

# Five Empowered Women in Pop Culture - Pop Culture Classroom

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The screenshot shows the homepage of the Pop Culture Classroom Blog. At the top, there is a navigation bar with social media icons (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), a 'SUBSCRIBE' button, and links for 'My Account', 'Cart', and '0 Items'. Below this is a main navigation menu with links for 'HOME', 'FOR EDUCATORS', 'FOR PARENTS', 'FOR STUDENTS', 'RESOURCES', and 'BLOG'. The 'POP CULTURE CLASSROOM' logo is prominently displayed on the left. The central banner features the text 'THE CLASSROOM BLOG' in large, bold letters, with a search icon on the right. Below the banner is a featured article titled 'FIVE EMPOWERED WOMEN IN POP CULTURE' by MK Sauer, dated April 11, 2018. The article's image shows a woman in traditional African attire. To the right of the article is a search bar and a 'Recent Posts' section listing several articles, including 'The Pop Culture Classroom Kids' Laboratory Returns for DCC'18!', '5 Comics For Teaching Diversity', 'FREE Denver Comic Con Admission for Educators!', 'Our Educational Course Returns to Denver Comic Con 2018!', and 'Using Graphic Novels to Get Your Kids Interested in Classic Literature'.



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## THE CLASSROOM BLOG



by MK Sauer | April 11, 2018

The term “strong female character” gets tossed around so often, but many representations of women in media aren’t necessarily all that progressive or empowering. Women aren’t as frequently represented as men, either: Looking at statistics from the past few years, only about 37% of roles on television are played by women (2015). In film, the percentage of speaking roles for women drops to 28% (2012), and women make up a mere 16% of directors, writers, producers and editors (2013). Representation matters—but more importantly, accurate and well-rounded representation allows people to see a world outside of themselves, fostering critical thinking and empathy with those who are different. Indeed, how we see ourselves and how we see others is drastically affected by the media we consume; by better representing empowered women in pop culture, we can try to combat the biases and stereotypes that come from normalizing only one ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or culture.

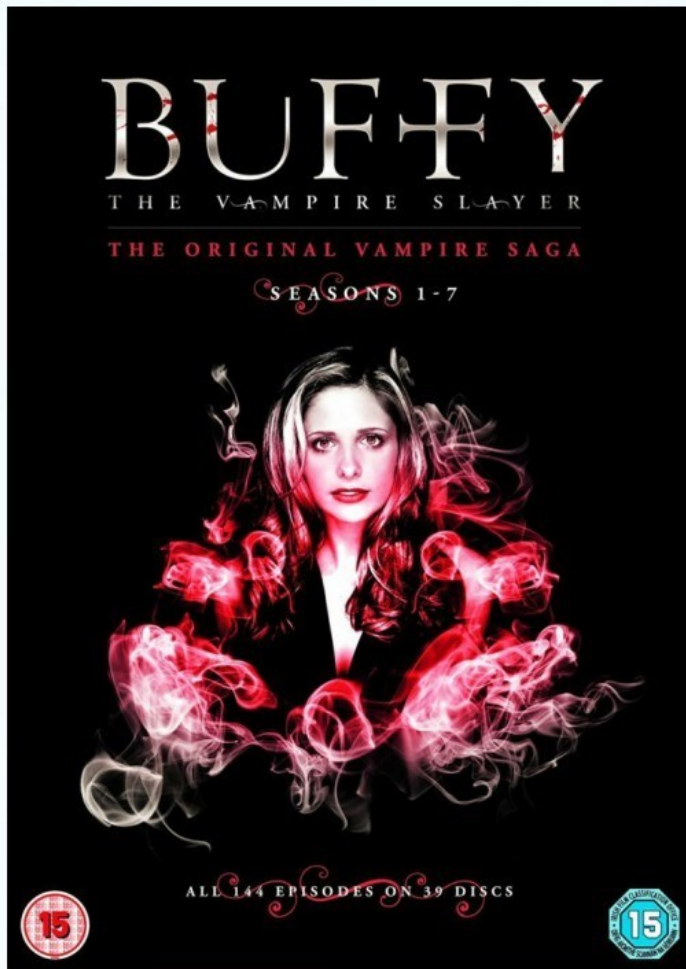
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The women listed below are five examples of female characters who are strong in more than just a spiritual or physical sense; they have agency, speak their minds, and aren't punished for pushing progressive ideas; they don't conform to clichéd standards of beauty or femininity. And though no one representation can be perfect for everyone, they all upend the status quo in diverse and exciting ways.

