Truth, Justice, and the Spiritual Way: 
Imam Ali as Muslim Super-hero

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la fata illa ‘Ali la sayf illa Dhu’l-Fiqar
There is no hero besides Ali, there is no sword besides Dhulfiqar.¹

Introduction

There are numerous Muslim superheroes in American comic books. Characters such as Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel), Sooraya Qadir (Dust), Monet St. Croix (M), and Faiza Hussain (Excalibur) are some of the more recent additions to the Marvel Universe. DC Comics introduced Bilal Alsselah (Nightrunner) as the Batman of Paris and Simon Baz as a Green Lantern to much fanfare. Each of these characters fits a Muslim into an established mold of comics superhero. Yet, there is also a long tradition of illustrated heroic tales in Islamicate cultures – cultures that are influenced by Muslims – that predates American comics. Islamicate traditions of heroic stories partnered with pictures continue into the present day. These heroic tales and archetypes are distinct from those present in the American comics medium. The rise of Muslim characters in the comics superhero genre should not obscure Muslim traditions of heroic stories.

One of the most important heroic figures in Islam is Ali, a close relation of the Prophet Muhammad. Ali’s biographical details indicate that he was a figure of great moral vision. This moral core is a signature element of what becomes his heroic narrative. In Islamicate literatures, we find that heroes are individuals who serve as exemplars.² The Islamicate hero is extraordinary, but can and should be emulated. In some traditions, more fantastic elements are introduced to the heroic story, so that the hero now becomes a super-hero, as opposed to a superhero.

The distinction between “superhero” and “super-hero” looks small, but

¹. Traditional Muslim expression.
². Renard 1993, 1, 9.
it is crucial. A hero is someone who acts at the limits of human capability, or in a selfless manner. Everyday heroes may include firefighters or teachers. A superhero often exceeds the normal bounds of human capability, and achieves heroic feats as a result of these abilities. An Islamicate super-hero is a hero who may be given special abilities because of her heroic qualities. The superhero is heroic because of her super powers, while the super-hero is super powered because of her heroism.

The stories of the hero and the super-hero are parallel collections referencing the same person. The distinction between a Superman and Clark Kent does not exist in Islamicate narratives, as the Islamicate hero does not have an alter ego. A possible parallel would be Jennifer Walters, aka She-Hulk. She is recognizable as the same person in both her roles as lawyer and superhero, but does different heroic actions in each capacity.

The Islamicate super-hero is also often granted her amazing abilities by divine favor, so this person is now uncanny and cannot be successfully emulated. The moral inspiration of the hero remains in super-hero stories, but the dominant didactic approach is gone. However, because the tales of the super-hero remind the consumer of the hero, the consumer still seeks to emulate the hero.

To look for the super-heroic qualities in Islamicate tales, as a parallel of superheroism, is to misread the tradition. These stories do not have superheroes. The super-heroic qualities are incidental to the purpose of these traditions. It is the hero, and her heroic qualities, that consumers want to emulate. We can speak of Muslim superheroes to mean Muslim characters in a specific genre of comics. However, when we look at Islamicate traditions, the focus is on the hero. To focus only on what is happening in the American media at the expense of what is an organic part of Muslim cultures is a type of Orientalism. These two conversations of Muslim superheroes and Islamicate hero tales must happen simultaneously.

It is in this vein of having concurrent conversations that we use Sufi Comics, an Indian-based comic series that tells well-known stories of Ali in a graphic format. They work with more heroic tales of Ali, eschewing imaginative (khayal) elements, to create morally edifying stories. Their material is visually resonant with American comic styles, while incorporating elements from Islamicate illustrative forms. These variances from the ex-

3. Compare the distinction between “superhero” and “super hero” in Coogan 2006, 49.
4. The “consumer” is a broad category for the individual who approaches these stories. They are not always read, in the sense of an individual with a book, but may be read aloud, or part of a larger oral performances. The result is that we are not always considering a “reader,” when discussing people who engage with these stories.
pected visuals are important elements in the storytelling for the authors of Sufi Comics.

This chapter explains how Ali fills the emic role of a hero in many Islamicate literatures. It begins by looking at him as a moral exemplar and the cultural expectations amongst many Muslims of what a hero is. His extraordinary qualities hint at more miraculous feats that will eventually develop around his person, turning him into a Muslim super-hero. This incorporation of super-heroic stories into Ali’s narrative allows us to further define how “hero” and “super-hero” function in Islamicate literatures, including in comparison to notions of comics “superheroes.” This context allows us to read Sufi Comics’s interpretations of Ali with nuance.

Ali the Hero

For Muslims, Muhammad is considered the perfect man. By virtue of being a prophet of God and the first Muslim, his behavior is emulated through reports (hadith) of his custom (sunnah). There is a rich tradition of miracle stories (mu’jiza) attributed to Muhammad as well. However, while he is considered a role model – the Qur’an even refers to him as such uswa hasana, a “beautiful role model,” Q. 33:21) – and has many heroic deeds to his credit, he is not the first person many Muslims think of when they think of a Muslim hero. That aspect of Muhammad’s charisma is manifest through his family, specifically his daughter Fatima, his grandsons Hasan and Husayn, and especially through his cousin and son-in-law Ali.5

For Shi'i Muslims, Ali is the successor to Muhammad’s religious and spiritual authority. It is through Ali’s children with Fatima that his descendants continue to manifest this heroic quality. Many Sufi Muslims, who recognize a different authority structure than Shi‘i Muslims, still assert that their line of masters begins with Ali. He is, for them, the inheritor of Muhammad’s special wisdom. The lines of masters of the various Sufi orders all trace their teachings back to Ali.6 Even for many Sunni Muslims, Ali represents heroic ideals and actions.7 He is a universal hero amongst Muslims.8

Ali becomes the embodiment of futuwwa/jawanmardi,9 terms, in Arabic and Persian respectively, that both translate roughly as “young-manliness.”

