

Did You Hear the One About the Suicide Bomber?

After Sept. 11, Shazia Mirza became famous by telling a single (some think abominable) joke.

It's a funny thing, being a devout Muslim female comic.

By Marshall Sella

It's a painfully slow Wednesday night at a London club called the Asylum. The owners seem to have lost their wits in designing the place: for purposes of comedy, it's terrifyingly well lighted, with a vivid tropical backdrop and a "stage" that is more accurately described as a corner of the room. As with struggling comedy clubs the world over, most of the performers are milling around outside, roping customers. But suddenly, the temperature of the place spikes. Shazia Mirza is coming, and Mirza is a Big Act in Britain these days. She enters and steps up, or rather over, to the stage and prepares to do her set. A few in the tiny crowd do a double take, for this comedian is wearing a traditional Muslim headdress. "I'm really pleased to be here, because my dad has let me out for the night," Mirza says, utterly deadpan. "So I'm not going to stay long. My dad is picking me up in 10 minutes. He thinks this is a library."

In the global menagerie of comedy, Mirza is that rarest of rare creatures — a female standup who is, in fact, a devout Muslim. In the past three years, working the clubs of England and other European venues, she has become notorious: a regular guest on the evening talk shows, a rage magnet for fundamentalist Muslims and, in every club from the vaunted Comedy Store in London to Brighton's Tea Time Titters, a proven draw.

At 27, in accordance with her faith, Mirza is a virgin, a nondrinker and a nonsmoker. She has never had a boyfriend, as it would be unacceptable to spend significant time with a man outside the bonds of marriage. "I never make jokes about sex," she says. "Because I've never had it."

Though Mirza was already a minor feature of the London comedy circuit in 2000, she hadn't given up her day job as a schoolteacher, shepherding 16-year-olds through the mysteries of physics in one of the East End's rougher schools.

But the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks changed everything. Initially, she ceased performing on the logic that this might not be the time for gags about Ramadan or, for that matter, *anything* funny a Muslim had to offer. Three weeks later, though, she took the stage in a Soho club called Amused Moose and, with a single joke, found the very, very thin line between acceptable comedy and abominable taste: "My name is Shazia Mirza," she said. "At least that's what it says on my pilot's license."

She'll never forget the reaction. "Everyone in the audience, all 200 of them, looked at each other, seeing if it was all right to laugh," she says. "And after the pause, they *really* laughed." The line got a standing ovation. Mirza became famous overnight. European clubs want-

Photograph by Nick Sinclair





'Do you think I could be a Bond girl?'

Mirza asks. 'I could show them . . . my face! There's a way to bridge the gap between the cultures!'

ed to book her with all speed; she was everywhere in the British media. While on tour, doing a layout for the German publication *Stern*, she was actually photographed posing with tiny model 747's, which she regards as howlingly funny. "The Germans loved me — and their sense of humor is still in development," she says. "No other country would think to buy me airplanes!"

MIRZA'S TRANSFORMATION into a comedian was achieved covertly. She was born in Birmingham to Pakistani parents and took a degree in biochemistry from Manchester University, much to her parents' pride. In 2000, however, she veered hard off the tracks in pursuit of amusing lager-boy crowds in smoky clubs. She hid this new career from her parents. In their world, having a comedian daughter was unthinkable, almost shameful. Even now, they are glared at in the mosque. Mirza tells me that fellow Muslims sometimes say to them: "We don't think you've brought your daughter up correctly. She should be something respectable. And she should be married, like a proper Muslim."

For a few years, the double life was hard to maintain. Shazia's father, Muhammad Ayaz Mirza, recalls his daughter covering her tracks with the claim that she was doing "research, lots of research." But when she came to Birmingham for a comedy competition, one of her brothers let it slip that he was going to see her. Flummoxed, the parents went along, too, but Shazia asked them to leave before the performance. Everyone was rattled. The gig was up.

