



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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### Arts: Popular Culture: North America

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“Practices, Interpretations and Representations”

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Muslim women in North America have availed themselves of various media vehicles to demonstrate and assert their presence in the public sphere. In the process, many of these women have dispelled the commonly held tropes that Muslim women eschew modernity and are disempowered. Immigrant and indigenous women alike have carved a niche in the landscape of popular culture in the fields of television, film, poetry, music, and the arts to express themselves and their community. In a sense, these women have been inspired by the rich and vibrant heritage of Islamic civilization and its legacy of attention to the aesthetic pursuits. In expressing creative and resonant voices, Muslim women in the United States and Canada use existing institutions through which they can convey their messages and also take the initiative to develop and establish new channels and conduits. The burgeoning and rapidly changing areas of technology and telecommunications have greatly facilitated and enhanced the ability of Muslim women to engage in and contribute to the formulation of a common and collective culture shared by themselves and non-Muslims alike. Their efforts have been particularly profound and timely in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, by showing an oftentimes underrepresented facet of Muslim culture, one that defies stereotype and generalization: female, assimilated, and integrated, yet at the same time unambiguously and unapologetically Muslim.

### Poetry

Poetry has a rich and sustained legacy in Islamic civilization. Throughout history, Muslim women have been active participants in this endeavor. There are several women who express themselves through poetry, either as in their careers or as a pastime. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, a graduate student at Princeton University, and Sham-e-Ali al-Jamil, a poet and lawyer, publish and perform their poetry in English to audiences across the United States. Abdul Khabeer, an African American Muslim, writes about women's issues and contemporary urban American conditions. Al-Jamil, born in India but reared in England and the United States, chooses themes such as women and social change in the post 11 September 2001 world. Poet and activist, Palestinian American Suheir Hammad focuses her work on subjects ranging from the occupation of the Palestinian Territories to Hurricane Katrina. Some Muslim women present their work on the Internet, in forums such as <http://www.samarmagazine.org>, the website for the *South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection*. Mohja Kahf teaches literature at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. A Syrian American, Kahf writes about image construction and representations of Muslim women as well as women's sexuality.

### Comedy

Comedy has proved to be a powerful device for both social and political commentary as well as its ability to humanize the ethnic, religious, and racial identity of its proponents. Since 11 September 2001, stand-up comedy has been employed by several Muslim women to entertain, to educate, and to raise awareness of the concerns and challenges faced by the community, from issues of racial and religious profiling to the public

perception of the headscarf. Maysoon Zayid, a Palestinian American with cerebral palsy, takes on sensitive topics such as her own condition as well the Arab–Israeli conflict and terrorism in order to raise public awareness in a humor filled setting. Negin Farsad is part of the Muslim Jewish comedy duo, Madame Funnypants, with Alexander Zalben. Her sketch comedy includes “Bootleg Islam” and other stand-up routines dealing with contemporary social and political issues. Although she is from Great Britain, Shazia Mirza has developed a loyal and growing following in North America, among both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

#### Art and artistry

Following in the spirit of a 14 centuries-long tradition of magnificent artwork, Muslim women in North America have gained recognition for their talents in Western cultural circles. Shazia Sikander is a Pakistani American whose miniatures – which in style evoke the traditional art of Pakistan with a contemporary treatment of women in Islam and other religions – have been exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution's Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. and New York's Whitney Museum. Asma Arshad is a multimedia specialist based in Toronto. Her paintings, primarily of Muslim and South Asian women, appear in several contemporary art galleries and exhibitions. As project director of the Cre8iv80 Studio, she is actively involved in the promotion of the arts in both the Muslim community and in the larger Canadian society. In the area of music, Zuriani Zonneveld is a Malaysian American Grammy Award-winning singer and producer, who has collaborated with mainstream artists such as Melissa Manchester and Brenda Russell, as well as blues artist Keb'Mo'. Zonneveld pays homage to her ethnic heritage in her music, infusing Asian sounds and tempos into Western melodies and themes of social justice and ecumenism.