9. Renard 2008, 69. There is another related term, muruwwah, which means manly virtue. According to one Arabic aphorism, “there is no religion without muruwwah” (quoted in Renard 1993, 14). However, futuwwah/jawanmardi take on a much more spiritual connotation that is relevant for the discussion of this article.
However, the connotative range of these terms is much larger. The Arabic *futuwwa* comes from the same root as *fata*, or hero, found in the phrase which begins this chapter: *la fata illa ’Ali*, there is no hero besides Ali. *Jawanmardi* is the Persian equivalent of the Arabic word. Both terms speak to more than notions of battlefield heroics; they are about correct behavior (*adab*) and an ethical worldview (*akhlaq*) to be inculcated amongst the truly heroic. It is in being responsible to these ideals, inspired by the divine, that one draws oneself closer to God. Despite the literal translation, which implies a gendered ideal, the practices of *jawanmardi* are open to women, and women participate in them. In several stories of Ali, we see him paired with his wife Fatima. She too represents the ideals of spiritual beings in the world. It is because she is also an exemplar that it is specifically Ali’s children with Fatima who inherit the charisma associated with Ali’s *futuwwa*.

Ali is the perfect *fata*, a status which is coupled with super-human events and actions (*karamat*), making him a super-hero. The *karamat* are not technically miracles, a status reserved for prophets, but are amazing, incredible, and even uncanny. While these fantastic events are attention-grabbing parts of Ali’s narrative, it is his quotidian actions that are the core of his heroic status.

We can discuss Ali’s heroic charisma in three parts: his teachings on being a Muslim; the *karamat*; and his actions as a *fata*. Many of his teachings are compiled in a work called *Nahj al-Balagha*, *The Peak of Eloquence*. The title itself is a hint at the esteem in which many Muslims hold Ali’s rhetorical skill. The *karamat* clearly establish Ali as a super-hero and demonstrate the ways in which Muslims in different cultures construct their (super-)heroes. While some of these stories are memorialized in painting, it is the actions of Ali as *fata* that persist across Muslim cultures, even in the contemporary period.

The creators of Sufi Comics represent Ali as the *fata*. The two brothers behind the comics, Mohammed Arif Vakil and Mohammed Ali Vakil, illustrate a variety of stories from Sufi and Shi’i sources, but which are firmly within the genre of *jawanmardi* literature. The two comic stories about Ali that we analyze in this chapter demonstrate his heroism. However, to get to the quality of his actions, we need to understand his thought.

Ali’s writings span a breadth of genres, from ideas on governance to advice for his children. There is a consistent interest in equity and justice (*adala*). For example, he says that justice is one of the four foundations of faith. He continues:

Justice also has four aspects: keen understanding, deep knowledge, a good power of decision, and firm forbearance. Therefore, whoever understands comes to acquire depth of knowledge; whoever acquires depth of knowledge drinks from the spring of judgement; and whoever exercises forbearance never commits evil actions in his affairs and leads a praiseworthy life among the people.\(^\text{12}\)

One of Ali’s most systematic engagements with how he sees justice manifest in the world appears in his letter to his governor in Egypt, Malik al-Ashtar. Reza Shah Kazemi, an expert in the Anglophone world on the teachings of Ali, has written extensively about this letter, so we need only focus on a few exemplary passages.\(^\text{13}\) In these selections, Ali bridges Qur’anic injunctions with action in the world, without always being explicit in his references. He manifests an ethical worldview that is deeply informed by his faith, without being didactic.

Ali begins the letter by urging al-Ashtar to hold virtuous acts as his dearest treasure. Concurrent with these virtuous acts, the governor is advised to exercise self-restraint. He then offers guidance on specific virtuous actions:

1. Forgive, because God is forgiving. (See fig. 1 for an illustration from 40 Sufi Comics of Malik al-Ashtar embodying this guidance.\(^\text{14}\))
2. Do not act rashly, and always seek multiple courses of action.
3. Let your affairs be focused on justice.
4. Remember the common people over the elite people, because they are the basis of a society.
5. Appoint as the head of the army someone who is slow to anger; quick to pardon; kind to the weak; severe with the strong; and is not inclined to violence.
6. Pay attention to the lowest classes, especially those who have no access to you.
7. Set apart the most of your time to explicitly think of God and nurture your soul.\(^\text{15}\)

This list ends with a reference to remembering God, but in many ways this admonishment frames the entire letter. It is in the recollection of God that one tempers the self. The actions that Ali recommends should flow from the mindfulness of God. Al-Ashtar must be forgiving, because God is

\(^\text{13}\) Shah-Kazemi 2006b.
\(^\text{14}\) Vakil and Vakil 2011, 17.
\(^\text{15}\) Shah-Kazemi 2006b, 219–36.
Figure 1: An illustration from 40 Sufi Comics of Malik al-Ashtar embodying the guidance he received from Ali to be forgiving.
forgiving (#1), and the commander of his army will also be forgiving (#5). Forgiveness and pardon become a particular manifestation of justice,\textsuperscript{16} which is ultimately the worldly focus of this advice (#3). For Ali, constructing the just society is dependent on remembering those who would not otherwise be remembered: the least amongst us. Leonard Lewisohn, a scholar of Islamicate literatures, makes an explicit connection between the ethics of Ali and the Sermon on the Mount from the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{17}

However, for Lewisohn, Ali’s letter is more explicit in a call to action than Jesus’ sermon. For Ali, justice is not an abstract concept, but one that is tied to action. As a result, his letter is a manifestation of a deeply spiritual worldview informed by the Qur’an, which does not need to be explicit in its reference to scripture. In the letter, Ali argues that justice is not just the central organizing principle of society: it is a personal virtue.\textsuperscript{18} There is an inherent relationship between the struggle an individual has with herself to do what is right and the struggle an individual has with society to do what is right.\textsuperscript{19} The internal and the external struggle are reinforcing positives: to do what is best for oneself spiritually is to create a better world, and a better world allows that individual to work towards spiritual advancement.

