



Television, Citizenship and the Situation Comedy in Canada: Cultural Diversity and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

Sarah A. Matheson, Brock University

smatheso@brocku.ca

Even before it debuted on Canadian television in January 2007, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's new situation comedy, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* generated unprecedented international news coverage. CNN, MSNBC, ABC News, BBC Radio and the *New York Times* featured reports on the series which was repeatedly referred to as a "controversial" new Canadian comedy program. The series focuses on a young Imam who moves from Toronto to run a mosque in the small prairie town of Mercy, Saskatchewan. The media coverage surrounding the series suggested that the "controversial" nature of the program rested in its focus on Muslim characters and in its humorous treatment of post 9/11 tensions. However, despite the notion that *Little Mosque* represents something radically different on television, it does adopt a familiar approach. Its wacky collection of characters and "fish out of water" premise is similar to shows such as *Northern Exposure*. Its gentle humour and "culture clash" storylines can also be found in a number of other sitcoms, but in Canada are especially reminiscent of the '70s CBC sitcom, *The King of Kensington*. Nevertheless, the perception that this series represents something innovative and ground breaking continues to circulate. In addition, American critics wondered if a series such as this would be accepted by audiences in the US, a query which points to the importance of national differences and the significance of the series' Canadian origins.

The popular dialogue surrounding *Little Mosque* highlights a number of key issues that I will explore in my analysis. In particular, these discussions raised the question of what role can comedy play in tackling and dealing with larger social anxieties and conflicts such as those surrounding cultural differences. In an article in the *The New York Times* for example, one critic suggested that the series could potentially operate as a means of assimilation for Muslims, where the humour could help make them "seem less peculiar."ⁱ In a roundtable discussion led

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by Paula Zahn on CNN, a panel of guests debated the role of comedy in combating intolerance. They agreed that television comedy such as this could not only entertain, but could be used to teach and to debunk negative stereotypes. Similarly, the creator of the program, Zarqa Nawaz, expressed her hope that the series could use humour as a vehicle for healing in the post 9/11 era. In an interview with ABC News she comments, “I think comedy is sort of a common language that we all speak, you know comedy is the perfect venue for a show like this where we try to understand and bridge the differences between us.”ⁱⁱ

All of these comments suggest the notion that television comedy is perceived to have the potential to serve a larger social function, perhaps working to deflate social anxieties, soothe conflicts, provide a greater sense of understanding among people etc. Given that the general mandate of the CBC is, among other things, to “contribute to shared national consciousness and identity” and to “reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada,” questions of nation and nation building as they relate to the representation of cultural diversity are immediately brought to the foreground.ⁱⁱⁱ My analysis will examine how comedy may operate in this specific national context, considering the following questions: What ideas about Canadian citizenship, national identity and nationhood are being communicated in *Little Mosque* and how are issues surrounding cultural diversity negotiated in this context? What strategies are deployed to provide a sense of reconciliation and how does the sitcom form specifically work to help support this? In what ways is this image of Canadian nationhood similar to or different from that found in other Canadian TV narratives that deal with similar subject matter (such as the urban multiculturalism of *King of Kensington* for example) ? My objective is to use *Little Mosque on the Prairie* as an interesting case study for examining how television participates in creating narratives of national belonging and for understanding the significance of specific genres to the portraits of nation that are presented.

ⁱ MacFarquhar, Neil. “Sitcom’s Precarious Presence: Being Muslim Over Here.” *The New York Times*. December 7, 2006.

ⁱⁱ <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=3272999>



ⁱⁱⁱ For a full description of the CBC's mandate see their corporate website, www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/about/mandate.shtml. The program's relationship to the CBC's general mandate is also discussed by Michele Byers in her interesting review in *Flow*. See Byers, Michele, "Little Mosque on the Prairie: The Life and Times of the CBC" in *Flow*. Volume 5, Issue 8, February 23 2007 (www.flowtv.org).

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