Mirza, while she remains close to her parents, is caustic about her upbringing. "I had a terrible childhood," she says. "My mum would admit that *she's* had a dreadful life. She was orphaned by war and of course had an arranged marriage. She's been depressed, oppressed, repressed — all you'd expect about a Muslim woman. Women are meant to be grateful for having a husband. My father was a chauvinist. That was normal.

"I'd go to the homes of my aunts and uncles," she adds, "and all the women were in the kitchen. These were wealthy families. But the wife was being the wife. I thought, Bloody hell, I'm not gonna end up like that."

Life for a proud Pakistani family in England, of course, carries special burdens. Mirza's father always insisted that his children should work twice as hard. "We wanted Shaz to be a doctor or a lawyer," he says, "some recognized profession."

The girl Shazia was unenthusiastic about the shimmering future her parents held out. Her fa-

vorite TV show was "Dallas"; it was all so glam. Her first acting experience was in a school production — playing Mary Magdalene. "I took over the show," she says wistfully. "Everyone was laughing, and this wasn't a comedy. When my lines were done, people were saying: 'Mary Magdalene! Exit right!' But I just stood there. I wanted to be there. After that, I had the main part in every school play.

"One parents' evening, a teacher told my mum, 'Your daughter has such a talent — you must send her to drama school!' And my mum said: 'Drama school? What's *that*?' I went a few times, but my dad put a stop to it."

For all her success, Mirza's parents may not yet have reconciled themselves to her career, but they have inched closer. Her mother attended a ceremony at which Mirza was awarded Best New Act of 2001, held at the London Palladium. Her father, whom she characterizes as "secretly proud," has seen her perform live exactly once. "He stood at the curtain in case it didn't go well," she says, shaking her head. "That way, no one would know I was his daughter. You can't change a generation."

While never abandoning her Islamic beliefs, Mirza has reacted sharply against its cultural trappings. One sunny afternoon, we meet for coffee in a balcony bistro in Liverpool Street Station, once a scrap-iron-strewn wreck of a place but now a locus of international wealth. A skating rink sits in the middle of a circle of shops and some of the wealthiest firms in the City. It's a double abyss, Dante in reverse. Look downward and you see the innocence of physical exertion; look up, and there is the promise of filthy lucre.

Mirza arrives at the bistro not in her headdress and drabs but in a very colorful ensemble, complete with pricey shoes and a Burberry clutch. This is part love of fashion, part survival. The headdress attracts a crowd. Without it, she can walk down the street unrecognized. When she does don the hijab, though, she is stopped at least once a block by fans. It has become both symbol and prop, whether Mirza realizes it or not.

It soon becomes clear that, against all expectations, Shazia Mirza is deeply ambitious. What she wants is to be a star, a big, rich Hollywood celebrity. "I keep telling my manager that I'm going to conquer America," she says brightly. "I want to be the face of Revlon! Anything lucrative! Wouldn't that be great?"

Mirza is a single organism in which cultures, even generations, are locked in combat. Raised within strict Muslim dictates, she has thrust herself into a comedic subculture where decorum is the sin — but "paradox" is not a word she ac-

knowledges. She'll speak at length about something her imam told her yesterday, then roll without segue into her scheme to become a household name in the States. Brandishing faith as a shield against frivolity, she is deeply immersed in pop culture. And she wants to go deeper.

As the conversation lopes along, Mirza breezily offers her sometimes callow worldview, which is cobbled together from spirituality and loose gossip. She often mentions George Clooney, the man of her dreams, if only he'd convert. And how cross-dressing is one of the signs, or so it is written in the Koran, she maintains, that the end of the world is near. One of her great heroes is Madonna. "Not so much for her work," Mirza says, "but because she says whatever she wants to say and does whatever she wants to do. She made it all right to shag!" This is an odd remark, since Mirza is not simply *like* a virgin; she is one. But she's talking more in the broad realities of culture — about theoretical sex, which seems to hold connotations of freedom for her.

