Laughter the Best Medicine: Muslim Comedians and Social Criticism in Post-9/11 America

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Abstract

This paper explores the role that Muslim standup comedians are playing in breaking down cultural barriers, promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, as well as tackling the misperceptions about Muslim and Arab Americans in the United States. I argue that Muslim comedians are increasingly taking on the role of Gramscian “organic intellectuals” capable of successfully participating in a quintessentially American activity—standup comedy—on behalf of their respective communities. Some scholars of Islam may argue that Muslim comedians, if they have any significance at all, are confined to the periphery of any meaningful discussions regarding Islam and Muslims after September 11. I will show that this is not only false, but fails to fully grasp the multifaceted responses that have arisen to combat Islamophobia and Arabophobia in the United States since the events of September 11, 2001.

I don’t know any terrorists, I’ve never met one or talked to one, not even accidentally. I’ve never been home late one night and gotten a phone call and heard: “Hello Hassan, it goes down tomorrow at midnight”, “Who is this?” “Oops sorry, wrong number”.

Maz Jobrani

Our hope is that like other ethnic groups and races before us, we can use comedy to foster understanding about who we are and redefine ourselves in an accurate, positive way.

Dean Obeidallah

Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship.

Oscar Wilde

Introduction

In the days after September 11, 2001, there was in the United States what Andrew Stott called a “voluntary moratorium on humor” during which joking and laughter of any kind was deemed inappropriate.¹ The Late Show with David Letterman and the Tonight Show with Jay Leno stayed off the air for weeks following the tragedy. When they did return, they did so without their opening monologues. Political humor, above all, retreated out of sheer respect for the tragedy that had been inflicted on the American people. Jokes about the American President George W. Bush’s intelligence and his twisting of the English language came to an abrupt end. Instead of mocking him, the American
people rallied behind him and looked to him for guidance and comfort. When the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* returned on September 26, 2001, it was a serious, uncomfortable, and emotional reminder of what had taken place. The visibly shaken Stewart began the show, with his voice cracking, by saying, “Our show has changed, I don’t doubt that. What it has become, I don’t know. “Subliminable” is not a punch line anymore. One day it will become that again and Lord willing it will become that again, because it means that we have ridden out the storm”.2 After 9/11, the ability to laugh, at themselves as well as their elected leaders, became for Americans a symbol of their freedom and the value of their democracy. As Stott points out, “Laughter – the pleasure, dissent, and first amendment freedom to express oneself freely that it seems to assume – came to stand in opposition to the fundamentalist dogmas and joyless religious strictures that were believed to characterize those responsible for the attacks”.3 Comedy, then, as a significant cultural activity, was integral to the coping process for many in the United States.

Similarly, Muslim comedians are inserting themselves into the dialogue, helping the Muslim community cope with the backlash brought on by 9/11, and attempting to repaint the public perception of Arab and Muslim Americans as unpatriotic and hostile to the United States. Even though scholars of religion have rarely taken the cultural importance of comedy seriously, there is much evidence to suggest that it is a significant social force. For example, during a CNN roundtable discussion focusing on whether the Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* would be successful in the United States, many participants noted that comedy could be enormously useful in combating ignorance, intolerance, and suspicion of Muslims in the post 9/11 world. As this paper will show, the call for Muslim comedians to become more involved in inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue is being forcefully answered. For instance, in December 2007, British journalist and documentary filmmaker Sarfraz Manzoor wrote an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* entitled, “It’s Time for Muslim Comedians to Stand Up”. He noted that although the West rarely associates the Muslim world with comedy, there are several Muslim comedians attempting to change this perception.4 They have come to the fore with such undertakings as the “Allah Made Me Funny Comedy Tour” and the “Axis of Evil Comedy Tour” as well as television shows like *Little Mosque* and the now cancelled *Aliens in America*. In May 2008, PBS aired an hour-long documentary entitled, “Stand-Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age”, which explored five comedians and their routines in a post-9/11 world. Although the presence of Muslim comedians in the public sphere is only increasing, to date there has been little to no academic examination of their cultural and religious significance. This paper attempts to fill this gap in the study of contemporary Islam.