The Heroic Ideal

In Ali’s teaching, we see the need to integrate individual achievement with moral impetus. This connection between action and intent is a staple of Muslim thought; to offer formal prayer without a statement of intent is considered an incomplete prayer.\textsuperscript{20} The question of morality is a fundamental one to the understanding of an Islamicate hero, who is ideally both moral and competent.\textsuperscript{21} In an Islamicate context, these requirements are further emphasized, because a hero has religious overtones. According to John Renard, an expert on themes of heroism in Islamicate contexts, a hero must “function as a model, an ideal of exemplary behavior as worked out in the context of adversity.”\textsuperscript{22}

However, this adversity does not suggest that the hero is “self-achieved,”\textsuperscript{23} because in an Islamicate context the idea of a self-made hero is untenable.

\textsuperscript{16} Lewisohn 2006, 145.
\textsuperscript{17} Lewisohn 2006, 117.
\textsuperscript{18} Paya 2013, 24,
\textsuperscript{19} Renard 1993, 27.
\textsuperscript{20} See, for example, al-Qadi al-Nu’man 2002; Nasir-i Khusraw 2012.
\textsuperscript{21} Allison and Goethals 2011, 44; Morris and Loeb 2005, 12; cf. Klock 2013a, 74.
\textsuperscript{23} Campbell 2004, 15.
The hero is called by God, and has God-given abilities. These abilities are used by each hero in unique ways and through free will, but the story is never a bildungsroman. By virtue of the hero’s special relationship with God, the inner transformation of the hero – the realization of spiritual potential – happens before the hero begins engaging with the world. It is only the spiritually perfected individual who can be a super-heroic force in the world.

Using Ali as a case study, we can create a working definition of an Islamicate hero. The hero has a special relationship with God, and as a result has a God-given ability. Many heroes have special weapons. The hero is human and can die. The special relationship with the divine is not a mark of invincibility or immortality. The hero is not supernatural but the “extreme realization” of human abilities, which means the hero has physical human weaknesses. Most importantly, the hero acts from a moral conviction, which is consistent with divine guidance and revelation. The hero can never be a vigilante who operates outside of the law, although she does fight against tyrannical and oppressive powers. Nor can the justice that the hero fights for simply be about personal strength and ability; it is not about the hero imposing her will.

From a Muslim perspective, the relationship between faith and justice is one of dependency. Justice becomes a manifestation of faith for Ali, and faith is cultivated in justice. Julie Meisami, a scholar of Islamicate literatures, discusses the ways in which notions of heroism in Muslim cultures are criticized as being flat and uninspiring. The argument rests on the belief that to valorize the individual would risk a type of idolatry. Yet, such a critique rests on two misconceptions. The first misconception is based on aesthetics and a reliance on Eurocentric notions of literature and heroism. The second misconception is premised on the universality of moral education. The form of many Islamicate heroic narratives emerges from “a conviction that the individual example validates the general principle, and, further, a belief in the human potential for both creativity and perfectability.”

27. Renard 1993, 63.
28. Many of these characteristics of the Islamicate hero are similar to characteristics outlined by authors who attempt to create more expansive definitions of what a superhero can be. See for example, Eco 2004, 146; Kaveney 2008, 6; McLuhan 2004, 105.
Ali becomes the embodiment of moral action, who demonstrates virtues accessible to all people. His heroism is grounded in his humanness. Following the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), who inverts Nietzschean thinking, Ali is an Übemensch because of his devotion to God. Therefore, while Ali is more than the average human, his status is theoretically achievable by anyone who is willing to learn from him and follow his example. This accessible, perfecting quality of Ali’s heroism, what John Renard describes as the “challenging, uplifting, and affirming [of] the potential of real people,” is the basis of my analysis of Sufi Comics.

There is another, parallel set of traditions that see Ali as a super-hero. The move from hero to super-hero is easy to make, because Ali is a religious hero. He has a special connection to the divine that allows him to move from the role of a perfected human to a person with abilities beyond the normal human sphere. His humanity makes him aware of death but he is also cognizant of the promise of a life after death, and a role in a divine plan. As a result, he is not afraid of conflict, as his confidence is not in himself, but in God. Therefore, he is almost always assured of victory, regardless of the situation. With a premise of guaranteed success, it is easy for hero stories to be linked to hagiography and, in turn, hagiography to become inflated into super-hero stories.

Peter Coogan, a researcher of American comics, creates a distinction between a hero, a hero that is super, and a superhero. His particular schema does not work well as a universal model. It has failings in American comics, as it is too narrow in the distinctions it makes. It is also too culturally specific to be applicable in an Islamicate milieu. The hero has a cultural context that determines how his heroism is constructed. Coogan is most interested in the American idea of a superhero, who has a “universal, prosocial mission”; has superpowers, including technological or mystical abilities; and has an identity tied to costume and codename. His “hero that is super” is missing at least one of these defining characteristics, but has superpowers. For Coogan, the regular hero is specifically missing superpowers.

