

Migrant Narratives

Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and
Community

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Introduction

This chapter offers a reading of a TV interview with British comedian Shazia Mirza as a migrant narrative. In her comedy routines Mirza habitually draws on her stage persona’s experiences as a British Muslim woman of Pakistani background. As such, she often references restrictions imposed on Muslim women concerning clothing or relationships with men, stereotypical perceptions of Muslim codes of conduct, as well as her parents’ preoccupation with her being unmarried. One underlying principle to these references is the assumption that the cultural background of her family is inherently different to what might generally be perceived as mainstream British society. In her public appearances, Shazia Mirza exposes these fault lines inscribed into contemporary Muslim experiences in Western societies and exploits them for comic effect. The following discussion of the interview aims at tracing the strategies Mirza employs to make these fault lines visible, such as combining testimony and stand-up to create a hybrid narrative genre, negotiating identity positions, and employing comedy to challenge stereotypical representations of Muslim identities in Britain. In so doing, she also proves the potential of migrant narratives to challenge societal discourse and notions of victimhood therein.

Narrative – Interview with Shazia Mirza on the *Jonathan Ross Show*

This interview with Shazia Mirza was recorded during her appearance on the *Jonathan Ross Show* in March 2016. There are also other guests present on the show, Australian actor Hugh Jackman and Welsh actor Taron Egerton, who get involved in the conversation, so that the attention occasionally shifts away from Mirza. At the same time, the interview gathers considerable speed in this multi-directional discussion (as marked in the transcript).

Jonathan Ross (JR): I know you as a comedian. I know of your work as a comedian. But it wasn’t your first choice, though? You were a teacher for some while before, weren’t you?

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- Shazia Mirza (SM):* Yes, I used to be a Science teacher. They hated me and I hated them. I taught in a lot of rough schools. I used to teach in Tower Hamlets in Dagenham.
- JR:* I believe one of your pupils went on to great fame himself. You taught the young Dizze Rascal?
- SM:* That's right, I did. Well, I tried to.
- JR:* He is a lovely... – I find him to be charming company. He is a very energetic young man. And I can imagine his focus wasn't always on the front of the classroom.
- SM:* That's right, he was... – actually, he loved music. He used to run out of my lesson and go "I'm going to the music room!" And I had to have to always drag him out of the music room and go: "Get out of here. Put your banjo down, you're coming to my lesson". And he'd go: "I hate you lesson! I hate your lesson!" But he just loved music, he was never about the fame – or the money.
- JR:* If you'd bump into him, would he still think of you as his teacher, d'you think?
- SM:* Well, I met him a couple of years ago. I went to a screening of a film and I was walking up the red carpet and all I heard behind me was this voice going: "Oi, Miss! Miss!". And I turned round and it was him and I said: "You don't have to call me Miss anymore, you know, we're not in school, and it sounds a bit sordid".

At this point, the conversation shifts briefly to one of the other guests on the show. In these first moments of the interview, Shazia Mirza is framed both as a comedian and a qualified Science teacher with maybe surprising overlaps between those professions. At the same time, her experiences working in less-privileged environments adds another dimension to her professional life.

- Other guest:* But surely, they thought you were funny. I'm certain they must have thought you are funny.
- SM:* You know, they used to say to me: "This is so boring, Miss, you're not funny. Go home!".
- Other guest:* Really?
- SM:* Do you know what I did? I used them as material! So, he is in my act now. I'm making money out of him.
- JR:* One of the things I know, in your comedy you talk about your upbringing, a fairly strict Muslim upbringing. Is that correct?
- SM:* My parents are both Muslim, they are both very religious. My mother, she wears the burka – mainly because she doesn't want to be seen with my dad. I don't know what the big deal is; all the women in my family, they all wear the burka and it's great – because they all use the same bus pass.

JR: That's a real positive.

SM: That's a positive! You know, I did have a very strict Muslim upbringing. I was never allowed out of the house...

JR: So seriously, it was a strict time?