In this paper, I explore the role that Muslim standup comedians are playing in breaking down cultural barriers, promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, as well as tackling the misperceptions of Muslim and Arab Americans in the United States. I argue that Muslim comedians are increasingly taking on the role of Gramscian “organic intellectuals” capable of successfully participating in a quintessentially American activity—standup comedy—on behalf of their respective communities. Some scholars of Islam may argue that Muslim comedians, if they have any significance at all, are confined to the periphery of any meaningful discussions regarding Islam and Muslims after September 11. I will show that this is not only false, but fails to fully grasp the multifaceted responses that have arisen to combat Islamophobia and Arabophobia in the United States since 9/11. I will first provide an overview of Gramsci’s writings on hegemony and the organic intellectual before undertaking an exploration of Muslim comedians and their significance in today’s world. The latter will be done with the use of short interviews I have
completed with some Muslim comedians, several interviews these comedians have completed with journalists, as well as some scenes from their on-stage performances.

Gramsci, Hegemony and the Intellectual

Antonio Gramsci’s (1891–1937) work on “hegemony” and the intellectual have their foundation in earlier Marxist writings on base/superstructure and ideology. Under Gramsci, these notions were reconceptualized and supplemented with a discussion of the importance of culture. For Marx, the arena in which economic activity takes place, which he terms the “base” or “structure”, determines and influences everything that happens in the “superstructure” (the law, education, politics, etc). As Jones notes, for Marx the “economic base is the most powerful and crucial level of social life. It is the base that brings the superstructure into being and which gives it its character”. For Marx, if society is to change, it must begin at the structural level, because changes in the superstructure do not ultimately affect the exploitation of the working class and thus cannot be truly revolutionary.

For Gramsci, the relationship between the base and the superstructure was more complicated. Instead of the linear relationship between the two that Marx had developed, Gramsci proposed a dialectical interaction, with the base and superstructure constantly impacting “upon each other with no level assumed to be the primary level of determinacy”. Gramsci also divided the superstructure into two further categories: the state and the civil society. The state consisted of coercive and state-funded endeavors like the police force, the army, and the civil service. The civil society, on the other hand, consisted of organizations that existed apart from the base (economic production) and the state, “but which are relatively long-lasting institutions supported and run by people outside of the other two major spheres”. These organizations could range from religious institutions and women’s groups to youth groups and sports clubs. For Gramsci, any particular collective may shift from one category to another, or could belong to more than one at any given period. The interrelationship between these three categories has been widely debated. As Bocock has noted, “Either the economic element does operate in some determining and specifiable way to affect the activities of the state and the organizations of civil society, or the state, and/or the components of civil society, can produce changes in the economic area.”

For Gramsci, then, society is made up of three elements: the base, the state, and the civil society. Marxist thought was a form of “economism” in that it was believed that “the economic base determines the ideological superstructures of religion, politics, the arts, law or education”. Gramsci’s emphasis on the other two aspects of society effectively distinguish him from traditional Marxism, which, according to Gramsci, over-emphasized the economic sphere and assumed that once “a change in the ownership of the main economic means of production, distribution and exchange has been accomplished there will be no major obstacles to a truly democratic, and free, society”. Gramsci did not argue that the economic sphere of activity was irrelevant, but believed that it was necessary to understand how power was exercised in the state and civil society as well. This exploration of the interaction between the three elements of society forms the basis for his writings on hegemony. Although an adequate definition of the term is elusive, Renate Holub provides a superb attempt:

Hegemony is a concept that helps to explain, on the one hand, how state apparatuses, or political society—supported by and supporting a specific economic
group—can coerce, via its institutions of law, police, army and prisons, the various strata of society into consenting to the status quo. On the other hand, and more importantly, hegemony is a concept that helps us to understand how and where political society and, above all, civil society, with its institutions ranging from education, religion and the family to the microstructures of the practices of everyday life, contribute to the production of meaning and values which in turn produce, direct and maintain the “spontaneous” consent of the various strata of society to that same status quo.  

