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REPRESS ME NOT, FOR I AM YOUR SUPERPOWER: SUPER-HEROISM AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN *MOON KNIGHT* (2022)

Review by Aicha Daoudi

Slater, Jeremy, creator. *Moon Knight*. Performances by Oscar Isaac, May Calamawy, F. Murray Abraham, Ethan Hawke, and Antonia Salib, Marvel Studios, 2022. Television. Disney+.

When Thor appeared in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) with a completely changed physical look fans met a different version of the God of Thunder. He became a depressed, overweight alcoholic with unkempt long hair and a shaggy beard instead of the charismatic hero who tries to save the world as usual. In so doing, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) offered the potential to subvert the audience's superhuman expectations of their superheroes. However, they kept this representation of mental illness in the storyline's periphery, downplaying it for jokes, much like Tony Stark's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in *Iron Man 3* (2013). Yet, mental illness has become more perceptible in Marvel's television series, including paranoid schizophrenia in *Legion* (2017-2019) as well as trauma, grief, and PTSD in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), *Hawkeye* (2021), and *WandaVision* (2021). Its latest mini-series, *Moon Knight* (2022), is no exception offering a centralised experience in the mind of a character with dissociative identity disorder (DID). Unlike its predecessors, *Moon Knight* emphasises the main character's inner struggle and mental health over their super-heroism. It achieves this through two major factors: the centrality of the character's mundane life and the focus on the inner dynamic between the alter-characters while they search for unity and wholeness, presenting a new kind of super-heroism.

Moon Knight tells the story of a lonely gift shop employee, Steven Grant (Oscar Isaac), who at first believes that he is sleepwalking. He performs a unique ritual every night to ensure that he does not leave the room. He restrains himself to the bedpost, tapes the edge of the door, and draws a circle of sand around his bed. Then, he discovers that his efforts are in vain because he had not been sleepwalking but blacking out as another alternate identity takes over his body. This alter identity is Marc Spector, a mercenary who functions as an avatar of a powerful Egyptian God, Khonsu (F. Murray Abraham). The two personalities try to navigate their inner conflict as the dual character is drawn into a battle between the gods.

The series' plot line reads as a routine story of Steven Grant, a lonely man with childlike innocence who suffers from DID and happens to be the alter of a vigilante/superhero, not the other way around. This focus was largely achieved through the change of perspective as the comics typically read from the point of view of Khonsu's avatar. The alteration also served as a shift of focus

in the story, offering a different angle for the narrative by marginalising the super-heroic element, a thing that is further emphasised by the screen time that Steven's character occupies, unaware of his superpowered alter-ego. As the director, Aaron Moorhead, stated in *Marvel Studios: Assembled* (2022): "It takes almost the entire length of a featured film until [one] see[s] the titular Moon Knight doing anything." This focus on Steven's mundane life and exploration of his blacked-out periods heightened the humanised portrayal of the superhero in *Moon Knight.* Steven is allowed to be seen as a separate authentic identity instead of the symptom of an illness. The subsequent conflicts between him and Marc continue to dominate the show's screen time, foregrounding their inner struggle rather than the flashy fight scenes in the series' central plot line.

Given the nature of the fantastical genre aspects of the cinematography reflect the conflict between Marc and Steven, visually externalising the fragmentation of character that is symptomatic of DID. When Steven is unaware of Marc's existence he suffers from blackouts and memory gaps, which are common symptoms of DID; these memory gaps turn into cinematic time-lapses that are removed from the eyes of the viewers. After he learns about Marc their co-consciousness and negotiations become visible using props like mirrors and reflective surfaces (which function as visualisers, much like Wanda's red hex). These props not only form external visual reflections of two different identities with the same physical appearance but symbolically reflect the importance of perception and reality as concepts in a DID system. The repeated close-up shots of Marc and Steven, whether directly or from a reflection, refocus the storyline on the character rather than the events surrounding them. In addition, there are often questions for both the characters and the audience concerning the reality of the perceived scene, where mirrors and pools of water are used to invert or subvert it. In the first episode, the show's cinematography utilises shots of Steven from the reflection of water on the floor. There is one scene, in particular, where he is talking to the street performer and the scene is actually upside down, shot as their reflection in a nearby fountain. When Steven is about to leave a leaf falls on the water and disrupts the reality of the characters' interaction.

This theme of perception versus reality is further developed in later episodes of the series. During the episode "Asylum," Marc and Steven wake up in a physiatrist hospital which is supposed to represent their unconscious mind and the guiding path to their afterlife. An Egyptian goddess explains that the hospital is an imagined space. It symbolises the system's reality informing Marc and Steven's perception of their lived experience. Having this episode dedicated to exploring the intricacies of their mind and the root of their illness, while the plot still proceeds in the periphery, recentres the narrative around a character study as opposed to a typical action-packed superhero movie. The ability to visually see the origins behind Steven's traits, like the British accent and the childlike innocence, from materials around Marc's childhood in this imagined space adds greater depth to the series' understanding and representation of DID. In the process, the show also subverts the typical benevolence of gods in the MCU, revealing Khonsu's manipulative and exploitative treatment of Marc/Steven that blurs the lines between hero and villains.

Although the creators of the show and the actors in it never claimed to present an accurate representation of DID, they took a lot of effort to make an authentic one. Not only did they hire specialised psychiatrist consultants to assist with the portrayal, but the main actor Oscar Isaac who

plays all the system's characters, did substantive research on DID including reading Robert Oxnam's *A Fractured Mind* (2005) which documents the author's personal experience with DID. This effort shows through in *Moon Knight*, offering a credible and sympathetic portrayal of mental illness that neither villainises nor seeks to cure it. The show offers the system a chance for harmonious cooperation instead of treatment. This is evident in two cinematographic elements it deploys. Firstly, the moon symbol in the series' credits starts as a thin waxing crescent when Steven and Marc are either in denial or rejection of each other and then it gradually increases to become a full moon as they accept one another and reach cohabitation by the final episode. Secondly, the music reflects this progression since the series' staple song is Engelbert Humperdinck's 'A Man Without Love' (1968), which echoes from the first episode to the last, hinting at the character's past. In the last episode, the show features titles such as Hesham Nazih's 'Befriending Myself' (2022) and Frank Sinatra's 'My Way of Life' (1969) that match the characters' dynamics as they navigate their mental illness and reach wholeness.

The declaration that navigating mental illness is the real superpower which Marc possesses moves the MCU away from its previous villainous or dismissive representations of mental illness. Although, this new attitude was clearly short-lived following the latest portrayal of The Scarlet Witch in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Nonetheless, *Moon Knight* delivers messages of self-love and self-acceptance to achieve cohabitation and wholeness, as well as the necessity of having support systems in times of mental distress. The series represents mental illness credibly as a personality trait instead of a trope used to advance the plot. By narrating a hero's journey navigating their mental illness simultaneously with their acquired superpowers, Marvel created more space to understand characters with mental illnesses, a space that was previously denied. Not only does *Moon Knight* get to represent characters that are much more complex and nuanced, but they also transcend their material from pure entertainment to more inclusive representation, portraying superheroes battling inner demons as well as outer ones. Perhaps, *Moon Knight* indicates that Phase Five of the MCU will emphasise the human aspects of the superhuman.

WORKS CITED

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Aicha Daoudi is a PhD student at the University of Limerick, Ireland. She is currently working on the overlap of the trope of the witch with archaic archetypal energies in American television series of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Her research interests include popular culture, American fiction, Fantasy, archetypes, witchcraft, and the supernatural.