34. Renard 1993, 63.
37. Hagen 2009, 353; Soenarto, 78.
41. Coogan 2013, 3.
Ali, as an Islamicate hero, has a universal, prosocial mission. However, that mission is defined by a religiously informed moral perspective. As a result, to live that moral life as an exemplar is a fundamental part of the mission, so there is no space for secret identities or costumes. The closest Ali comes to having a signature costume is his sword Dhulfiqar and his steed Duldul. Nor can Ali have superpowers that define his mission as *fata*; to do so would make him impossible to emulate and thus defeat his mission. Coogan’s definition cannot meaningfully contribute to an Islamicate notion of the super-hero.

Without superpowers or a secret identity, Ali cannot function as a superhero in the sense of the U.S. comic book genre. However, he is a superhero. The heroic quality of Ali is elevated by the consumers of his stories, embellished with miraculous elements and retold as new tales. Ali’s human qualities persist, as does his primary heroic function to serve as a moral exemplar. The ways in which he achieves that mission is fantastic, making him super in a sense of being awe-inspiring, without discouraging the belief that one can emulate his moral conviction. The unrealistic elements of these stories index Ali’s special relationship with the divine, as they can only emerge from Ali’s perfected spiritual character.

The Islamicate super-hero is one whose humanity and heroic qualities are centered in a narrative of divine purpose. That centering does not have to be explicit, but can be implicit through references to the hero’s relationship to the divine or the hero’s moral character. Because of his special relationship to God, the hero is always assured victory. As a result, the hero can be put in fantastic situations that allow him to act in super-heroic ways. Primarily, the super-hero will have miraculous feats credited to him, but these miracles are favors from God, and not inherent in the hero.

In Ali’s super-heroic narratives, miraculous events surround him from his birth, when his mother receives a premonitory dream that involves Muhammad and the holy site of the Ka’ba expands to bring Ali’s mother inside, so that she can give birth to Ali inside of it. There are other signs of Ali’s favored status, such as Muhammad tying his turban around Ali’s head, a sign of blessing.

In a folk tale from the Pamir mountain range in Central Asia, a hero by the name of al-Walid is unable to defeat a despotic figure named Qahqahah. It is Ali who is ultimately able to defeat this villain. The basis for this victory is tied to Ali’s unsurpassed piety, and “it is argued in the legend that the long reign of tyranny and injustice manifested in Qahqahah had to be replaced

42. Similar claims regarding the religious values of superheroes can be found in several works, most notably Weinstein 2006.
by freedom and justice brought by Ali, and that true salvation was due to Ali and his progeny.\textsuperscript{43} In this story the human strengths of al-Walid are not sufficient to defeat the enemy; Ali’s special connection to God is necessary.

Certain tropes emerge around Ali as hero and super-hero.\textsuperscript{44} One trope is that he hears calls for help from people in need when they have no other recourse. This tradition actually dates back to Prophet Muhammad, who called on Ali for help on various occasions,\textsuperscript{45} for help in battle; there is even a belief amongst Shi’a that a special prayer was revealed to Muhammad to call for the help of Ali.\textsuperscript{46} The prayer has a line which says “call Ali, the manifestation of marvels.” The reference to “marvels” contributes to the inflation of Ali’s stories to the level of the super-hero. Another element of Ali’s superheroism is his strength, which allows him to slay dragons or lift doors that normally require eight men to carry.\textsuperscript{47} Ali also has strong interpersonal skills, so that he is represented as a loyal man, a good father, and a good husband. To the latter point, his wife Fatima, who is arguably an under-appreciated hero in her own right,\textsuperscript{48} often appears in stories with him. Finally, since Ali is a Muslim hero, he will often end up converting other characters in his stories to Islam, and this becomes a sign of heroic success.

Ali’s tales of heroism cross cultural borders. Some stories are unique to particular communities; many tales are variations of a core narrative, with Ali defeating hordes of enemies. One of the most commonly retold stories seems to be a story wherein Muhammad, in a time of need, calls Ali. These are not embellishments of the events of Khaybar or Uhud but distinct battles that are clearly mythic, while referencing historical antecedents. For example, in one Swahili version, Muhammad is losing a battle, and the angel Gabriel appears to tell him to call Ali. After Muhammad calls for him, Ali miraculously appears from a great distance to slay three giants, take down 2000 men, and defeat the enemy’s champion, at which point the remainder of the opposition converts to Islam.\textsuperscript{49}

In another story, a Muslim is captured by the demon Rasi Li Ghuli, the Swahili version of the Arabic ra’s al-ghul (or “Head of the Demon”).\textsuperscript{50} Ali

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Iloliev 2015, 310.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Renard 1993, 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Shah-Kazemi 2006b, 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Amir-Moezzi 2011, 352–353.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} Shah-Kazemi 2006b, 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Madelung 2014.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Knappert 1999, 77–88. According to Knappert, there seems to be an Arabic version of this tale as well; cf. 1967, 193–197.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} This ra’s al-ghul is not the same as Batman’s nemesis, Ra’s al Ghul. It is not inconceivable that the comic character is an Orientalist pastiche of Islamicate antecedents, but there is no direct evidence for such a linkage.
\end{itemize}
defeats the demon, rescues the Muslim and other captives, and in the process is able to show his cunning and prowess in defeating numerous foes.\textsuperscript{51} This demon is not the most powerful supernatural foe that Ali fights. In an increasing escalation of Ali’s prowess, there is a mythic retelling of the Battle of Badr, where Satan battles the angel Gabriel in the air and Ali on the ground. Ali is about to slay Satan but Gabriel prevents him from delivering the killing blow, because, according to a Muslim belief, “Satan cannot be killed before Judgement Day.”\textsuperscript{52}

Ali’s fantastic qualities do not just center around battle prowess. His moral character is also an important part of his heroism that is manifest in super-heroic action. In one instance, a young man wants to win the heart of a woman by killing Ali. When Ali hears this tale, he tells the young man that if he becomes Muslim, Ali will offer his head to the boy, so he can win the heart of his beloved. The boy refuses to convert, and the two fight. Ali bests him, at which point the youth converts to Islam, and Ali says he will help the young man get his girl.\textsuperscript{53} The tale illustrates Ali’s dedication to his religion, as he is willing to die to have someone convert to the faith. He also represents a commitment to help those who ask for it, even though the boy fought with him.