What is fundamentally important to understand about Gramsci’s writings on hegemony is that it is not maintained solely through institutions, beliefs, and ideologies. Rather, hegemony works through the “common sense” functioning of everyday life. As Raymond Williams has noted, “Hegemony is a lived system of meanings and values, not simply an ideology, a sense of reality beyond which it is, for most people, difficult to move, a lived dominance and subordination, internalized”. Hegemony, then, is diffused throughout society in a system of values, morals, and attitudes. As the status quo is upheld by the mere functioning of everyday life, the ruling values take on a “natural” or “common sense” quality and become more difficult to challenge. For Gramsci common sense is not a unified set of values instituted by every new group that comes to power, but rather consists of “stratified deposits” left from previous philosophies containing “Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over”. 

One of the ways in which the fragmentary, yet powerful, nature of common sense can be challenged is by introducing counter-hegemonic ideas as “new sedimentations”. Muslim comedians, for example, repeatedly attempt to infuse new sedimentations into the common sense functioning of American society. As will be argued below, by (inter alia) critiquing popular culture representations of Muslim and Arab Americans, as well as American views of the hijab, Muslim comedians attempt to siphon new ideas and new opinions into society’s “common sense”. As Landy states, “New meanings and new attitudes are in the process of being created alongside the old: change is constantly in the state of becoming just as dominant and traditional practices are constantly exerting their power”. If a group wishes to challenge the prevailing common sense, in other words, they need to work on creating a counter-hegemony. Since the majority of a given society accepts the current hegemony as common sense and as “the way things are”, counter-hegemonic struggle can be very difficult. This leads us into the discussion of intellectuals, who, for Gramsci, were crucial for the creation of a counter-hegemony.

The Organic Intellectual

An exploration of Gramsci’s writings on the intellectual is fundamentally important for understanding his entire project. His thoughts on the intellectual, however, are not uniform as they were developed throughout his life. Gramsci begins by noting that “all men are intellectuals” but “not all men have in society the function of intellectuals”. He humorously states in a footnote that just because “everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket, we do not necessarily say that everyone is a cook or a tailor”. For Gramsci, there are two types of intellectuals: traditional and organic. Traditional intellectuals are those who consider themselves to be withdrawn from the mundane complexity of social life and functioning outside of the influence of
the dominant social group. The clergy, professors and painters are good examples of traditional intellectuals. For Gramsci, however, traditional intellectuals may believe that they are working outside of the dominant social group, but are in fact always perpetuating their values. As he states, “The intellectuals are the dominant group’s “deputies” exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government”. Thus, for Gramsci, traditional intellectuals are not as independent from the ruling group as they would like to believe. It is important to note that traditional intellectuals were once organic to a particular group but “now appear to be autonomous of that class” and they may again become organic “to a class or cause if conditions threaten its autonomy”. In other words, as new issues arise in society, traditional intellectuals may wish to become involved with them. In fact, Gramsci argues that one of the first tasks of a counter-hegemonic initiative should be to “win over” the traditional intellectuals.

Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, arise within a new group and provide this new class of individuals with “homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but in the social and political fields”. Organic intellectuals must have the ability to convey the needs and desires of the community they represent and must recognize that they are products of this community, which has a vested interest in their representative ability. Organic intellectuals must voice the interests of the group, defend the perception of it in public and “inspire its self-confidence as an historical actor and to provide it with social, cultural, and political leadership”. The education of a new “human mass” depends on the ability and leadership of organic intellectuals. As the group begins to organize itself, attempts to defend itself in public, or fight for recognition, it depends on its intellectuals for “conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas”. These individuals could be scholars and writers but, in contemporary society, could, as Adamson notes, be “journalists, publishers, television personnel, and everyone else associated with what is now sometimes called the ‘culture industry’”. For example, as the American war in Iraq declines in popularity, anti-war groups and individuals do indeed depend on scholars to articulate their viewpoints, but also turn to elements of popular television such as The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and Real Time with Bill Maher to obtain an “elaboration of ideas” with which to criticize the United States government. Having examined Gramsci’s writings on hegemony and the intellectual, I now turn to an analysis of how Muslim comedians are taking on the role of organic intellectuals who, through comedy, are attempting to combat the prevailing negative stereotypes and common sense beliefs surrounding Muslims and Arabs in the United States.

