

Exploring the  
symbolism of the star  
of david in michael  
muhammad knight's  
the taq...



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Since the rise of the subculture, punk rockers have been re-appropriating a variety symbols and everyday items. The primary intention of this bricolage is to shock on-lookers and make some sort of statement. An interesting example of this appears in Michael Muhammad Knight's novel *The Taqwacores*. During the passage on pages 211-12 of the text, Jehangir touches on the history of punk bricolage, distinguishing between symbolic re-appropriation in punk subculture as a whole and Muslim punk: taqwacore. Prior to his analysis, the Star of David physically appears in the novel, generating a number of effects on readers. These effects extend to a large readership including the Muslim community, the Jewish community, and the equally less religious community, simply reacting to the physicality of a symbol in a text. The use of the Star of David in Michael Muhammad Knight's *The Taqwacores* is successful in marveling a wide readership due to religious and cultural predispositions, shock value produced by the physicality of the symbol and a sense of connectivity to Yusef's character. It is significant to look at this passage from a Historicist perspective to understand why the punk usage of the Star of David in *The Taqwacores* causes a reaction and has the ability to formulate controversy amongst a wide readership. Simon Malpas discusses how literature and history function together: "art and literature do not merely reflect the ideas, beliefs and desires of a society in a disinterested manner; they are shaped by them and are actively involved in challenging them ... literature and culture are sites of power and resistance" (Malpas 61). It is important to understand the history of punk subcultural appropriation of religious symbols, as well as societal receptions of the Star of David to fully understand the significance behind Knight using the symbol in his text. Packed with historical significance, it is bound to receive some <https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-symbolism-of-the-star-of-david-in-michael-muhammad-knights-the-taqwacores/>

sort of reaction regardless of the audience of readers today due to both past and current events. Malpas explains: The act of imagination or inspiration that allows a work of art or literature to be created is to be analysed not as some mystical force belonging to a genius, but as a function of the circulation of social discourses in which the artist or writer is as deeply embedded as any other person." (62)Essentially, it would be impossible for Knight to produce this text without including personal experience within his own social discourse. Similarly, it would be impossible for readers not to read this text without personal experience and cultural predispositions coming into play. By physically displaying the Star of David, Knight inevitably engages a certain degree of surprise from unexpected readers, each with their own understanding and interpretation of the symbol. In punk subculture, the re-appropriation of cultural and religious symbols is commonplace as a means of drawing shock and awe from onlookers. Shane Gunster explains how subcultural bricolage functions: The real work of subcultures is not so much expressive as transgressive: the power of style does not arise out of the objective similarities between signs and a way of life, but rather in the differences between how a sign is normally used and its relocation by a subcultural group to a different semiotic context. (Gunster 201)As Jehangir points out, " the old-school punks like Iggy Pop and Sid Vicious, they used to wear the swastika and all this Nazi bullshit" (Knight 211). Punks did not historically bear these symbols to support Nazism, but simply to create controversy and blur the lines between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Punk subculture perfected bricolage by " constitut[ing] itself negatively via a dislocation of signifiers so severe that the possibility for meaning itself was fatally damaged" (Gunster 202). The <https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-symbolism-of-the-star-of-david-in-michael-muhammad-knights-the-taqwacores/>

main point here is that the meaning of the Star of David is being played with so drastically that all meaning behind it becomes irrelevant. Whether or not readers and onlookers see it in this light is an entirely different matter.

Jehangir rhetorically questions the purpose of taqwacore bricolage: “ if this is Muslim Punk, and our community and audience is all fuckin’ Muslim, what symbol’s more unsettling than the Star of fuckin’ David?” (Knight 211).

Taqwacore is building on the symbolic re-appropriation which already exists in punk subculture by using religious symbols guaranteed to draw a reaction from its specifically Muslim audience. This effectively makes symbolic re-appropriation something exclusively taqwacore rather than just punk. In the case of The Taqwacores, the Star of David not only functions by shocking the fictional audience in the text, but also readers, who engage with the symbol almost as personally as Yusef by actually seeing it. The structure of text leading up to the physical appearance of the symbol is scattered in a stream-of-consciousness style, with only one period appearing for twelve lines of text. This indicates Yusef’s flustered reaction to seeing the symbol all over the house. He is depicted as being so distraught by constantly noticing the symbol “ jumping out at me from t-shirt iron-ons, necklaces, patches and even tattooed forearms” that he cannot bring himself to say what it is (Knight 211). Then, rather than Knight simply stating which symbol is being referenced in words, it physically appears in the text. This instance puts readers in Yusef’s shoes, allowing them to experience their own reaction to the symbol. Readers are drawn directly into the text through visual means, changing the pace of the text significantly. This is the only instance in the novel where a symbol physically appears, and a rare occurrence in texts of this nature as a whole. The unusual physical presence of the Star of David

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within the text builds upon readers' reactions to the symbol itself. Punk and taqwacore bricolage can also fuel a variety of reactions from readers of various religious backgrounds. Malpas defines historicism as "the practice of interpreting texts on the basis of the idea that their meanings are generated by the historical contexts in which they are located, and that these contexts change as history moves on" (Malpas 57). Religious symbols such as the Star of David have taken on a variety of meanings throughout time, and these meanings change depending on the religious and cultural exposure of the reader in question. Be it through shock, fascination or distaste, if the point of re-appropriating the symbol is to rile up the Muslim readership, it would undoubtedly prove to be successful. Similarly, a Jewish reader may find it offensive that the symbol is being used out of its original context at all. Alternatively, an Agnostic reader may be disturbed by the re-appropriation simply because they find it disrespectful and inappropriate, regardless of personal significance. Perhaps if the symbol were being used to put across a specific political message, the receptions would be different, or readers would have the chance to gain stronger insight into Knight's and punk subculture's motives. However, as Jehangir states, the point of challenging the meaning of the Star of David is simply "because it's fun" (Knight 212). Simply by taking the symbol out of its serious historical and religious context and depositing it within a rebellious movement just for fun is easily the starting point for even more controversy and frustration. Bricolage is not a new concept among subcultural discourse, and particularly punk discourse. However, Michael Muhammad Knight uses symbolic re-appropriation in a more specific way in his novel *The Taqwacores*. Yusef represents the fictional audience in the novel, providing readers with a clear reaction to the

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appearance of the Star of David within his surroundings. Knight takes this a step further by actually showing readers what Yusef sees. This allows readers to gage their own reaction, and become part of the story as peers of Yusef and the taqwacore house. Depending upon the cultural and religious background of this readership, the symbol is able to take on a variety of meanings. This interactivity is parallel to the fictional characters, Yusef and Jehangir, forming their own individual understandings of the symbol in this passage. More literally speaking, the fact that a symbol physically appears in a novel alone is unusual and would be interesting to most readers, adding another level to the bricolage. As Malpas states, “ any meanings that a text might have are always related to the much wider cultural, political, economic and social institutions and practices of its context” (Malpas 57). This absolutely rings true for Knight’s use of the Star of David in this novel. By failing to consider the societal factors surrounding the symbol, readers would be missing the potential motives Knight has in including it.

Works Cited  
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