Another story describes Ali’s religious learning. A man feels an urge to travel and speak to Muhammad. After traveling, he arrives to find out Muhammad has passed away, but is advised to go speak to Ali. He asks Ali twenty difficult questions about faith, which Ali easily answers, and the man converts to Islam.\textsuperscript{54} Ali’s fluency with esoteric material of the faith demonstrates a special relationship to the divine, which allows him to access this knowledge.

Ali’s relationship to Fatima, his wife, is emblematic of his conception of family. Their union is blessed by God, who tells Muhammad that they should be married, and who promises that Gabriel will be Ali’s \textit{vakil} (representative) and God will be Fatima’s.\textsuperscript{55} Fatima refuses the worldly gifts from God that are given as a wedding present, asking instead to be an intercessor for Muslim women in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{56}

Fatima’s rejection of material wealth from God is embedded in a larger discourse of one rejecting worldly attachment, including wealth, as one

\textsuperscript{51} Knappert 1999, 139–144.
\textsuperscript{52} Knappert 1985, 249.
\textsuperscript{53} Knappert 1985, 258–259.
\textsuperscript{54} Knappert 1999.
\textsuperscript{55} Knappert 1999, 45. In Islamic law, a bride and a groom do not marry each other directly, but through affirmations of their \textit{vakils}, or representatives.
\textsuperscript{56} Knappert 1985, 240–241.
becomes more spiritually adept. Ali, as a person deeply invested in being God-conscious, is not rich. On a journey, he gives away the last of his money in charity. As he nears home, a man offers to sell him a camel on credit. Ali takes the camel, and a rich man offers to buy the camel. This transaction allows Ali to pay the initial cost of the camel and have money left over. The man he gives the money to and the man involved in the camel transaction are God’s representatives. The tale demonstrates Ali’s generosity to the consumer of the story.\textsuperscript{57} An important subtext here is that trusting in God is the best guarantee of sustenance.

A story with a similar moral involves Fatima being ill. She asks for a pomegranate to make juice, so that her symptoms may be relieved. Ali finds the last pomegranate in the city. He then meets a sick beggar, and Ali gives him the fruit so that the beggar may reap its benefit. The angel Gabriel then visits Ali and Fatima to provide a collection of pomegranates for Ali to give to Fatima.\textsuperscript{58} In both stories, Ali’s generosity and reliance on God are expressions of his moral qualities. That moral expression of charity is what marks him as a hero. His heroism is then merged with mythic engagement with God and an angel to mark him as a super-hero.

Food and sustenance, in the context of family and God’s power, continue to be important elements of Ali’s super-heroism in cross-cultural contexts. In one story, Ali and Fatima are fasting for three days. Their sons Hasan and Husayn are ill, and the fast is a prayer for healing. At sunset, as Fatima finishes making five portions of food – for herself, Muhammad, Ali, Hasan, and Husayn – beggars come knocking on the door. Ali gives the beggars the food and the family’s fast remains unbroken. On the second night, blind men come by and Muhammad gives them food, and the fast continues. On the third day, orphans come by and Fatima gives them food. After fasting for three days without interruption, God sends a message to the five of them that they will be granted Paradise, and thus will receive blessed sustenance, for their generosity.\textsuperscript{59}

Amongst the Hui, an ethnic group in China, there is a similar story of fasting. An army led by Ali has been without food for three days. Ali promises food and asks Hasan and Husayn to go scouting for something to eat. Fatima begins cooking for the army, as though the food will appear. Hasan and Husayn find only sacks of sawdust. Fatima takes the sawdust and mixes it with rocks from a nearby river. The combination miraculously turns into

\textsuperscript{57} Knappert 1985, 46; Renard 1993, 111.
\textsuperscript{58} Knappert 1985, 275.
\textsuperscript{59} Knappert 1985, 259–260.
a rich porridge that feeds the army. Ali’s trust in God is shared by his family, which allows God to become an actor in the world.60

The miraculous nature of these stories emphasizes the manifestation of God’s power in response to those who rely utterly on God. They feed into the super-heroic powers granted to Ali by being a mard-e khuda, a man of God. However, it is his role as fata that provides a more practical model of emulation. In his more human tales, the reader/listener/viewer is reminded of a core principle of Ali’s teachings: knowledge must be turned into action.61

As we saw in his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, knowing the ethical precepts of the Qur’an should result in specific actions that one can take to improve the lives of people.

The Stranger

Sufi Comics illustrate the stories of Ali as a hero. Two brothers, Mohammed Ali Vakil and Mohammed Arif Vakil, started the company in 2009. According to their website, they believe “that religion is not just about following a set of rules & regulations, but actually meant to reform us from inside so that we become better human beings,” and they are “influenced by the spiritual and moral stories of the Prophet Muhammad (s) and his Holy Progeny (the Ahlul Bayt).”62 In their explanatory statement of the comics, the brothers clearly articulate that they see these stories as a means of personal edification, to make them better Muslims.

“The Stranger” is a story that deals with obligations of family, loyalty, and commitments to those in need. The story begins with an image of a woman carrying water back to her family. She meets a man who asks why her husband is not doing the heavy work of the house. She responds that her husband was a soldier in Ali’s army, and that he died in battle. The stranger offers to help her carry the load, and when they arrive at her home, he sees that she has children. He offers to help that day and he returns over the following days, bringing her food and taking care of the children. One day, a neighbor comes over and recognizes the stranger as Ali, and the woman begs his forgiveness for making him do house work.