**Muslim Comedians and Social Activism**

The comedian is particularly well positioned to serve as an organic intellectual, capable of satirically challenging the hegemonic common sense that exists around issues of race, gender, religion, etc. Comedians like Chris Rock, Paul Mooney, Russell Peters, Margaret Cho, and Dave Chappelle are a few examples of organic intellectuals who challenge the stereotypes and common sense beliefs held about their respective ethnic groups. The use of comedy to highlight injustices experienced by the Muslim community is common among all of the recent Arab and Muslim American comics. As Dean Obeidallah, co-founder of the Arab-American Comedy Tour, states, “For all the comics I know that are of Middle Eastern heritage, the idea of using their craft as a way of activism is a thread that unites all of us”.

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Comedians like Obeidallah can be activists particularly because they reside in a separate cultural sphere in which certain kinds of expression are expected and permitted. This does not mean, however, that these “jokes” lack social consequence. In fact, it is precisely because comedians communicate through what Mintz calls a “publicly protected” mode of expression that they have the potential to say what the politician cannot. The comedian, as organic intellectual, can use humor “to expose chauvinism, to expose ineptitude, to expose oppression, and to expose pretentiousness”. Majken Sorensen has even gone so far as to argue that comedy could be a “powerful strategy of nonviolent resistance to oppression… in a different way than traditional resistance”.

An example of such non-violent resistance has been the Muslim comedian’s response to the subtle racism that has permeated the discourse around Arabs and Muslims, especially during the 2008 election. Dean Obeidallah, for instance, expressed that he was becoming nauseated with the way that Muslims and Arabs were being talked about in the election campaign (recall the now famous “Obama is an Arab” comment made by a John McCain supporter in Minnesota). Obeidallah states that these discourses are “a big part of my act and it shows that there exists in America, unfortunately, this acceptance that somehow Muslims or Arabs (and people use those terms interchangeably) … that somehow it would disqualify him from office”. Uneasiness about Arab and Muslim Americans does not seem to have died down over the years. A 2006 Gallop poll, for example, found that 39% of Americans admit to having feelings of prejudice against Muslims living in the US, 39% said that they may support an initiative to have Muslims carry around special ID cards, and 34% stated that they believe Muslims in America are sympathetic to groups like al-Qaeda.

Muslim comedians believe that such distrust and fear can be combated through comedy. As female comedian Tissa Hami stated in an interview with PBS, “I don’t think that I would have ever gone into standup comedy if it hadn’t been for 9/11 … Living through 9/11 as an Iranian who had lived through the hostage crisis … I just wanted to do something this time”. Dean Obeidallah also speaks of 9/11 as a turning point that altered the way he was viewed and changed his comedic performance: “Before 9/11, I’m just a white guy living a typical white guy life. All my friends had names like Monica, and Chandler, and Joey, and Ross. I go to bed September 10th white, wake up September 11th, I’m an Arab!” Obeidallah, a light-skinned, Palestinian-Italian American, is very honest that he can be a spectator in these discussions if he wishes. He does not “look Muslim”. Other comedians, like Ahmed Ahmed or Azhar Usman, do not have this “luxury”. However, Obeidallah takes his role as an organic intellectual very seriously and believes that he cannot sit on the sidelines. As he notes, the United States has “a great tradition of using comedy to deal with social, religious and racial issues … and that’s the goal with my comedy … it’s not a class, I’m not teaching Arab 101 or Islam 101, but when you come away I hope that the audience sees a different side to who we are and it makes them think a little bit”.

The post-9/11 public interest in Islam and Muslims has also carried over to interest in Muslim comedy. As Azhar Usman notes, after 9/11 the American public “suddenly wanted to know more [about Islam], and that’s probably why our Muslim comedy tour has been so popular”. The comedy club has always been a haven of risk-free discourse, and Muslim comedians all speak of the comedy club as an ideal place to challenge assumptions. Comedians, in a sense, have the audience right where they want them. As Obeidallah states, comedians have “a great opportunity to talk to people when they are there to have fun, and their guard is down, and their laughing and their having a nice time. You’re showing them through subtle things the positive side to
who we are and then even more expressed things through your statements in your comedy show, explaining what we are really about, what the religion is really about, attacking the stereotypes that have so unfortunately caused a backlash against us – the innocent Muslims and Middle Easterners across America.”