Still, the fact that Mirza lives between two worlds (or, more bafflingly, completely in both) may not be as contradictory as it seems. Her staccato, thumb-in-the-eye persona is a backlash against everything she watched her mother live through, to say nothing of those countless aunts huddled in the kitchen. To understand the ferocity with which Mirza has run toward popular culture, you need to understand the bleakness of the culture from which she ran. Between oppression and empowerment, comedy is the bridge. If she appears to be impossibly antithetical — caught between faith and ambition, fame and secrecy, hostility and humor — that may simply be what it looks like when Islam is mutated by the battering light of stardom and all its promises.

Whatever the case, Mirza's liberal reading of the Koran has revealed nothing to her that prohibits the life she has chosen. No contradictions, no regrets. "The prophet Muhammad, peace be unto him, had a sense of humor!" she insists. "And Islam actually empowers women. It's perversions of faith that have oppressed women. Just as suicide and murder could not be further from the teachings of Muhammad. Islam is not about bombs and mustaches and having 10 wives."

Edging onto thin ice, I ask, "Do you ever want to be married?"

Mirza cannot resist. "Yes — to George Clooney," she says, laughing. "Though Pierce Brosnan is hot. Do you think I could be a Bond girl? I could show them . . . my face! There's a way to bridge the gap between the cultures!"

SHAZIA MIRZA has paid her dues beyond the way most comedians would apply that phrase. She always insists that she is not political, but the

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Take my wives, please: Mirza cracks wise.

sheer heat of her subject matter has cost her dearly. "I went to Mecca," goes one joke. "In front of the holy black stone, where you repent your sins, someone pinched my bum. I like to think it was the hand of God."

Mirza isn't shy about using profanity — but she is certain she never blasphemes. This view is not shared by certain fundamentalists. At one London performance, she was 30 seconds into her act when three men rushed the stage and decried her as "a disgrace to Islam and the culture." One of them seized her by the throat and shoved her into a wall. By the time the police arrived, she'd run off. The men claimed she had somehow provoked them, and Mirza wasn't going to wait around to see how the story played out.

She has had several death threats. Recently, on tour in Odense, Denmark, Mirza was told that fundamentalists had let it be known that if she set foot onstage, they would kill her. "I was given two armed guards," she recalls. "It was the first time I ever saw a gun that big. I thought, Bloody hell, I'm telling jokes, and *that is a gun*. But I thought the most important time to do the comedy was there and then. If these people think it's a sin to tell jokes, what will they think when Americans take their oil? And is that sort of thinking why there's mass destruction of the World Trade Center? Is this how mass murderers justify their thinking?"

Evidently, the threats have not had their intended effect. She still does the Mecca joke every chance she gets.

Mirza lives in the Forest Gate neighborhood of London's East End, sharing a house with two other women (not close friends, by any measure). Despite her countless appearances on TV and in the press, rather incredibly, neither of her housemates, Mirza says, has the vaguest idea that she's a comic — nor even that she is a Muslim. Doubt this, and it will take only one glimpse of her anxiety at being unmasked to persuade you. Mirza laughingly says the two women seem to believe, since she's often heading for work at 8 p.m. and returning at 2 a.m., that she's "on the game" or, if not an actual prostitute, perhaps just a lap dancer.

She has never let them glimpse her in the head-dress, never explained the weeks-long trips she takes to Holland or Finland or Germany while on tour: "If someone said: 'That girl Shazia you live with? She's a comedian,' they'd never believe it."

That's Mirza's divided psyche all over. Adoring the spotlight, she lusts for anonymity. When I visit her at home, it is on the understanding that if catastrophe strikes and I run into one of the housemates, I'll be playing the role of a visiting American schoolteacher, here to engage in a lively exchange of views on methodology.

On my arrival, the house is dimly lit. We sneak up the narrow stairway like teenagers after a prom, until we reach her bedroom, the room that contains all the traces of her work and faith. It's a small, spare chamber, with no paintings on the walls. (Those are forbidden under strict interpretation of Islamic law.) There is a modest, scuffed desk, surrounded by stacks of papers on the floor — endless variations of her "sets," lists of jokes that have yet to be performed and reliable old standbys. Her bookshelf, mirroring the dichotomy of her devotions, contains not only her well-thumbed Koran but also biographies of Madonna and Elton John. Her ambition, too, is well represented; there are teetering four-foot stacks of newspapers and magazines, an inexhaustible cache of press cuttings she may hand out to advance her career.