SM: Yeah, I wasn't allowed to wear make-up, I wasn't allowed to have the friends that I wanted, I wasn't allowed to have boyfriends, I wasn't allowed to have sex. God, if only I had known at the time! No big deal, nobody has sex these days anyway. You lot don't [addressing the audience], otherwise you wouldn't be here tonight. I mean, it's been such a long time now, I don't think about it anymore. I think the only way I'm going to get it now is, if it snows heavily and someone slips in. Don't feel sorry for me. I've got a couple of degrees and I've got a lot of reading done. [addressing the other guests at the show, Hugh Jackman and Taron Egerton] That's the only reason I go skiing.

While there is no interruption in the conversation here, Mirza turns her attention away from the show host to talk to the other two guests and also the audience. She makes fun of her students, who did not find her funny as a teacher, while also delineating how her strict Muslim family background impacts her life to this day.

JR: You're from Birmingham?

SM: Yes. Obviously, I don't live there anymore, because I'm doing well.

JR: Your parents, though, they came up from Pakistan, I believe?

SM: They came from Pakistan to Birmingham, so not much difference – in the 1960s.

JR: So, it must have been quite a culture shock for them when they first arrived here?

SM: You know what, they were desperate to be British. They were so... they really wanted to be like the British. My dad is called Mohammed, but he abbreviates it to Bob. I'd come home and there'd be calendars of Samantha Fox on the kitchen wall, like naked pictures of women in haystacks, and we'd say to him: "What are you doing?" and he'd say [in Pakistani accent]: "Well, you know, John down the road, he's got one of these, so I had to get one. Because that's what all the British men are doing, you know?" He is Welsh.

JR: You used to holiday in Wales when you were young, did you?

SM: Well, the first holiday we ever went on was in a caravan in Cardigan Bay because my dad went [in Pakistani accent], "You know, all the British are staying in caravans, let's go and do it". And we got there and he just... – we had to come home after four days because he didn't like using the toilets. He was like [in Pakistani accent], "I'm all for the British but this is too much!" [...] * And they came from Pakistan!

Before the other guests on the show briefly start talking about their knowledge of Wales and the Welsh language, Shazia Mirza sketches how different cultural experiences, such as a Pakistani family background, everyday life in Britain, including holidays in Wales, were negotiated in her family.

JR: So, your parents, though, they must be really proud of your success now, they must look at you and see what you have achieved.

SM: They are actually in denial. Like people stop my dad in the streets in Birmingham and they'll go: "You know, we saw your daughter on TV". And then he'll go [in Pakistani accent], "Yes, that is right. But she really has a degree in biochemistry. The comedy, she'll get over it".

JR: But, so, what about when you met the Queen? They must have thought this is quite a milestone.

SM: They thought [in Pakistani accent], "Finally, we are British! Our daughter has met the Queen! We are British!" – Sure, I met the Queen. I met the Queen three times. Last time I met her, the reason I went to the palace, because the Indian Prime Minister was coming to Britain. I'm not Indian. But the Queen thought, "I know, let's gather up some Indians and people who look Indian and get them to the palace." They asked me to bring two types of ID, like a driver's licence or a passport. I got so nervous, I knew I wasn't meant to be there, I took my gas bill, just in case. This perception that the Queen talks like this [in a Queen-like accent], "and it's true, she really does talk like this". And I was standing in line to meet her and I put my hand out to shake her hand and she went [in a Queen-like accent], "And what do you do?" And I started talking like that as well. She went [in a Queen-like accent], "And what do you do?" and I went [in a Queen-like accent], "I'm a comedian". And I felt my Birmingham accent going up three social registers. And then she said to me [in a Queen-like accent], "Oh, and do you do any TV?" and I said, "Yes, I do some", and she said [in a Queen-like accent], "And do people recognise you? and I thought, "Obviously not". And then she said [in a Queen-like accent], "The same thing happens to me".

JR: What? Hang on, people don't recognise the Queen?

SM: She went [in a Queen-like accent], "The same thing happens to me! Sometimes I go shooting in the country and people look at me and go: 'I know you' and I think, you don't know me, where do you know me from?" I wanted to say, "You're the f* Queen!"

In the retelling of an episode that visibly entertains the audience as well as the other guests on the show, Shazia Mirza brings together not only professional success, which is acknowledged through her meeting with the Queen,

but also how she is confronted by persistent everyday-racisms, in this case in the orbit of the royal household.

