 <http://www.the99.org/art-1-33-Articles-1-3-51,ckl>.

[15]Roya Hakakian.

[16] As quoted by Michael Chou and Youssef Morshedy, "Comics Bridge Cultural Gaps", www.middle-east-online.com, 27 October 2007, 25 June 2010 <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=22840=22840&format=0>.

[17]As quoted by Mariam Mossalli, Naif Al-Mutawa, Interview with Mariam Mossalli, *The One: Naif Al-Mutawa*, www.arabnews.com, 12 May 2010, 28 June 2010 <http://arabnews.com/lifestyle/art_culture/article52762.ece>.