



The new Avengers: art by Mahmud Asrar and Brandon Peterson

Society has changed and so have our superheroes. **Maria Norris** explains why the comic-book industry is leading the way in promoting diversity and tolerance.

Q: How are comic books helping to combat prejudice and present ethnic minorities in a positive light?

A: In recent years, Marvel Comics have created some powerful black and mixed-race superheroes in the form of *Ms Marvel* – Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani-American girl and Marvel's first lead Muslim character; and *Spider-Man* – Miles Morales, who is half-Latino and half-African American. DC Comics' *Gotham Academy* also has Japanese-Americans as part of the main cast of characters, with the lead character, Olive, defined by her ambiguous ethnicity, which is also a deliberate move by the creators.

Some of Marvel's *Avengers* superheroes have also undergone a metamorphosis, with Thor now being a woman – the new Goddess of Thunder – and Captain America now being Sam Wilson, an African American.

All these characters promote diversity and have enormous fan bases worldwide. It is interesting that the film versions of most of these superheroes have remained in the white, male, Anglo-Saxon mould.

Q: Why is the film industry stuck in the stereotypical view of the superhero, which doesn't reflect the real world?

A: Hollywood has a long history of white supremacy and the idea that people of colour do not sell. They believe that having a minority ethnic character in the lead role is a huge financial risk and are unwilling to take that risk. The comic-book industry is much smaller and can afford to take risks because the fallout is not as extreme. It's interesting to see the notion of a black James Bond being discussed in the media but I doubt that Hollywood will listen.

Q: Does the growing success of comic books partly reflect the fact they are offering what films and television are not, and representing the world as it is, not an idealised version?

A: Yes, to some extent. Comic books are about wish fulfilment. They are a visual form of storytelling but they reflect reality much more than films and television. Also, because they have a strong independent culture, it gives them much more freedom to include a greater diversity of characters, including women, ethnic minorities and LGBT role models. The comic-book industry is very open and inclusive and caters to huge numbers of young women.

Q: How is the disabled community represented in comic books?

A: One of the biggest disabled superheroes of previous years was Barbara Gordon's Oracle character, who was originally Batgirl but was shot by The Joker in 1988 and became paralysed. When DC rebooted its line in 2011 and found a cure for Oracle's paralysis, there was a huge outcry from fans. The creators have responded by introducing a bi-racial, disabled woman as Batgirl's new best friend, Frankie Charles, who is also the new Oracle. DC's former series *The Movement*, focusing on a group of diverse teenagers, also featured the character of Vengeance Moth, a 19-year-old woman with muscular dystrophy who uses a wheelchair. Disabled characters are better represented in comics than films and television but there is still a way to go.

Q: Is there evidence to show that comic books are globally embraced and their popularity not just confined to the western world?

A: Absolutely. *Ms Marvel* is read all over the world – in the US, UK, India, Pakistan, Lebanon and further afield. Her popularity spans all cultures. This not only reflects the power of online buying but it shows we are more similar than we think and that storytelling is universal. That is why it is so important to have diversity in all forms – gender, race, sexuality and disability.

Q: Do you think the growing success of comic books is sustainable or perhaps just a passing fad?

People are getting tired of the same old white, male superhero tropes and that's why they are turning away from the cinematic versions to comics. The latter are far more progressive, though still far from perfect, especially when it comes to the diversity of the creators. But if comics continue to deliver good stories and a diverse representation of characters, they will retain – and increase – their readership. ■



Maria Norris is a guest teacher in LSE's Government Department and LSE 100 and also a Research Officer in the Institute of Public Affairs. In 2015 she organised a week-long project on Comics and Human Rights. She was talking to **Candy Gibson**, Senior Press Officer at LSE.

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