

Transcript - Zarqa

1. Please introduce yourself and give us a quick synopsis of your new series Zarqa.

My name is Zarqa Nawaz and my series is about a bitter, selfish Muslim woman who can't handle it when her ex-husband gets married to a younger, skinnier white yoga instructor. So in a fit of vindictiveness, she decides to compete by telling everyone on Facebook, she's coming with a white brain surgeon named Brian.

2. We've never seen a comedy from a Muslim woman's perspective on television before. Why do you think it's important that a story like this needs to be told, and what makes it so relatable?

I think it's really important for representation because people need to see how Muslim women react to situations which, surprise, surprise, is the same way any other woman would react. Because Muslim women have been racialized, people believe we are passive and frequently victims of abuse and don't have agency in our own lives. From my Little Mosque on the Prairie days, I learned the more specific you can get, the more universal the issue or story becomes. And there is nothing more universal than a woman getting jealous when her ex-husband gets remarried to someone younger.

3. How does the character of Zarqa differ from other representations of Muslim women on other shows? Can you tell us what makes her so unique in Canadian television specifically, and why it's important to see more characters like her onscreen?

It's very rare to see Muslim woman in leading roles. Mostly we show up in shows like Homeland where terrorism is being depicted.

Rayyan on Little Mosque on the Prairie was unique because she existed, and she was a doctor, wore hijab and had agency. so I think she's unique .

So yeah, ZARQA will be unique because as far as I know, there hasn't been a show with a Muslim woman as a lead.

4. You had a great deal of success on your previous show Little Mosque on the Prairie, reaching a wide Canadian and international audience. Can you tell us why you think it was able to reach so many, and why you believe/hope Zarqa will have a similar or even greater impact?

I think that Little Mosque on the Prairie was the first show that showed Muslims as regular people on television. We had never seen a sitcom with Muslims in lead roles before and so it was a shock for people. I think they had no idea what to expect because until then, the only Muslims on TV were the ones on the news and they were terrorists and evil. This overwhelming negative depiction created a sense of 'othering' for Muslims so when Little Mosque appeared, it was the first time that Muslims were seen as regular human beings and that was a really, really big deal for people. One man told me that he couldn't look at a bearded Muslim man the same way again because it didn't occur to him that Muslims could also be husbands and pay mortgages and raise kids and just do ordinary things that ordinary people do because he had never seen that on television before. So even though the show was criticized for being sweet and kind, it was revolutionary in the sense that it was blowing people's minds away.

- 5. How did your experience on Little Mosque (as writer/producer) inform your approach to Zarqa (as writer/producer/showrunner)? Are there any lessons you learned, changes you decided to make as a result of that experience? What informed your choice to have more control over story decisions in your role as showrunner?**

When I made Little Mosque on the Prairie, it was my very first time in a story room. It became clear to me that I wasn't being groomed to be the head writer or the showrunner. The CBC executive at the time from what I had been told, either didn't believe women were funny or didn't believe in grooming people of color to that position. In that time period, it was assumed that only white men deserved that role and could be trusted with leadership in a story room and a mentorship system was not going to be set up for me. It's true I was a green writer, but every writer starts someplace and someone gives them a shot at leadership. I didn't realize it at the time, but this is how systemic racism works. I really believed I wasn't a good writer after going thru that experience. It was one of the toughest and painful experiences in my life. But I knew that 7 white guys in a room weren't going to be able to make this show because they had no experience in the Muslim community. So a friend told me that this would be a great opportunity to learn the craft of writing, learn the process of breaking story, and to put my ego and my feelings aside and learn how to become the writer I believed I could be. So I really concentrated on learning the skill and becoming a stronger writer as a result and so when the time came that I could become a showrunner I had earned it, I had done the work because as a showrunner you have to be the person who solves the hardest story problems, in the end it's on your shoulders and people look to you and so you have to figure it out and it's really scary thing to do and I think a lot of people go into this job without having had the experience, without having done the work and the show suffers. I feel like I am ready now to be a showrunner now, that I can earn the respect and trust of the other writers because I can

answer the questions and figure out the solution to the problems of plot and story and character.

- 6. Can you talk about bringing on Claire Ross Dunn and Sadiya Durrani (who you worked with on Little Mosque) to join your writing and production teams, and why you chose to work with them again? Why was it important to you to have a diverse and female-led team behind Zarqa?**

Claire and Sadiya had worked on Little Mosque on the Prairie with me and so we knew each other and were friends and I had kept in touch with them for years. Claire is both an excellent project manager and also a very creative person so she was the perfect person to bring on because a lot of Canadian television is paperwork and project management more than even the creative part of it. I would say I spend less time on the creative part of the show than I do on the paperwork which is terrible but that's the reality of Canadian television . And it's great to have women but I just want to say that I also feel it's important for diversity to have men in a room too. Right now we have a very small room, only three writers but if this show goes further I would definitely bring in men because I think the best rooms are the most diverse rooms that means both men and women and also men and women from different backgrounds, race, religion because the more differences you have, the more perspectives you get and the richer the story becomes.

- 7. Why was it important to you that production for Zarqa take place in Saskatchewan? Why is it important to bring opportunities for production to communities like these?**

I live in Saskatchewan and at that time, the shows Corner Gas and Little Mosque on the Prairie both came out of this province and I believe that those two shows reinvigorated the television industry in this country and gave a lot of other shows the chance to succeed because now people knew that it was possible to have ratings and success on Canadian television and we never had that before. So I feel like those two shows deserve recognition for their role in spurring on an industry that was kind of sputtering along. But the Saskatchewan government, in an act which I believe they have sincerely regretted, got rid of the tax credit and gutted the television industry in the province that I live in. We need to diversify our economy in Saskatchewan, it can't just be oil and gas. We need art as well and I believe that 'if we start making it, they will come philosophy' and the government will rethink its policy or at least do something where it encourages production in another way.

