Teaching Islam with Graphic Novels and Comics

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In his "Homage to Joe Sacco," Edward Said celebrates the author of Palestine and gives us one of the best love letters to comics ever written. He shares his first comic book experience, "Everything about the enticing book of colored pictures, but specially its untidy, sprawling format, the colorful, riotous extravagance of its pictures, the unrestrained passage between what characters thought and said . . . all this made up for a hugely wonderful thrill." I remember my first time; squirreling away school lunch money to keep up with the exploits of the Uncanny X-Men. If that seems frivolous, my defense is that X-Men stories are an extended allegory about the evils of racism. Comics can be powerful. Comics can be profound. But there is more that makes them special.

The comic book engages a particular kind of multimodal literacy. By creating meaning
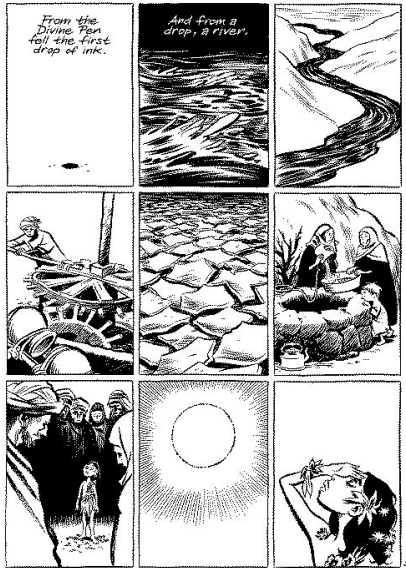
through the juxtaposition of text and image, they provide an innovative means for introducing visual content into the religious studies classroom. With panels increasing or decreasing in size and number, there is a flexibility of space in comics providing for movement akin to close-ups and wide angle shots encompassing subjects both fantastic and mundane. The potential dynamism and complexity of the comic book is the heart of its classroom potential. Yes, they can capture student interest because they are exciting and fun. They will also force the student to engage with content in new ways.

Teachers are sometimes concerned with responding to different learning styles among students. I agree with this sentiment insofar as the classroom activities remain focused on encouraging deep reflection on Islam and the achievement of learning goals. With comics, then, the value is not just that they have pictures but what it is that a particular collection of pictures can do.
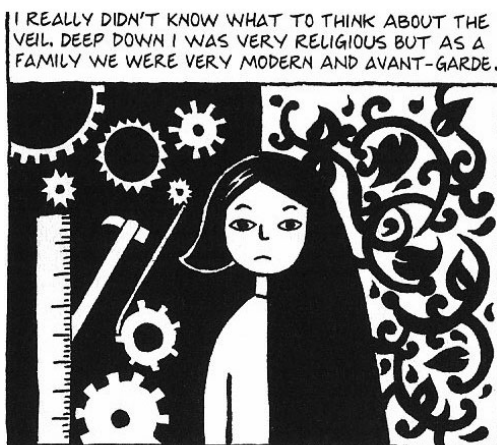
Consider Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis, a comic memoir about growing up in the midst of Iran's Islamic Revolution. She illustrates conversations with

God, with mullahs who are "truly religious," and with those who are attacking her on religious grounds. This allows for a different order of questioning: How does she depict God? Is there a difference in the way she frames positive and negative religious interactions in a panel? How does the comic show us *her* religion in a way text alone could not?

Or we can reflect on Craig Thompson's Habibi, a beautifully illustrated Islamic fairy tale across 672 pages. Thompson's fascination with Arabic calligraphy is central to the volume; it serves as
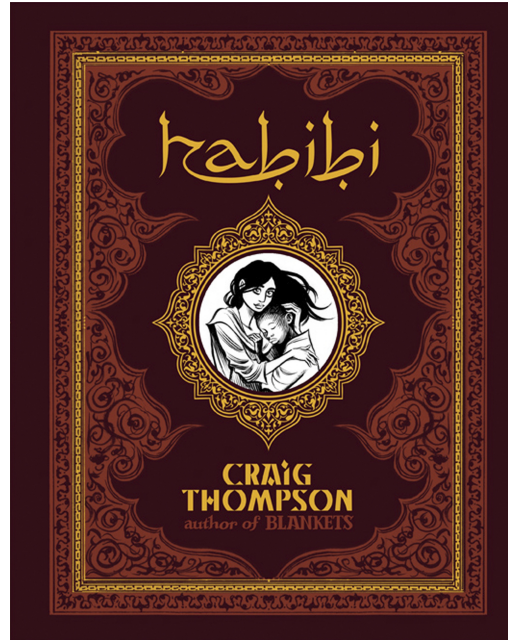
an extended meditation on the relationship between text and image in the human struggle to come to terms with the divine. When Thompson draws parallels between fluid Arabic script, a stream, and a rivulet of blood spilled out on the ground, what is he trying to tell the reader? When he gives us a dual-frame depiction of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac on one side and Ishmael on the other, what can we learn?

Then we have the latest iteration of Ms. Marvel, an American Muslim teenager struggling with questions of responsibility and identity while negotiating newfound powers. San Francisco street artists recently used images of Ms. Marvel, known as Kamala Khan when not battling supervillains, to cover up anti-Islamic advertisements sponsored by a hate group. In Issue #6 Kamala meets with an imam who tells her to practice courage, strength, honesty, compassion, and self-respect. In scenes like this, in both image and word, how does *Ms. Marvel* depict Islam? How does it communicate the experience of Muslim women in the United States? Does this run counter to some of the other ways in which women are depicted in superhero comics?

While I can attest to the richness of content in each of the four comics mentioned above, it is up to individual educators to read a comic carefully beforehand and decide how the material will be of use in the classroom. For instance, I believe *Persepolis* would be an excellent addition to a list of course readings while *Ms. Marvel* would make an appropriate topic for a student research project. On a cautionary note, these titles are subject to the same biases one might find in any other group of texts and teachers should weigh them accordingly.

Comics can give rise to exciting new learning activities and deep questions about the way in which Muslims experience their religion. They can activate the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy by providing opportunities for evaluation and analysis word by word, image by image, and panel by panel. If you struggle to get your students to really wrestle with their reading assignments, this might be a way in. Comics can let you scaffold and model active reading before working with less accessible texts.

As a capstone benefit, comics can also provide inspiration on how to assess student learning. Giving your class an option to show what they know by creating their own comics or other visual media will require some additional preparation on the teacher's part but it has the potential to transform summative assessment into a genuinely meaningful process; in Said's words, "a hugely wonderful thrill."

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/06/teaching-islam-with-graphic-novels-and-comics/