#### Broadcast and print media

The power of television as a medium for communication should not be understated. The dissemination of ideas and the shaping of popular culture are chiefly accomplished through their public presence on air. Muslim women have also increased their profile in the field of news reporting. They have reported and highlighted issues such as women's health and working conditions as well as specific topics such as the headscarf worldwide, including in the Muslim world. Rudi Bakhtiar, an Iranian American, has served as an anchorwoman on CNN Headline News; she is currently a correspondent for Fox News. Yet Muslim women occupy not only positions of influence in the public sphere; some have engaged in the equally important behind-the-scenes roles. Farah Ispahani is the managing editor and executive producer for *Beyond the Headlines* on Voice of America news service. She has more than two decades of experience at major news networks such as ABC, NBC, and CNN. Aasiya Zubair, a Pakistani American, is Programming Director for Bridges TV, North America's first full-time American Muslim television network. Bridges TV is an English language broadcasting channel that seeks to “bridge” the West and the Muslim world. Although it caters primarily to the approximately 8 million Muslims living in North America, Bridges TV offers programming that is educational and geared toward non-Muslim consumption as well. Launched in December 2004 as a subscription-based pay service, Bridges TV has now become part of Comcast's basic digital cable service, and continues to be available on other cable providers and satellite television services. Tayyibah Taylor and Marlina Soerakoesoemah are the creative minds behind *Azizah Magazine*, a periodical devoted entirely to issues concerning Muslim women. Along with Maryam Aziz, they produce a magazine dedicated to be the voice for Muslim women, with feature sections on current events, politics, fitness, fashion, and travel.

#### Film and documentaries

Film is a powerful medium of communication in the modern age, and several Muslim women have employed this field as directors, writers, producers, and even actors. They have chosen to make documentaries as well as light-hearted movies to appeal to a broad base of public preferences. Zarqa Nawaz is a Canadian filmmaker who has written, produced, and directed several projects, such as the 1995 satirical short film, *BBQ Muslims*. The title of the movie comes from its plot, which involves two Canadian Muslim brothers whose backyard barbeque grill explodes while they are sleeping. Their neighbors, the media, and even the legal system suspect them of being terrorists. The film was made in the aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City terrorist

bombing, where Muslims were wrongly accused of the attack. Nawaz attempted to satirize the hysteria and reflexive suspicions cast on Muslims for anything involving a detonation. Her second film, *Death Threat*, tackles the issue of Muslim stereotypes in the media. In 2007, Nawaz created a comedy, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, broadcast weekly on Canadian television. The plot involves a small Muslim community's interaction with the other residents of a rural town in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Her work has received critical acclaim and recognition and has been well received across religious and cultural lines. Naheed Mustafa is also from Canada; she focuses on documentaries, examining issues such as the headscarf and the public perceptions it creates in *My Body is My Own Business*. The film chronicles how some Muslim women have begun to reclaim the headscarf as part of their religious and cultural identity. Nilofer Pazira, a Canadian journalist, took an acting role in the 2001 documentary film, *Kandahar*, chronicling her attempts to return to her native Afghanistan in the aftermath of Taliban rule.

#### The Internet

Muslim women have been very adept at availing themselves of new technologies and the advantages they bring. The Internet, for example, provides connectivity as well as relative anonymity. It also allows Muslim women to communicate with one another irrespective of their level of mobility. Many websites have emerged that cater to the needs and issues that affect and concern Muslim women; <[hijab.com](http://hijab.com)> is one such website. Mohja Kahf not only writes poetry; she is a regular contributor to a column entitled, "Sex and the Umma," which is maintained on the website <<http://www.muslimwakeup.com>>. Layla al-Mariyati, a gynecologist-obstetrician in Los Angeles, uses her medical expertise to provide advice on the column as well. Muslim women also use Internet sites (for example <<http://www.naseeb.com>.) to meet prospective suitors, as the natural physical barriers of the Internet facilitate discretion and protect Islamic sensitivities.

#### Conclusion

Muslim women in North America have been very active in their engagement with the various facets of popular culture. Recognizing the huge influence that popular culture has in shaping public perception, these women have seized upon an opportunity to express themselves and to demonstrate the vibrancy of Islamic society. By using media such as television, film, literature, poetry, music, and the Internet, Muslim women have entered the public sphere, shattering preconceived notions about themselves, their religion, and their cultures while asserting their presence through expression in the entire spectrum of communication arenas. The effective use of technology greatly expands and enhances the ability of these women to express themselves, reaching local and global audiences at the same speed. While offering an alternative, dynamic view of Muslim culture, Muslim women in North America are shaping popular culture for themselves and for society at large.

-Saeed A. Khan