



October 18, 2004

Female Muslim Comics Twist Bias into Comic Jobs

Run Date: 10/10/04

By Megan Cossey
WeNews correspondent

A small band of female Muslim comics are breaking cultural and gender stereotypes on stages across the country with a diverse set of convictions and comedic styles. The personal has never seemed so political as when these women crack a joke.

(WOMENS E-NEWS)--Tissa Hami strode onstage at a Boston comedy club this past August in black pants, a thigh length black coat and a head covering, stared down her audience and deadpanned "I really should be wearing a long coat but, well," and her voice suddenly turned valley girl, "I was feeling kind of slutty today!"

The crowd erupted in relieved laughter, and Hami, 31, still a newbie on the Boston stand-up circuit with only two years under her belt, went on to launch sardonic riffs on fake passports, the racism she faced as an Iranian growing up in the Boston suburbs and the dearth of other female Muslim comics: "Well, I didn't want the competition so I stoned them."



Negin Farsad

She probably won't have to revert to sticks and stones since there really are only a handful of female Muslim comics performing in the United States (plus British-born Shazia Mirza, whose act draws a crowd whenever she crosses the pond). In many ways they don't resemble each other much beyond their religion, a penchant for edgy humor and jokes about getting through airport security. Their families are from very different countries, including Iran, Pakistan and the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, and they certainly don't agree on the need to be activists or to "represent."

Using the personal, however, has never seemed so political when these women do it. In a post-9/11 world where, as New York-based sketch comic Negin Farsad, 28, puts it, Islamic people are portrayed in the media as either terrorists or "dusty people hanging out in villages with no jobs," their wittily crafted personal stories and one-liners about Islam, immigrant parents and racial profiling are sure to prick the interest--ire--of their audience.

Their male counterparts, including Palestinian American stand up comic Dean Obeidallah and a well-publicized group called The Arabian Knights, may tread similar ground, but they don't have to struggle with decisions about dressing in hijab on or off stage, nor do they get to use jokes about virginity, sexism and the pressures to get married.

'Bootleg Islam'

Farsad, a veteran of the New York underground sketch comedy scene, is an Iranian American who plumbed her Iranian background for a one-woman show, "Bootleg Islam," that quickly sold out to audiences at last August's New York International Fringe Festival. The show got a rare mention in The Wall Street Journal and was included in a piece about political theater in The New York Sun.

Yet in many ways Farsad's show hardly seems political. She does gently comic impressions of her family in Iran, including a playboy, hard-drinking uncle who she casts as a Prohibition-era gangster, and one of her cousin, a wide-eyed, 23-year-old virgin wrapped in a chador and looking forward to seeing her husband naked on her wedding night. Farsad said she was startled by some of the responses.

"I think one of the funniest things for me was that people said after the show 'Hey, that was really funny and it was really educational,' and I never set out to do anything educational," she said. "I guess I take it for granted, but most people don't know what life is like in these other countries."

"I think people are very curious about the Middle East; they're very curious about Muslims," agreed Hami, who was born in a northern province of Iran and moved to the States when she was 5.

Hami had never seriously considered taking her sense of humor to the stage until 9/11 happened and she became frustrated by the repetitively negative coverage Muslims were getting in the media. So she took an adult education class on stand-up comedy and two years ago she stepped onstage for the first time at the Comedy Studio in Cambridge, wrapped in hijab clothing, terrified and determined to make a mark for her sex and her religion.

"I wanted to speak up in some way and speak out in some way and I noticed that Muslim comics were getting some attention, but they were all men . . . and I just thought, why isn't a woman doing this?" Hami recalled. "I wanted to show a different view of Muslim women. We're not all terrorists, not all fanatics, we're not all voiceless and oppressed."

Hami doesn't actually wear the hijab in her everyday life: She said while her family is "culturally strict" they do not consider themselves religious. (Hami has said her mother pointed out that her own Islamic cleric grandfather "would roll over in his grave if he knew that his great granddaughter was onstage talking about lesbian harems.")

Reaching the Mainstream

By contrast, Mirza, who is 28, considers herself deeply religious and always used to wear Islamic head covering when she started performing her stand up routines four years ago. Mirza, while not the first, is the most famous of the female Muslim comics out there. It is her pilot-license one liner--"My name is Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot license"--told shortly after 9/11 that produced the gasp and laugh heard around the world thanks to the countless stories about her work in prominent newspapers and television shows like The New York Times and CBS' "60 Minutes."