One reading of this text is that Ali is committed to all the people in his

60. Li and Luckert 1994, 94–96.
62. Unknown 2012. The “(s)” after the mention of Muhammad’s name is a symbol for prayers to be offered by Muslims for Muhammad. It is often translated as “peace be upon him” in English. The “Ahlul Bayt” (i.e. Ahl al-Bayt) are are Muhammad’s close family, including Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn.
care, as witnessed in his letter to al-Ashtar. No one will take care of the widow and the orphan if he does not do so himself. The familial argument can be extended based on what we saw as part of his miraculous stories about food. Here, the needy person and her family are also part of Ali’s family, as the soldier was part of Ali’s army. The man entrusted Ali with his life, and so Ali fulfills that trust by taking care of the man’s family.

A variation of the story adds a detail of Ali standing in front of a cooking fire and saying that he was trying to feel the fire of hell. This imagery is consistent with Ali as *fata*, recognizing that his actions in this world are determined by God. It can also be that he reminds himself of what happens when he fails in his duties in faith. Another reading is that it is an earthly penance, a form of mea culpa, where he seeks forgiveness from the family, as the father died for Ali, and now the children are orphans.

Because stories of Ali are well known amongst Muslims, the one-page comic also serves as a rich archive of intertextual references. For example, a famous prayer of Ali states:

> There is a group who worship God out of desire [for something not yet attained], and this is the worship of the merchants. And there is a group who worship God out of fear, and this is the worship of the slaves. And there is a group who worship God out of gratitude, and this is the worship of the free.63

It seems consistent with the logic of this prayer to not worship God out of fear of hell, that Ali standing in front of the fire is most likely a connection between the worldly and otherworldly conceptions of justice in his actions. He is called to help the woman and her family by divine guidance, not from fear of punishment. However, that does not mean that he is not aware that there is a punishment for those who fail in their religious obligations. From a Muslim worldview, justice without consciousness of the divine leads to relativism, while a commitment to the letter of religious law that strips it of its intent is reductionism.64 Ali is in equilibrium, navigating a balance between *din* (religion) and *dunya* (the world). Reza Shah-Kazemi argues that justice is fully realized when it is linked to “the spiritual precepts of the Islamic faith,” and that “contemplation and action are seen in this perspective as complementary, not contradictory.”65

This story of Ali as “The Stranger” seems to be well known in the oral tradition, but does not have any obvious visual depiction in the archives of

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63. Shah-Kazemi 2011, 32. This prayer is illustrated in Vakil and Vakil 2011, 39.
64. Lakhani 2006, 56.
Figure 2: The story of “The Stranger” by Sufi Comics.
Ali’s iconography.66 The Sufi Comics version of the story appears to be a rare depiction of the story. While depictions of human beings are common in Muslim traditions, particularly in traditions of spiritual discipline, the artists of the comic chose not to depict Ali’s face. The aura of a visual depiction carries with it baraka or blessing.67 The image also collapses mythic time, so that the religious figure is present, rather than represented, and the viewer engages in “visual hagiography,” conflating the life of the figure with her own life.68 These images are further used for talismanic purposes, such as protection, or good fortune, and reminders to do good.69

The lack of details in Ali’s face – and of Muhammad’s family more broadly in Sufi Comics – signifies that his visage is too holy to behold. The blank space is a type of halo to indicate Ali’s special status. It is also an acknowledgement of his position in certain Shi‘i thought as a peerless hero, both because of his commitment to the faith, and because God has chosen him to be a hero. He is between hero and super-hero. This liminality of being both hero and super-hero is an important part of the Islamicate tradition.70 The consumer of the tale is put in an aspirational position: to emulate the perfect human, whilst knowing they will fail. It is the struggle to better oneself that defines the religious life of many of these consumers. The fantastical elements of Ali’s battle prowess are not as important in this story. In this story, the elements of Ali’s super-hero identity are tied to his relationship with the divine. The average believer can only achieve part of his ability; the remainder can only be granted by God, and it has only been promised to Muhammad and his family. The visualization allows the reader to receive the blessings of the image, to be morally edified, and to know that Ali is to be followed because of divine command.

Despite the special lineage and characteristics of Ali, the first panel finds him walking by himself on the streets of a town (fig. 2). He sees a woman struggling with a heavy load and offers her his assistance. In the next panel, she tells him of her difficulties, so Ali becomes an emotional support as well. It is the humanity of Ali that is magnified and represented in this sequence.

66. Flankerud 2010, 58.
67. Here, the work of Walter Benjamin, and to a lesser extent John Berger, are instrumental to understanding “aura.” They speak to the tradition and history that is evoked by the image and how viewers integrate that longer narrative into understandings of the image. The viewer may then potentially integrate those understandings into their own lives. See Benjamin 1986; Berger 1973.
68. Roberts et al., 2003, 45.
69. Roberts et al. 2003, 48; Flankerud 2010, 60.
70. For similar arguments about the liminality of superheroes, cf. Kaveney 2008, 5; Coogan 2006, 52.
The next panel captures three events: the joyfulness of the children at the return of the mother, Ali’s restless night, and Ali’s return the next day. The fact that there are two children represented is highly significant to a Muslim reader. Ali has two sons, Hasan and Husayn. The evocation of an empty house with two young children resonates with Ali and with the reader, who is familiar with Ali’s life. The reader is not sure what is troubling Ali during his sleepless night: it could be guilt or it could be the suffering he witnessed in the family. The next day, Ali eases the family’s material need by bringing them food. This construction of the visual flow invests the reader in the story because it alludes to Ali’s own personal story. It also emphasizes the notion that religious knowledge must result in action. Here, Ali seeks to aid the widow and the orphans. These are Qur’anic commandments that Ali reiterates in his letter to Malik al-Ashtar. His unease at night, then, most likely relates to the difficulties of the family.