Combating the common sense depictions of their fellow Arabs and Muslims in the media is a dominant concern for these comedians. Maz Jobrani, an Iranian-born comedian and actor, is weary of the ways in which Middle Easterners are portrayed in the media. During his routine on The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson, he notes, “Every time they show us on TV, they always show the crazy guy burning the flag, going like ‘Death to America!’ It’s always that guy. Just once, I wish they’d show us, I don’t know, baking a cookie. Just once!” Jobrani states that he has gotten into the habit of turning down all acting roles that depict the Arab as a terrorist. He states that he may accept these roles in the future when the climate of America has changed to the point where these popular culture characterizations do not have such an effect.

He often singles out one film that he believes has had a particularly negative impact on the way in which Arabs and Muslims are viewed in the United States: “People base their assumptions about Middle Eastern men and relationships on the Sally Field film, Not Without My Daughter.” The film, released with (perhaps unintended) impeccable timing five days before Operation Desert Storm, is about an Iranian doctor, Moody, living in the United States with his American wife, Betty, and their daughter, Mahtob. Moody convinces his reluctant family to take a trip to Iran, telling them that he wishes to see his homeland again. Although Betty is hesitant, she ultimately agrees. Once in Iran, however, the situation turns ugly. Moody declares that Iran is their new home. As acclaimed critic Roger Ebert writes, the film then “plunges us into a world of Islamic fundamentalism, which it depicts in shrill terms as one of men who beat their wives, of a religion that honors women by depriving them of what in the West would be considered basic human rights, of women who are willing or unwilling captives of their men.” Such depictions, Jobrani argues, do nothing to promote mutual understanding or tolerance. Instead, they depict Muslims and Islamic countries as hotbeds of fanaticism, teeming with Muslim men who enslave their wives (who themselves do not practice anything other than compliance). Films such as Not Without My Daughter serve to warn American women about the dangers of inter-racial marriage, as well as to fortify beliefs surrounding the need to export freedom and democracy to these countries.

Muslim comedians operating today are dedicated to combating such negative portrayals. They often discuss the ignorance they encounter during interviews. As Obeidallah notes, “I’ve had people say ‘You’re Arab, but you look so normal’. I’ve heard that many times. I was on Fox News Radio and the guy actually said, ‘You’re Arab, so how many terrorists are there?’ Like, I would know – because we have meetings or something. I didn’t know what to tell the guy – I said 83.” Obeidallah’s sarcastic response to the radio show host, as opposed to a political one, does much to point out to him the ridiculousness of his question. Such comedic responses do not put the interviewer on the defensive. Rather, it gives them the space to recognize their own ignorance and their own prejudices. These comedians, in their role as organic intellectuals, seem to understand that such questions point to a lack of understanding, and acceptance of the hegemonic common sense about Muslims, rather than malevolence on the part of the public. From this standpoint, their humorous responses often disarm a potentially tense situation and create the space for planting “new sedimentations” for mutual understanding.
As discussed earlier, ignorance of Islam was highly prevalent during the 2008 election campaign in the United States. There was much talk, often bordering on open racism, about Presidential candidate Barack Obama being a Muslim, about “terrorist fist bumps”, and “madrasas”. As Azhar Usman states:

Remember several months ago: “Barack Obama, when he was a child in Indonesia, attended a madrasa”, Ooooooh. Turns out “madrasa” is just the Arabic word for school. The media was upset because Barack Obama went to school? Proving once again that many Americans prefer their politicians uneducated.47

Such ignorance has put Muslim comedians into overdrive – they tour excessively, do dozens of interviews every week, and are dedicated to promoting a better image of Arab and Muslim Americans. As Obeidallah states:

I hope to attract as many average Americans to the show so we can build bridges and foster understanding. I hope that people will come to the show and laugh and also understand a little bit more about who we really are as opposed to being afraid of all people who look Middle Eastern or have an accent.48