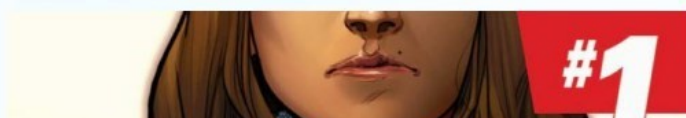
### 1) Buffy Summers



*Buffy The Vampire Slayer* debuted in 1997, a time when most empowered female heroes were tough women who were modeled on traditional male action heroes. (Think of the masculine Ripley from the *Alien* franchise or the tough-as-nails Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*). Buffy, as played by actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, is as strong (if not stronger) than the boys, but she also embraces her feminine side. She was the first to show audiences that they could be both "The Chosen One" and "the cheerleader"; that a small teenage girl who wasn't particularly tough-looking, but was as strong emotionally and physically as any of her male counterparts, could be the savior of the world.

Not only that, *Buffy* gave us one of the first mainstream, televised representations of a lesbian relationship. Buffy wasn't the only empowered woman on the show; her friend Willow became an iconic queer figure in her own right. Not only that, after the show ended, *Buffy* continued in comic form, and there, Buffy herself had a relationship with another woman, demonstrating that an empowered woman need not be defined by any one sexual orientation. Also revelatory for the time was that the queer relationships in *Buffy* were portrayed like any other: they were simply couples who loved each other.

### 2) Ms. Marvel / Kamala Khan





When Kamala Khan debuted as Ms. Marvel (a moniker previously held by Carol Danvers, before she was promoted to “Captain”) in March 2014, she became Marvel Comics’ first headlining Muslim superhero. Kamala Khan is a fascinating character, because while Kamala is endowed with superpowers that allow her to fight crime and neighborhood thugs, she also struggles with identity issues such as her faith, body image, and fitting in with the other teenagers in her Manhattan borough.

Kamala, a brown-haired Pakistani-American, struggles to be accepted in a world where definitions of beauty are shaped by Western standards (i.e. blonde, thin, and white). Using her superpower of extreme stretchy-shape shifting, at first she makes herself look stereotypically beautiful, only to realize that’s not where her beauty (or her power) comes from. As she accepts herself as a woman of color, so does she become an intriguing and complex character, emboldened by her own acceptance of her identity.

Kamala frequently struggles with the ways that others try to define her, as both a woman and a Muslim. Muslim women are stereotypically shown to be either oppressed by their faith (and misogynistic male characters who happen to share that faith), or, on the other hand, as terrorists. Some examples include characters portrayed in shows such as *Homeland* and *24*, or films like *Aladdin* (in which most of the women characters are objectified belly dancers). Kamala, in contrast, is neither oppressed by her faith, nor does she condone violent acts. (Indeed, her faith, as it should be, is completely separate from the stereotypical representations of violent Islamic terrorists.) And Kamala is always shown to be more than just a shallow, sexualized belly dancer. Her culture is truly represented, not twisted by decades-old stereotypes. By showing that she’s more than her gender or her faith, Kamala shows the ways that women are complex humans with more than just surface-deep attributes.

### 3) Olivia Dunham





The sci-fi TV show *Fringe* ran from 2008-2013. In it, Olivia Dunham (played by Anna Torv) is an FBI agent who investigates cases on the 'fringe' of scientific achievement—ones that often have dire consequences for those involved. What makes Olivia unique, however, is her portrayal as a somber, unemotional woman who is ambitious and driven—qualities that are almost never given to female leads. Usually, women are given a few personality quirks, but rarely are they fully fleshed out characters with flaws that might make them “unlikeable.”