JR: Let me ask you about shaving off bodily hair, Shazia. Because Shazia made a documentary series for BBC3 back when it was on TV, before it went online. Now what was the purpose behind this, this was kind of embrace the idea of women not having to shave, or what?

SM: Yeah, it was called from *F*** Off, I'm a Hairy Woman*, and it was basically we feel, a lot of women feel, that men are prejudiced towards hairy women. And, I mean, I'm very hairy – Asian women are very hairy, my mother's very hairy, she's got a beard and a moustache; she started to bleach her facial hair. I told her to stop that now because when she gets on a lift, under the light, she looks like Father Christmas. It was all about how to... [in reaction to the common laughter] ... this is all true. None of these are jokes, it's just my life...

[...]*

SM: Cause, you know, women, they do a lot of shaving, plucking, lawn-mowing, all this kind of thing.

JR: They used to do more than now, I think.

SM: Oh my god, yeah. Now, women have these things called Brazilian, I don't know if you've heard of them.

[...]*

SM: The thing is, young women, you are right, they have these Brazilian, they have everything off. I mean, I went for a Brazilian, I had the Gaza strip. Very popular on the Edgware Road. I mean, it's all the rage now, but I think we should go back to letting it all grow out.

JR: You can trim, right, you don't have to take it all off?

[...]¹

SM: Well, I grew my body hair for seven months for the documentary. It was really weird because people really reacted in a strange way. I'd get on the tube and I had a lot of make-up on, but I had hairy legs. And this woman came up to me and she said, "Listen, love, I know what you're going through. I totally understand, here is my number, if you ever wanna talk". And she thought I was going through a sex change operation. But it's weird how people react to hairy women.

As becomes visible by the ellipses in this last passage, Mirza's description of the documentary on female body hair prompts repeated responses from the other guests and expands the interview into a broader discussion.

Methodological reflections – Ways of narrating the self

This text is transcribed from a TV interview with British comedian Shazia Mirza, whose comedy routines habitually draw on her stage persona's experiences as a British Muslim woman of Pakistani background. The following discussion will be mostly based on the interview, though occasionally some of Mirza's stand-up material will be referenced to highlight overlaps with her comedy. Since Mirza's narrative can be situated at an intersection of a variety of discourses, such as gender, ethnicity, religion and other fields of identity politics, the methods for analysing her narrative will also have to be diverse. I will offer a reading of her text that relies on a literary perspective on narrative genre, on cultural studies to shine a light on identity construction, and eventually linguistics and anthropology, for the role of comedy as a means to subvert dominant stereotypes pertaining to all discourses at work in the narrative and Mirza's performance.

Central to the analysis will have to be the text genre itself, in that Mirza's narrative is unusual for a variety of reasons: She talks about her experiences on television, on the popular *Jonathan Ross Show* (ITV).² This programme expressly aims to entertain, rather than inform, with its blurb reading: "Employing his infectious wit and sense of fun, [Jonathan Ross] chats to some terrific celebrity guests and asks the questions to which everyone wants to know the answers" (The Jonathan Ross Show 2020). In line with this proposition, the other guests present during Mirza's interview are Australian Hollywood star Hugh Jackman and Welsh actor Taron Egerton, both of whom not only freely react with the laughter Mirza's comedy aims for, but also repeatedly display expressions of surprise and disbelief at her open challenging of societal discourses. Curiously enough, Jackman as well as Egerton occasionally align themselves with Mirza's accounts of being the "other". Thus, Jackman would recall meeting the Queen as a somewhat inept "Aussie", whereas Egerton exploits his knowledge of the seemingly outlandish language of Welsh for entertainment.³

With its focus on "celebrity" and "fun", this show creates a narrative environment that positions Mirza at once in a framework of (relative) fame and glamour, while also demanding a light-hearted account of things. As a consequence, the comedian chooses to create a narrative that feeds off her stand-up sketches as much as her lived experiences. Owing to the fact that Mirza's comedy routine habitually draws on her life story, as is typical for stand-up comedy (Keisalo 2018, p. 551), the two narrative positions – the fictionalised and the testimonial⁴ – become inextricably entangled. Thus, Mirza can make use of the force of testimony to shine a light on "histories of harm" (Gilmore 2017, p. 307) while employing the quality of stand-up comedy to subvert and question social and cultural norms (Keisalo 2018, p. 550). Eventually, it will be futile to try and peel the two strands apart. However, a discussion of the narrative modes employed in this particular cross-over of genre will allow us to assess how Mirza uses the momentum created at the intersection between

stand-up comedy and testimonial to challenge calcified notions of migrant experiences.