Muslim comedians often note that the use of comedy for political and social activism is not a novel concept. Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Bill Hicks, Chris Rock, and others have done it for years. As Obeidallah points out:

Stand-up is truly an American invention … [and] as Americans we use what we know to relate to other Americans. The thing we don’t have in common that makes us more unique – we also want to change the world. And that’s our goal through comedy. We want to change people’s perception of Arabs, who we are in America and that we’re a force to understand.49

In interviews, Azhar Usman often repeats the late actor Peter Ustinov’s statement that comedy is simply a funny way of being serious. For Usman, who sports a long beard and a skull cap, racial profiling and media stereotypes need to be discussed openly as the “unnecessary evil of life after 9/11”.50 For Usman “stand-up is an art of protest, fundamentally. When you study the history of stand-up, you see how often it gets used as a tool, an art form for the underdog. Black American comedians, Jewish-American comedians, Latino comedians, women comedians, gay comedians, blue-collar Americans, Jeff Foxworthy and that whole hillbilly comedy tour … time and time again, you find that groups that are written off by mainstream America use comedy as a weapon. This is a way for them to speak truth to power—that quintessentially American thing to do. And that’s what we’re doing as well”.51 Aside from their immediate comedic material, then, part of the success of Muslim comedians is their participation in a quintessentially American cultural activity. The format of the standup comedian—on stage with a microphone providing cultural commentary—is one that is familiar to most Americans. Once the audience enters the comedy club, they knowingly enter a cultural space where their beliefs, tastes, and outlook may come under scrutiny.52 Since, according to Gramsci, the status quo is upheld by the mere functioning of everyday life, where the ruling values take on a “natural” quality, the comedy club is the perfect venue for siphoning new ideas into society’s “common sense”. As Koziski has pointed out, standup comedians can be thought of as cultural anthropologists who “pattern their comic material close to everyday reality, making obvious behavioral patterns, explicit and tacit operating knowledge and other insights about American society objects of conscious reflection”. 53 The comedian as organic intellectual can serve as a representative for their respective
ethnic group, and use the comedy stage to voice grievances and pinpoint the faults of the majority.

**Muslim Women in Comedy**

Female Muslim comics—like Shazia Mirza, Tissa Hami, and Maysoon Zaid—are also coming to the fore as strong organic intellectuals providing commentaries on women and Islam. Shazia Mirza, a British comedian, routinely starts her performances with “I’m pleased to be here, because my dad has let me out for the night . . . he thinks I’m at the library” or “My name is Shazia Mirza, or at least that’s what it says on my pilot’s license”. The latter joke, told three weeks after 9/11 during a performance at a club in Soho, elicited a period of uneasy silence before the laughter erupted. As journalist Geraldine Bedell noted after watching Mirza perform:

> You can see [the audience] trying to work it out: does she want them to laugh at Islam? Is that OK? Is she even for real, this deadpan person with a light, Brummie drawl? How should they respond to this small, neat, demure and self-confessedly devout woman telling them that all men are pigs, especially Muslim men, “but that’s no use to me because I don’t eat pork”?

Of all the female Muslim comics working today, Mirza is by far the most personal. Her material expresses a deep-seated ambivalence about her own past, her fellow Muslims, as well as her Pakistani heritage. As she states:

> It’s too soon for me. I don’t feel ready to talk about being a Muslim woman in depth yet. People have expected a lot of me. They want more, they want me to go deeper, but I can’t. It’s hard enough to crack jokes. Our culture doesn’t encourage women to speak, never mind do stand-up. It has been a long journey to come this far.

She has experienced a lot during her career as a comedian: immigration tends to hold her back, believing that there is no such thing as a female Muslim comedian, and her father has told her to stop what she is doing and get married (“But he knows he can no longer control me, so he has stopped talking about it. Now he tells [people] I’m doing research, or that it’s only a hobby”).