Mirza, who was in New York this September for a three day gig at Baruch College called "The Last Temptation of Shazia," is a former high school physics teacher and the Birmingham, England, daughter of Pakistani parents. She insouciantly draws on her parents' conservative attitudes for her routines with a trademark deadpan. "People ask me why does your mother walk five steps behind your father, and I said well, he looks better from behind." She even spins the tale of a furtive pinch she got on a trip to Mecca, guessing that it must have been "the hand of God."

Although Mirza has gotten her share of hate e-mail and threats and was even physically attacked once by three Bangladeshi men at a show in England, she said that it's the media's relentless focus on her religion that has tired her out. There has been a noticeable fallout. For example, a year ago Mirza decided to stop wearing her head covering onstage. Club managers and bookers were telling her that the schtick had gotten old and she needed something new and she was upset that a mark of her own religious convictions was being interpreted as a gimmick.

"It became about the hijab and not about me and I'm still the same person with the same morals," said Mirza with a note of irritation in her voice as she sat drying her toenails at a Chelsea nail salon the day after her sold-out run at Baruch. "It's just a bit of cloth on your head."

Mirza also made a conscious decision to use fewer jokes about Islam and terrorism (she retired the pilot-license crack once and for all) and focus more on personal stories. Of course, like many of her fellow female Muslim comics, her personal experiences can't help but touch on airport security harassment and relentless stereotyping. Mirza, however, roundly rejects any characterization of herself as comic activist.

"This is very selfish, but I never think about anybody else but myself," she said. "I just want to be a great stand-up."

Mixing Activism with Humor

Maysoon Zayid is a Palestinian American who has been doing the stand-up circuit in New York and around the country for six years now, which would make her a relative veteran compared to the other women. She sees her role as vastly different from Mirza's. She is serious about mixing activism and politics with her

humor ("I think it should be the goal of every Arab man to marry one of the Bush twins," she quipped at a recent show in a Lower East Side political bookstore) and her comic totem is Richard Pryor; she also loves Jon Stewart of "The Daily Show." Offstage, Zayid runs a four month-long arts camp for disabled and refugee children in the Palestinian territories. She is also the co-chair of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, which has its second run starting today through Wednesday.

"So much has happened since I began," starting with President Bush's election, explained Zayid, who was born and raised in New Jersey but makes annual summer trips back to the Palestinian territories. "I really felt the need to represent as an Arab because there was so much hate coming out of that administration."

Then came 9/11 with its resulting crackdown on the Arab and Muslim immigrant communities, the heightened sense of racial profiling at airports and on the streets. All of it is ripe material for Zayid's routines, which she also delivers in Arabic and has taken to Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian territories.

"I have so many good Bush jokes that I think I convert Republicans," she said. "I think the main reason that politics and comedy work so well together is we're allowed to be biased."

Unlike Hami and Mirza, Zayid never wears the hijab or incorporates it into her acts, which tends to confound some audiences once they realize that she is Muslim. She also thinks she may get less media attention than women who do perform in hijab as a result.

"They have a picture in their head of Arab women in veils and hijab and when they see me I throw them off," she said. "I think it's the media that focuses on the women in their hijab, like 'How are they let out of their houses?'"

Fighting for Industry Recognition

One thing these women all agree on: They are all competing against men in an industry that isn't completely sure women can be funny, regardless of race or religion.

"It's not about ethnicity, it's about being a woman," is how Zayid expressed it.

Usually, they are the only woman at stand-up nights and bookers are always hesitant to give them time with the microphone. Farsad also pointed out that in an area that is already dominated by men, men are more likely to get a leg up from their fraternal peers.

"Women one hundred percent, no doubt, have a harder time. Comedy is a men's club," she said. "And it's really clear if you do a sociological study of how these things happen. If Conan hires a series of dudes who he went to school with, and then there's a turnover and then those dudes hire more dudes, they all hire dudes that they went to school with. It's really clear how it all happens; it's just how do we break the cycle?"

Farsad remembers watching the writers and cast from "The Daily Show" crowding onstage this year to receive their Emmy.

"Every guy on the show is a white dude," she remembered watching in amazement. "They're missing out on 50 percent of the types of jokes they could be making!"

Megan Cossey is a freelance journalist living in New York City.