Theoretically, the interview situation would demand responses from the interviewee somewhere on the testimonial spectrum; with testimony understood here as life-stories of previously marginalised voices shared with an audience (Woods 2021, p. 1), rather than public accounts by people who suffered harm (Gilmore 2017, p. 307). However, Mirza's answers are often almost prefabricated, actual take-outs from her comedy routines.⁵ Even though stand-up is predicated on the exposure of the self and making the personal available for public consumption, it is a "staged performance of self-presentation" (Lindfors 2019, p. 276). Thus, Mirza's answers might very well be rooted in personal experiences as she repeatedly ascertains, but they draw on the fictionalised performance of these experiences. The communicative framework on the show, however, is distinctly different from a comedy performance: The conversation includes the show host, guests and audience in contrast to stand-up, where the comedian is mostly alone on stage and communicates with the audience only (Keisalo 2018, p. 551). This framing accommodates ever such minute shifts in Mirza's narrative, though, adding a testimonial quality to her comic material. As a consequence, exploring these shifts, and their effect on Mirza's narrative, will be the starting point for my analysis of the material.

Predicated on these narrative positions, Mirza seems to be going back and forth between what could be assumed to be Shazia Mirza, the person, and Shazia Mirza, the stage persona. The ambiguity created by the different character positions that Mirza assumes allows for a discussion of identity construction and narrative agency as inherently unstable and very much dependent on context, which seems to be particularly acute in migrant experiences. As Stuart Hall (1990, p. 222) delineates:

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of *enunciation*. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say "in our own name", of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place.

This inherent synchronicity of all identity positions that Hall asserts is thus further complicated in Shazia Mirza's account given on the *Jonathan Ross Show*, as she introduces at least two perspectives: The comedian forged in stage performances and the person who has a science degree and is the daughter of Pakistani immigrants. Each of these identity positions informs the other, each in itself negotiated in the process of presenting. A closer look into these subjectivities and the processes involved in their construction will aid the decoding of the narrative position and the agency it creates.

At the same time as Mirza's various subject positions take shape in the interview, laying bare their inherent instability and their dependency on context, she also taps into a powerful resort that has long informed diasporic and

post-colonial struggles: A notion of belonging that relies on the idea of a collective culture with “common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (Hall 1990, p. 223). It is this view of identity that has encouraged previously marginalised groups to make their voices heard, as they are sharing their stories and experiences from a point of enunciation that has been resonating with people across the world ever since. As the discussion will show, Mirza also relies on this perception – partly to pitch “British” against “Pakistani” heritage for comic effect, partly to refute stereotypical notions of non-Muslim and Muslim identities.

Eventually, in line with the narrative situation (the entertainment format) and the shifting narrative positions (the stand-up comedian and second-generation migrant), the dominant mode of the interview is comedic. In this hybrid narrative constellation, Mirza employs comedy to challenge preconceptions of contemporary Muslim life in western societies, but also to create agency for her stage persona, and herself, as a Muslim woman from a traditional Pakistani background. In so doing, she presents herself as actively breaking taboos (for example by stating that she does not have sex, that she is a hairy woman and that she is making money off her former students), and thereby avowedly refutes any sense of victimisation. Comedy is her tool to invert existing power structures. This can be linked to the superiority theory of humour, already formulated by Plato and Aristotle, which focuses on the superiority that the person making the joke assumes over the one who is ridiculed (Weaver *et al.* 2016, p. 228). Given how Shazia Mirza, person and persona, is situated in various discourses of gender, ethnicity, religion and other fields of identity politics, shining a light on her comedic techniques can help unravel how she challenges the multiple hierarchies she finds herself inscribed in.