This idea of turning faith into action continues in the next panel, where Ali agrees to watch the children. It is an opportunity for Ali to seek forgiveness for not coming sooner to care for the orphans. He says, “forgive Ali if he has failed his duty towards you.” The duty can only be the religious obligation that remains unrealized. This possibility is emphasized at the end of the panel, when Ali places his face near the fire and reminds himself that “the heat of the fire […] is for those who fail in their duty to widows and orphans.” The panel sees Ali the man, who seeks forgiveness, and also Ali the mard-e khuda, who knows his obligations to the divine. He is, once more, balancing the commitment to justice in this world and the next.

A neighbor announcing Ali’s identity to the woman is the sole focus of the fifth panel. It is the shock of recognition and a lifting of the veil of secrets. This revelation is the equivalent of an epiphany in this telling of the story. It is the Freudian unheimlich, “everything that ought to have remained […] secret and hidden but has come to light.” 71 What was a relationship of equals is now turned into a relationship between the Commander of the Faithful, Ali, and the widow of one of his soldiers. He attempts to revert to the old order in the next panel, telling the woman that she does not need his forgiveness, but he needs hers.

The subtle shift in body language reinforces this idea of changed power relationships. In the first panel, Ali is upright. After that, he is always bowed, either carrying a load, or sitting on the floor. He only returns to his full height once his identity is revealed. It is only as Ali, and in seeking forgiveness as Ali, that his true self is reintegrated. He must take responsibility for his own actions. He cannot ask forgiveness for himself, as though he were

a disinterested party. The action of making reparations is a part of what makes Ali a *fata*, a hero.

The story of “The Stranger” makes clear that Ali’s heroism is not tied to battle prowess. Instead, it is manifest through his caring actions. He provides emotional and physical support to a woman and her children who lost the most important man in their lives. The man was a soldier for Ali, so Ali has an obligation to the family. More importantly, Ali is under divine command to help those who cannot help themselves. In Ali’s quest for forgiveness, he must act in a way that benefits the family, but he must also directly ask for forgiveness. It is that challenge that makes the task difficult, but also worth doing.

**Sheathing the Sword**

Ali’s emphasis on doing tasks correctly and well applies to his martial experience as well. Jalaluddin Rumi, a well-known thirteenth-century Persian poet, writes a story of Ali in battle.⁷² The core of the story is that Ali is in a duel and defeats his enemy. As Ali is getting ready to slay his opponent, the man spits in Ali’s face. At this point, Ali sheathes his sword. When asked why, Ali responds that when he was fighting before, he was fighting for God, but when he got angry, he was fighting for himself, and that is not the appropriate way to fight. His enemy, amazed at what he heard, converts to Islam.

This particular story is illustrated in numerous collections of Rumi’s work. The Sufi Comics version seems to collapse several different stories, including Rumi’s. There are hints of the story of the young man who tried to kill Ali to win the hand of a woman. The moral core of the story, “Follow Principles” (fig. 3), is fairly consistent with Rumi’s version, and it speaks to a different model of heroism than simple combat.

As Ali readies himself to deliver the killing blow to his opponent, he is stopped by a plea to give to a beggar. We have consistently seen that one of Ali’s primary concerns is caring for the needy. By casting himself as being in need, Ali’s enemy is able to save his own life. From panel one, we move to panel four, where Ali’s explicit declaration of reliance on God indexes his actions as being those of a hero in an Islamicate vein. It is because of the surety of his faith and God’s plan for him that Ali is able to willingly surrender his sword.

In this telling of the story, and in Rumi’s version, it is when Ali stops himself from delivering the fatal blow that he exhibits self-control born of

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⁷³ Vakil and Vakil 2011, 21.
Figure 3: “Follow Principles” by Sufi Comics.
piety, which is a precondition for leading others.\textsuperscript{74} Ali’s faith supersedes any other concern. Since charitable giving is commanded in the Qur’an above almost any other act, Ali must give his sword to his enemy. Reza Shah-Kazemi says that Ali’s writings frequently reference a Qur’anic verse that the soul incites one to evil. The conception of evil includes the arrogation of the rights of God for oneself. One of the ways this arrogation manifests is to commit acts in a manner that is consistent with God’s command, but which is opposed to the intent of the acts.\textsuperscript{75} Had Ali killed his opponent, he would have been right in killing someone threatening to kill him. However, the point of conflict in Ali’s view is not victory through destruction, but the ability to create peace.

In the Rumi version, Ali’s refusal to slay his enemy epitomizes Ali’s relationship to the divine, which causes him to be humble and conquer his own anger. Ali says that he is fighting to “quell anger, not because [he is] stirred by anger.” Ali demonstrates that a physical struggle is meaningless without a concurrent spiritual struggle.\textsuperscript{76} He must better himself in all ways, and thus, even though he could have been a victor in battle, his greater challenge lies in controlling his own desires.

Panels five and six demonstrate that the enemy has not yet learned this lesson. As we close in on the face of the opponent, we are conscious of him as a person. The panel is a strong parallel to the angry face we see in the second panel. Contrary to Ali’s blank visage, upon which we can project any number of visions – and which symbolizes a loss of the individual self into the divine\textsuperscript{77} – his adversary is still very much grounded in this world. He is sure of himself and indicates that he will follow Ali. For the adversary, to submit to another person is a sign of obedience, but he remains a man, attentive to the world. Ali’s response in panel seven is to turn his back on the enemy, which indicates a cutting off of the relationship. He does not even return to battle, and appears to walk away. As he leaves, Ali says that his opponent should follow principles, not people. This message is a chastisement that people are still of this world but that principles are eternal. It is an implicit call to convert to Islam and to recognize God.