Mirza offers to show a few clips of her TV appearances, and she has plenty from which to choose. The tapes run the gamut from British talk shows to news programs from the continent. On Denmark's "Deadline" (the equivalent of, say, "Nightline"), she quips that Saddam Hussein has hidden his weapons of mass destruction up his wife's purdah, since no one looks up there. The host, pleased if a bit mystified, ends the segment by saying, "I think we have never had so many jokes on 'Deadline!'"

Mirza switches off the TV, as time grows short. She needs to drive to a gig miles away in Soho. As we tiptoe out of her bedroom, I pretend that I'm going to say hello to her Canadian housemate and raise my hand as if to knock on the adjacent door. Mirza hisses a profanity (one of the big ones) and nearly moves to restrain me. I take a rough measure of the neighbor's sheer proximity, wondering if the Canadian is deaf and blind. By the time I turn back to Mirza, she is carefully locking her bedroom door and testing the knob.

ANOTHER NIGHT, another comedy club. But this one is in Manhattan, in Mirza's promised land, which holds visions of fame and wealth that shall not conflict with true Islam. She has come to America to cast her lot, or at least to have a look at the terrain.

Just as it has for 28 years, the Comic Strip guarantees "the stars of tomorrow — tonight!" Mirza arrives in her usual black outfit but has braced herself against the May chill with a bright sweatshirt that makes her look absurdly like Lit-

tle Red Riding Hood. Sitting among the requisite photos of Seinfeld, Ray Romano and dozens of industry casualties, she looks unnerved. She speaks of the previous evening, a gig in the trendy Luna Lounge, as "a complete disaster."

"They were afraid of me!" she says, nervously following her custom of scribbling a joke list on her palm. "I think people here might not like Muslims. All New Yorkers know is that my people blew up their country — and I'm paying for it. When the white males did suicide-bomber jokes last night, people laughed. When I did them, they were terrified!"

I try to assure Mirza that this city, far from being a one-horse dorp, is pretty diverse; it's not as if New Yorkers have never seen a Muslim before. But she will have none of it. When six Muslims enter the club and sit a few tables away, she mutters, "Every Muslim in New York City is here."

On the heels of the Luna calamity, Mirza's manager has instructed her to wade carefully into her political material. But Mirza has resolved to ignore the advice, and opens with a relatively dicey joke: one that, back in the U.K., is an Old Reliable. She chooses a man in the front row (in this case, an Oklahoma Sooners football coach), leans toward him and says: "Don't worry, sir. I won't blow you up."

The man emits a little puff of air, in unison with everyone at his table — then guffaws. Through her mercilessly deadpan demeanor, Mirza is visibly relieved.

The crowd is especially fond of another of Mirza's standbys. "America's Most Wanted" is now being shown in Saudi Arabia," she says flatly. "Last week, a Muslim woman was caught shoplifting. She was caught on CCTV. Police are looking for a woman . . . with brown eyes."

But there's still that pilot's-license joke looming out there, the barometer of the room. Eventually, drawing courage from the laughter, she hurls out that trademark line. This crowd does what hundreds of crowds have done before. There is a pause; three people make quiet *unkhh* noises, as if they've been elbowed in the gut. Then comes a gale of laughter.

But this time, there's a talker in the bunch. "That was out of order," a man says from the center of the room.

"Do you think it was out of order?" Mirza shoots back icily, handling him like any other heckler, trying to top him for control.

"Yes."

"Tough."

The man walks out. Within moments, word has spread through the room that he lost a sister in the World Trade Center, and the joke did not illuminate or charm him. Mirza barrels ahead without skipping a beat. "If the comedy doesn't work out," she continues, "I'm going to become a suicide bomber. I went to see my job counselor, and he said, 'Previous experience not required.'" And on this night, in this club, the moans are drowned out by laughter. ■