Analysis – Comedy as strategy

In that Shazia Mirza's narrative is situated at various intersecting discourses, cultural practices and narrative genres, a combination of the approaches sketched above will be employed to unravel the tactics she uses and to which effect. First, I will look at the material from a literary angle, since the genre itself, oscillating between comedy routine and testimonial, deserves further attention. Additionally, the identity construction taking place within the narrative will be investigated by relating it to the process of “storying the self” (Finnegan 1997, p. 65) against the backdrop of who gets to present the “other” (Hall 1997). The mode of presentation, eventually, will form the last dimension to be explored here in that the comedy Mirza employs to tackle these – at times highly controversial – issues seems the be-all and end-all to how effectively she can deconstruct stereotypical representations of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The question of which narrative genre Mirza relies on informs the entire conversation with Jonathan Ross, leading him to tentatively try and fix her

in a specific narrative position. Thus, when the talk show host, the audience and the other guests are – once again – roaring with laughter at an answer she has just given, Shazia Mirza claims, deadpan, that “[n]one of these are jokes, it’s just my life...”, which is at once hard to contest but also hard to take at face value. That Jonathan Ross is at least partly aiming for a conversation that would yield some results in terms of a testimony, is palpable in his questions. He particularly tries to find out more about Mirza’s experience of growing up as the daughter of Muslim Pakistani immigrants. When Ross attempts to tap into a real-life experience informing the comedy, this is met with a joke about a burka and a shared bus pass, which happens to be material Mirza has been using for quite a while, for example during her performance in Stockholm in 2009 (Stockholm Live 2009). The host’s reaction to this, “So seriously, it was a strict time?” indicates that he is well aware of the fact he has been presented with comedy material. But even though he is trying to trigger potentially more serious answers, Mirza only partly does his bidding.

In that she chooses to answer the interview questions at her will with either comedy material, which also has an indexical relationship to her off-stage self (Lindfors 2019, p. 277), and/or testimonial narratives, Mirza retains control of the conversation. As powerful and central as testimony is to contemporary life (Gilmore 2017, p. 307), its status is also a fragile one. Even though the “I” narrative of individual experiences provides agency to its author (Woods 2021, p. 1), it is particularly in the mediation of testimony that damage can be done, either to the one bearing testimony or to its cause as Woods (2021, p. 2) delineates. Paul Gready (2008 cited in Woods 2021) ties this back to “the lack of control over representation in truth commission or human rights reports, the court room, the media or within cultural production”, which “can mark a return to powerlessness”. Despite the fact that Mirza’s narrative is framed in an entertainment format, it is clearly of vital importance to her to evade any sense of powerlessness or identification as a victim of some sort. Thus, sidestepping a format that is habitually “exposed to doubt as a routine feature”, especially when employed by women (Gilmore 2017, p. 307), is thus one of Mirza’s strategies to ascertain her agency. In the process, she also questions the perceived victimhood of other Muslim women by turning her mother’s burka, habitually seen as a sign of female suppression, into an asset that spares the mother the supposed embarrassment of being seen with her husband. The shift between the two genres often comes within one answer, as in the following response to Ross’s question about her strict parents:

SM: Yeah, I wasn’t allowed to wear make-up, I wasn’t allowed to have the friends that I wanted, I wasn’t allowed to have boyfriends, I wasn’t allowed to have sex. God, if only I had known at the time! No big deal, nobody has sex these days anyway. You lot don’t [addressing the audience], otherwise you wouldn’t be here tonight. I mean, it’s been such a long time now, I don’t think about it anymore. I think the only way I’m going to get it now is, if

it snows heavily and someone slips in. Don't feel sorry for me. I've got a couple of degrees and I've got a lot of reading done.