There is a third character in this story, Ali’s sword Dhulfiqar. In the first panel, it is between the two duelers, with its distinctive two blades at the end. It is intimately linked with Ali, so much so that the angel Gabriel

\textsuperscript{74} Lakhani 2006, 44; cf. Shah-Kazemi 2006a, 80.
\textsuperscript{75} Shah-Kazemi 2006a, 72–77.
\textsuperscript{76} Lewisohn 2006, 135–136. Cf. the letter to Malik al-Ashtar, which says to find a commander of the army who is slow to anger and quick to forgive.
\textsuperscript{77} Shah-Kazemi 2006a, 77.
once says that there is “no hero except for Ali, and no sword except for Dhulfiqar.”

For his enemy to ask for it is to ask for an extreme sacrifice from Ali. However, Ali must comply because a beggar cannot be refused, as we read in the story of Ali and the pomegranate. It is for this reason that Ali hands the sword over. In the third panel, Dhulfiqar is in the center, but on its side, poised not to kill the body of the enemy, but to kill his ignorance. Ali is attempting to demonstrate correct behavior rather than explain it to his enemy. Once the blade is handed over, and the adversary brings it close to himself, Ali is able to cause his enemy to lay down the sword. The power is not in the sword but in the intent with which it is wielded. For Ali, the power is God, and that power flows through Ali and into the blade. For the opponent, a blade is a blade, and without a weapon, Ali should be defenseless. However, in panel four, when Ali points out how impotent the enemy is compared to God, Dhulfiqar disappears from the comic. Ali’s power is not in the sword.

The informed reader knows that there is a deeper history of Dhulfiqar. The origin of the sword is unclear. In some tellings, it is Adam’s sword that is passed along the line of prophets until it goes from Muhammad to Ali. Other versions have Muhammad receiving the sword directly from God, during Muhammad’s Night Journey. Muhammad then passes the sword on to Ali during a battle, when Ali’s own sword breaks. In any version, the sword has a mythic quality to it, denoting Ali’s special status. There is a story that says Ali had a small scroll attached to Dhulfiqar, in which was written, “may God curse whoever slaughters for other than God.” This parchment serves as a reminder to Ali that when he wields the blade he must remain God-conscious, and emphasizes Ali’s rationale in sheathing the sword.

Ali and his sword become the epitome of a jawanmard, engaging in chivalrous acts, or in the case of Dhulfiqar, being a vehicle for the establishment of virtue. However, Ali’s heroism is not based on his prowess with a sword. Even in combat, he must be in control of himself and be God-conscious. It is when his human nature would call him to strike that he must refrain from doing so, as there is a higher obligation. In one version of the story, his obligation is to stop his anger. In another version of the story, the obligation is to give charity. Ali’s heroism, defined by his relationship with the divine, is about knowing when not to attack as much as it is by his great victories in battle.

78. Shah-Kazemi 2006b, 15.
Conclusion

Ali says “no individual is lost and no nation is refused prosperity and success if the foundations of their thought and actions rest upon piety and godliness, and upon truth and justice.” There is an unmistakable, if superficial, parallel with the famous Superman catchphrase about his fight for “truth, justice, and the American way.” However, Superman’s heroism is dependent on secret identities, costumes, and his own strength and will. Ali’s truth and justice are defined by his religion, Islam, and his relationship with God. He must be public about his identity and actions. His humanity, and the concordant human struggle to obey God, is the source of his heroism.

In Muslim traditions, Ali is the first hero. The angel Gabriel vouchsafes him as such, saying that he is a peerless hero. His heroism is based on his valor in battle but also his refusal to fight, his erudition, and his leadership. These qualities eventually take on a super-human dimension in mythic tales. These stories often incorporate details of historical events, granting them a semblance of veracity. The super-human stories, while meant to entertain, also have a moral value.

It is in the more human stories, of Ali as a hero, that the reader/listener receives moral edification. Certain characteristics of Ali can be achieved by a committed believer. Yet, many attributes are reserved for Ali and his family alone, because of their relationship to Muhammad and God. This special status is depicted through a halo-like effect, whether a gold ring, a crown of fire, or a blank face. In Islamicate tales, the hero is never dependent on super powers. Rather, the hero can do fantastical things, but is grounded in an approachable humanity to encourage the consumer to better her own life. As a result, Ali is best described as a super-hero, a hero who sometimes appears with uncanny abilities given by God.

Sufi Comics continues a long history of illustrating heroic stories from Islamicate traditions. The shift to a comics format allows for a more detailed telling of these stories. Traditionally, the image would be of a key moment in the tale, with text driving the manuscript. The comics medium merges the narrative and illustrative elements in a more seamless fashion. The result is a dense version of stories that can engage with greater intertextual knowledge. At the same time, the core of Ali’s morality persists throughout the stories. He is the first (super-)hero for Muslims. He has his signature sword, and fights for truth, justice, and the spiritual way.

That there is an alternative concept of what heroism is should not de-

tract from the emergence of characters like Simon Baz or Monet St. Croix in the American comic industry. However, it would be disingenuous to speak of Muslim superheroes without recognizing that there is a long and diverse history of what the idea of the hero means to Muslims. The point is not to establish competing visions of the hero, but to recognize the plurality of heroic models. As Muslim creators like G. Willow Wilson and Sana Amanat work on characters like Kamala Khan, we may also witness an expansion of what defines the Islamicate hero or an organic integration of different understandings of the hero.
Works Cited