The main target of Mirza’s comedic wrath is not her religion. As she states, “I’m quite devout. I would never make jokes about the Koran. I really believe in my faith”. Rather, she focuses the full force of her ire on her own community, many of whom she believes to be hypocrites. She states that she is now resolutely committed to combating the hypocrisy that plagues some members of the Muslim community, as well as challenging cultural notions of what Muslim women can and cannot do. In critiquing what she believes to be the poor treatment of women in certain Muslim countries, she notes that she is often asked why Muslim women walk several steps behind their husbands. She responds, “actually, these days the women are walking five steps in front of the husbands . . . because of the landmines”. She also often accuses Muslim men of being absurdly afraid of Muslim women’s sexuality. One of her routines states: “I went to Afghanistan recently. In Afghanistan, the women, they’re not allowed to wear high heels because the click of the heels is meant to attract men”, and without missing a beat, she closes with “all goats have now been locked up”. One of the fundamental concerns of Muslim women comics is, like their male counterparts, the negative stereotypes surrounding Arab and Muslim Americans in the United States. However, they are also
somewhat uniquely critical of their own communities and their treatment of women. As Mirza states, “I feel that I’m making a difference just by standing on that stage. Voicing Asian women, voicing Muslim women and representing another section of society, giving an insight to people about how it really is”.62

Maysoon Zayid, another female Muslim comic, regularly introduces herself as a “Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey”. She provides keen comedic insight into the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, Muslim identity, as well as life as a disabled woman. She played a role in Adam Sandler’s recent film You Don’t Mess with the Zohan (2008), and also runs Maysoon’s Kids, an organization providing assistance to disabled, wounded, and refugee children in the West Bank. Like her male comedic counterparts, Zayid also discusses the difficulties of being an Arab-American attempting to travel in the United States: “I walk in and they see an Arab trying to board a plane but I have cerebral palsy, which means I shake all the time. So, they don’t just see an Arab, they see a shaking Arab and think ‘That bitch is nervous!'”63 She notes that it is not a necessity for comedians to advertise the fact that they are Muslim. However, she argues that once a comic makes his/her religion known to their audience, their comedy automatically becomes political. Audiences will demand commentary. Zayid states that she felt an obligation to talk about Islam and being Muslim, because of the negative stereotypes that pervade the media, especially with respect to Muslim women. “So I was like okay, I’m a Muslim woman and I’m very spiritual and proud of who I am and who my family is and where I come from, so let me talk about it so that people can see that Islam has different faces”.64

Unlike some of the negative responses that Shazia Mirza has received, Zayid states that members of her own community, as well as her parents, are enormously supportive. She notes that the only time she has ever been censored is during her appearance on ABC’s 20/20 where Zayid got into a heated exchange with co-anchor John Stossel. As she notes:

He said to me: in your country you would never be able to do this. So I responded by saying that I was born in Cliffside, New Jersey. This is my country, but if you mean my ancestral country, I’ve done it there too. And he was like you can never do this over there. I’m like, I have! I have done standup over there. He’s like, well you could never talk about politics and Yasser Arafat the way you do here. I’m like, I have. And he’s like, well, you can never say, and I’m like, but I have. And he was like, well you could never say, and I’m like, but I have! and then I was like, do you want to see the video tape?65

In the end, the entire exchange was edited out of the program.

All three female comedians under discussion have also had to deal with issues surrounding the hijab. Zayid notes that she does not wear the hijab or a burqa on stage and feels that this alone provides a different idea of what Muslim women are supposed to look like in public. Tissa Hami and Shazia Mirza, on the other hand, have at times incorporated the hijab into their acts. Hami often starts off wearing the hijab and removes it half way through her act to illustrate that she is the same woman regardless of what she wears on her head. By using the headscarf in her routine, she wants to show that:

... not all veiled Muslim women are silent or oppressed or subservient or terrorist. That, a veiled woman isn’t someone to revile or fear ... that whether I’m veiled or not, I am the exact same person.66
This is her not-so-subtle attempt to siphon new ideas into society’s common sense beliefs about Arab and Muslim women. As one commentator noted, “Hami’s comedy is meant to encourage viewers to look beyond appearances. She dresses in all black, from her shoes to her hijab, and then comes out with lines like: ‘I’ll be honest with you. I should have worn a long coat, but I was feeling kind of slutty tonight’”. Muslim women have had mixed reaction to Mirza’s and Hami’s strategy. Some reader comments on the Muslimah Media Watch website sums up the nature of the criticism they at times receive. One reader wrote,

What I don’t like about either comedian’s act is that they both wear hijab as a type of stage garb, neither of them are muhajabat [hijab wearers], which I find kind of demeaning. If they don’t wear it, that’s fine, just don’t turn it into a type of fancy dress to catch people’s attention.