Olivia is distant and stoic, traits usually given to male characters, but she remains undeniably feminine and is compassionate and enthusiastic about her work. Her feelings are strong; she just keeps them close to her chest—and though she cries on screen, it's not played as a weakness. Rather, it just shows that she's human.

She also isn't lost in a romantic plot, like many female characters. (One very popular example is Bella in the *Twilight* novels, who had dreams of going to college and becoming a teacher, but abandoned all that once she met Edward. In fact, she ditches just about everything in her life—family, friends—for her relationship with him.) Once women characters in media find a significant other, their stories become more about their role as a companion within the context of a relationship, instead of a fully-developed character with their own unique psychology, that just so happens to be in a serious relationship. In other words, Olivia is never defined as a girlfriend or a wife, but is rather her own complete person, who just so happens to be married to someone else.

#### 4) Okoye





Credit: Kwaku Alston/©Marvel Studios 2018

*Black Panther* (2018) is loaded with exceptional female characters, including Okoye (Danai Gurira). Okoye is the general of the Dora Milaje, the royal guard of Black Panther, the Marvel superhero from Wakanda. She is a commanding military presence, and is shown to be just as adept at fighting as any other warrior (even without super powers!). But more importantly, she is an integral part of the film. Without her, the story would fall apart.

Okoye, like the other women in *Black Panther*, is treated as an absolute equal to the men, but not only is Okoye a strong warrior, she's also a wife. Even so, her relationship to her husband, a leader from another tribe within Wakanda, is the least defining aspect of her life. When forced to make a difficult decision between her duty as a Dora Milaje and her loyalties to her husband, she chooses her duty. Not only that, but the way in which she makes her decision shown is so nonchalant, it doesn't seem like a decision at all: Okoye's loyalty is ultimately to her country, not to her husband.

But the most spectacular part of Okoye's and the other women's roles, is that they are all women of color. Black women are usually treated in the media as loud, obnoxious and angry, so that their thoughts and feelings are never taken seriously because of their emotionality. Such characters are oftentimes dismissed because of their volatility. No one in *Black Panther* is ever subject to this type of exaggerated aggression and they are all listened to, reasonable, and prime examples of motivated and effective characters.

##### 5) Doreen Green / Squirrel Girl





Another Marvel entry, Squirrel Girl has been around since the early 90s, but her recent comic book appearances in *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* (January 2015) have proven to be her most empowering yet. As a teenage girl with the proportional strength of a squirrel, and the ability to command an army of the furry critters (think Aquaman, but with squirrels instead of fish), she has yet to be beaten by any villain, either due to her squirrely powers or her extreme luck.

Doreen is a fantastically well-rounded character: she loves her body (which, like Ms. Marvel, isn't the thin-framed, large-chested sexy model from most other comics), her self-esteem is nestled in her abundant humor, and she's enrolled in a STEM degree program in college. But what makes Doreen an empowered character is her relatability through humor. There is an unfair adage that women can't be funny and Squirrel Girl proves the exact opposite.

Like her male counterpart Deadpool, Squirrel Girl is an irreverent comedian who breaks the fourth-wall of her own comics. She uses humor and coincidence as weapons, but more importantly, she uses them all so exceedingly well that no one calls foul like they do with other female characters. Squirrel Girl has defeated some of the toughest villains in the Marvel Universe (Galactus and Thanos, to name a few) using her unique skills. And because of the humor and the charming way in which she does these things, it's accepted as a light-hearted break from the seriousness that can sometimes bog down a story. The fact that Squirrel Girl can be so impossibly unbeatable paves the way for other female characters to be allowed to be inexplicably good at things (like so many male heroes are) without being singled out for being a woman.

**Honorable Mentions:** Jane Foster as Thor, Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and Batwoman

What other empowered female characters can you think of? Feel free to contact us and let us know! And as always, don't forget to subscribe to our site for more info (in the top right of this window).

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