While the opening sentence about strict rules concerning make-up, friends and sex appears straightforward and ties in with common representations of Muslim women in western countries (Donohoue Clyne 2003, p. 19), the end of the passage, which has her wondering whether she will ever experience sex, references stand-up material (for example *Syndicado TV* 2017). Thus, Mirza makes use of the agency that testimony bestows on her, but in combining it with the subversive form of stand-up comedy, she acquires greater control of the situation and the narrative. It is worth noting that in this shift between genres, timing is crucial: the moment the audience might pity Mirza for her restrictive upbringing, she makes fun of them and their lack of alternatives to attending the taping of a talk show. The immediacy of communication with the audience and the comedian's control over the conversation, which is so typical for this type of comedy, becomes manifest (Lindfors 2019, p. 279). Both of these prove vital in Mirza's narrative. By resorting to her comedy material, she can transfer this control into the interview situation and, simultaneously, gain – unmediated – support for this strategy by the audience's approving laughter. In so doing, she capitalises on a relationship that Lindfors (2019, p. 277) describes as a co-authoring in stand-up, between the audience and the comedian, which results in "ritualized collective laughter". In its questioning of where to draw the line between what is private and what is public (Keisalo 2018, p. 558), stand-up comedy seems especially suited for Mirza's mixing of genres. Asked about how she experiences her supposedly strict Muslim parents, Mirza can refer to a public version of her private life, already performed in her comedy routines, and thus maintain control.

The second dimension to explore here is the performance of identities, which is productively complicated by the different genres at play in Mirza's narrative, the stage persona doing comedy and the person giving testimony. This instability of identity in the interview situation becomes indicative of how identities are constructed and context-dependent in more general terms. We encounter Shazia Mirza as failing former teacher, as a comedian, as a TV presenter (for the documentary *F*** Off, I'm a Hairy Woman*), as Muslim woman ("You know, I did have a very strict Muslim upbringing"), as the daughter of Pakistani immigrants. All of these facets come into existence through the narrative itself in that "the self [is] essentially 'storied' – formulated and experienced through self-narratives" (Finnegan 1997, p. 69). This is why, in Buitelaar's (2006, p. 262) view, life-stories are so relevant when dealing with "intersecting identifications". They "point to the fact that identity is created by organizing stories about multiple identifications into continually revised biographical narratives that form answers to the question "'Who am I?'" (Buitelaar 2006, p. 262).

Mirza's story of herself exposes the contrasts that are commonly assumed to exist between her identities – such as stand-up comedian, who shares the

most private aspects of her life, and Muslim woman, who is shielded from the public (Ratheiser 2013, p. 307). Her supposedly more provocative statements about sex or body hair can be allocated to her comedian persona, whereas the references to her parents' origin, complete with Pakistani accent, ascertain her migratory background. The different narrative voices and genres she employs simultaneously attest to these different identity positions – and produce them. “Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation”, as Stuart Hall (2011, p. 3) observes, they are “not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (Hall 2011, p. 3). In narrating her different identities, Mirza speaks them into existence, while questioning dominant stereotypes such as the silenced, submissive Muslim woman (Buitelaar 2006, p. 265) – her story and her appearance on the popular TV programme make it very clear that she is anything but.

It is particularly when Mirza talks about her family background that she explores cultural identity as being constructed through difference (Hall 2011, p. 4). In an exchange with the talk show host about her family hailing from Pakistan, Mirza initially observes that coming to Birmingham was not that big a change for her parents, alluding to the city's large population of Middle Eastern descent. When Ross implies a possible “culture shock” as a consequence of their exposure to “British” life – meaning white, non-Muslim, western life – Mirza takes him up on this. She claims her parents wanted to be British – again affirming that being British is distinctly different from being Pakistani – but their mode of striving for Britishness exposes the superficiality informing these often stereotypical and reductionist cultural representations: Her father adopting the name of Bob and hanging up pornographic calendars. This at once questions stereotypical notions of certain cultural practices, i.e. being British means having pictures of half-naked women on the wall, while affirming the different identity positions involved. In Hall's (2011, p. 4) words, “it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed”. It seems that the identity positions Mirza invokes here, her father's Pakistani background and his attempt at “doing being British” would through their supposed differences first bring about both identity constructs, their “positive” meanings. At the same time these constructs would make way for a performance of identity, specific to Mirza's father, which could exploit both individual constructs to create something new and situative.