It seems, however, that comics like Tissa Hami have given their use of the hijab more thought than simply using it as a “fancy dress” or “stage garb”. As she stated in a recent interview with Public Radio International:

The way I treat the veil is from a very Iranian perspective. The Iran I was born into, a woman could dress however she wanted. Post-revolution, a woman has to veil when she goes out in public . . . Every single day as a woman, you end up, multiple times a day, putting the veil on, taking it off, putting it on, taking it off . . . It really felt like a mockery. It felt like a sham . . . and we were not the ones mocking it. I felt like the mullahs, with their laws, that they were making a mockery of the veil . . . So when I decided that I would go onstage veiled and at the half-way point, take it off, I was mimicking what I did multiple times a day when I was living in Iran. And I wanted, in a place where I could do that, where I had the freedom to do that, to take the veil off publicly and on stage to show, one, that I could do it and, two, that whether I have the veil on or not, that I am the exact same person.

In other words, the taking off of the veil in public serves, for Hami, a two-fold political purpose: firstly, she attempts to take back control over her own life and control over the decision to wear the veil. Secondly, she communicates to a Western audience that Muslim women who wear the veils are not an exotic “other”, incapable of being understood. Muslim women in comedy, then, are not only attempting to overturn negative perceptions of Arab and Muslim Americans in the United States, like their male counterparts, but are also challenging the common sense beliefs about Arab and Muslim women by providing the West with a different conception of the Muslim woman as someone who is neither oppressed nor in need of saving.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Muslim comedians are increasingly taking on the role of Gramscian organic intellectuals in their efforts to combat stereotypes and promote intercultural dialogue. They are dedicated to repainting the image of Arabs, Muslims and Islam that exists in the West. As Moz Jobrani stated, “I think that I’m just someone who’s putting forth an image that hasn’t been seen before. When we did our Axis of Evil comedy special, and it aired on Comedy Central, I actually read a conservative blog where the writer was saying, ‘I never knew these people laughed’. That, to me, is huge. To show us as we’ve never been shown before”.

Comedian Ahmed Ahmed
As he tells PBS, “we can’t define who we are on a serious note, because nobody will listen. So the only way to do it is to be funny about it”. Muslim comedians, as organic intellectuals, voice the interests of their communities, defend the perception of them in public and aid the community in its fight for recognition. As Dean Obeidallah argues, Arabs and Muslims themselves must craft the public face of their community in the United States. “It’s up to us to go forward and tell people who we really are. The burden is on us, and we should be the ones telling our own story. I don’t want some other person telling the story about who Arabs are in America and who Muslims are. We should tell that story.”

In attempting to change the way Arab and Muslim Americans are viewed from the outside, Muslim comedians as organic intellectuals also hope to uplift individuals from their own community. These comedians believe that Arab and Muslim Americans can gain confidence and self-respect from their comedy as well. As their community is negatively depicted in the media, and the public responds to them with suspicion, Muslim comedians attempt to provide cultural leadership and urge members of their community to see themselves as equal citizens. Muslim comedians also hope to provide members of their community with new ideas about what it means to be Muslim in America. Many of these comedians note that Muslims who attend their shows are not only overwhelmingly supportive but also grateful to them for painting a new image of their faith. As comedian Azeem, a former member of the Allah Made Me Funny Comedy Tour, states:

> The group of people that I’ve noticed that come out are those persons who, for some reason have felt spiritually disenfranchised... But, to be honest, what I’ve noticed is as they leave, it’s like they just came from a spiritual revival... They are seeing us and they’re saying, ‘Man, they are having fun with their Islam’

NOTES

6. Ibid., p. 29.
7. Ibid. p. 34.
9. Ibid. p. 35.
10. Ibid. p. 33.
11. Ibid. p. 35.
15. Ibid.


68. Ibid.


73. DNC Comedy Coverage, op. cit.