Negotiating cultural identity along these lines of difference and (the dismantling of) stereotypical notions lies also at the heart of the episode Mirza tells about meeting the Queen, which throws identity dimensions of class, geographical background and ethnicity into sharp relief. She recalls how she is invited for a visit of the Indian Prime Minister, despite the fact that she is not Indian, but “the Queen thought, ‘I know, let's gather up some Indians and people who look Indian and get them to the palace’”. Mirza exposes the

racism inherent in this presumed consideration of the monarch, which she contrasts with the pride this invitation created in her parents: “They thought [in Pakistani accent], ‘Finally, we are British! Our daughter has met the Queen! We are British!’” By combining these two perspectives of the encounter, her parents’ and the Queen’s, Mirza at once shows how deeply preconceptions run in Britain’s multi-ethnic society, while also asserting that Britain *is* in fact a multi-ethnic, multicultural society: Her parents’ claim to be British, Pakistani accent and all, is validated in her narrative. This is underscored further by how Mirza frames her own reaction to meeting the sovereign: “And I felt my Birmingham accent going up three social registers”, indicating that hailing from the West Midlands is just as much part of her cultural identity as the other markers we have hitherto discussed, such as ethnicity, religious background and class. The regional designation also comes with a linguistic one, her Birmingham accent as much marked by its difference to her parents’ Pakistani accent as to the Queen’s accent or as to Received Pronunciation (RP), the “norm” pronunciation aimed for particularly in educated and/or upper-class environments (Britain 2017, p. 291). In explicitly referencing this, Mirza asserts her position as “Brummie” and deliberately distances herself from RP speaking elites, thus making her non-Pakistani accent another performance of yet another dimension of cultural identity.

The last facet of Mirza’s performance to be discussed here is that of comedy and which functions it fulfils in her narrative. When she answers Jonathan Ross’s questions, she has the audience as well as the other guests and her interview partner in stitches. Clearly, large sections of her narrative resonate with her audience, inviting them to partake in the communicative act, which is a characteristic element of stand-up comedy as Antti Lindfors (2019, p. 277) observes: “Even at their seemingly most personal, that is, stand-up comics tend to assign their everyday lives with general social resonance, drawing on their token experiences in the name of something typical or thematizing larger-scale causes or injustices [...]”. This specific reaction – laughter – is tied to the mode of her presentation – a genre-mix heavy on stand-up comedy – which becomes a powerful tool for “thematizing larger-scale causes or injustices”: Stereotypes of Muslim and non-Muslim representations in a western context, of migrant experiences, and also of gender norms.

Comedy has long been an effective instrument to challenge power relations in a variety of contexts and, as a consequence, to help the comedian assume agency. Mirza’s narrative exemplifies this in many ways. When she tells the story about a former student of hers, who told her that she was profoundly unfunny and boring, she retaliates by stating: “Do you know what I did? I used them as material! So, he is in my act now. I’m making money out of him.” In so doing, the comedian makes use of the subversive, disruptive nature of humour, which often consists of placing the target of their jokes in an inferior position (Weaver *et al.* 2016, p. 228). Shazia Mirza employs comedy, this “public use of power” (Keisalo 2018, p. 550), as a formidable tool to challenge the multiple hierarchies she finds herself inscribed in.

Her strategy to construct agency within the narrative opens up in at least three different directions. For one, in her routines but also in the interview quoted from above, she uses her position of – at least temporary – superiority to question stereotypes concerning contemporary Muslim life in a western context. She invites the audience to laugh with her, for example, about one form of representation of Muslim identity that has seemingly become metonymical for all Muslim existence in the west, that of the veiled woman. In her joke about the advantages that Muslim women have by covering their faces with a burka, because it allows them to share a bus pass (and not to be seen with their husbands), Mirza exploits the “essentialist discourse” in which women wearing headscarves “function as symbols of the anti-modernity of Islam” (Buitelaar 2006, p. 260). By turning this essentialist assumption into a joke, she recruits her audience’s laughter in dismantling the stereotype of Muslim women as “oppressed, powerless and victimised” (Benn and Jawad 2003, p. xiv). Thus, the joke is on everybody who adheres to this clichéd perception of Muslim women, and a specific female Muslim agency is established in the process, which challenges ethnic and gender stereotypes alike. Mirza follows this route also in her own performance which in itself is a forceful refutation of this image.

Secondly, by enacting this position of superiority as a woman, Shazia Mirza challenges prevalent gender roles – not only from a Muslim perspective. The production of humour has long been considered a male prerogative, as for example Regina Barreca (1996, p. 1) writes in her collection of women’s humour. Publicly making fun of something or someone is an act of aggression which, for a long time, has been considered incompatible with female behaviour in our hierarchic system of gender relations and has thus become part of a “traditional performance of masculinity”, as Kotthoff (2006, p. 14) argues. While this expression of masculinity through comedy has been a staple in popular cultural productions, a similar path was largely closed off for women. Stand-up comedy is no exception in this. It developed in the US in the first half of the twentieth century and, despite the fact that female comedians have “never been absent”, it has always strongly relied on male performers (Keisalo 2018, p. 550). Even though more and more female comedians have been entering the scene over the last decade, they are still conspicuously underrepresented (Keisalo 2018, p. 550). Simply by being a woman in the public arena of stand-up comedy can thus be considered a form of transgression that challenges perceived notions of gender, and potentially even more so in the context of how Muslim women are often perceived, as discussed above. Mirza herself brings this to a head in a more specific Muslim context by remarking dryly, “the thing is that Muslim men don’t want to marry me – because I speak.” (Stockholm Live 2009).

Eventually, Mirza employs a strategy frequently associated with female comedy, namely self-deprecating humour (Colleary 2015, p. 145). This becomes particularly palpable in the passage where she talks about her TV programme *F*** Off, I’m a Hairy Woman*:

[...] it was basically, we feel, a lot of women feel, that men are prejudiced towards hairy women. And, I mean, I'm very hairy – Asian women are very hairy, my mother's very hairy, she's got a beard and a moustache; she started to bleach her facial hair. I told her to stop that now because when she gets on a lift, under the light, she looks like Father Christmas.

Already the title of Mirza's TV show makes clear that being seen as hairy is not necessarily in line with mainstream perceptions of female beauty. In that she positions herself (and her mother) explicitly outside this norm, Mirza makes fun of herself – but eventually also challenges beauty standards and (western) forms of representation.

This type of humour functions in two ways throughout the narrative. For one, it allows Mirza to “appear unthreatening” (Keisalo 2018, p. 557), which is likely one of the reasons it is a particularly productive strategy in comedy by women, given how interdependent aggressive humour and performances of masculinity have long been. By being “threatening as well as mitigating the threat” through self-deprecation (Keisalo 2018, p. 557), the comedian can establish a relationship with the audience, who very likely will see themselves in some of the personal stories the comedian shares. The connection with the audience, and the shared laughter about her persona, allow Mirza to retain control of the narrative process and the direction of the humour, while laying bare stereotypical notions of what it means to be a woman, a Muslim, a person of Pakistani heritage in British society.

Shazia Mirza's multi-layered narrative, positioned at an intersection of discourses on gender, ethnicity, religion and other fields of identity politics in contemporary Britain, powerfully demonstrates how vital a chorus of different voices can be to gain deeper insights in migrant experiences. Sometimes, as in the interview at hand, the different voices can even come from the same person, testifying not only to the narrative agency of the speaker, but also to the multiplicity of strategies used to question stereotypes and re-inscribe dominant discourses. It is by combining testimony and stand-up to create a hybrid narrative genre, negotiating various identity positions and, eventually, through her use of comedy that Shazia Mirza succeeds in dismantling prevalent preconceptions concerning experiences of a second-generation migrant, Muslim woman in Britain.

Notes

1 Other people on the show comment/talk.

2 Aired on 19 March 2016.

3 The mix of guests and their interactions could also be fruitfully read at the intersection of postcolonial and gender studies.

4 This is not to say that testimonial does not also – at least in parts – rely on storied and thus fictionalised accounts of experiences. As will be seen in the following discussion the lines are often blurry.

5 See, for example, Stockholm Live 2009 or Syndicado TV 2017.

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