



Sitara Hewitt has a lot in common with her hijab-wearing character on *Little Mosque on the Prairie* — but it may not be what you think.

By Heidi McKenzie

Kindred Spirit

Amid throngs of multicoloured fabrics, Sitara Hewitt and her mother are browsing in a sari shop in Toronto's Little India on Gerrard St. E. Hewitt reaches for a bright coral paisley print with accents of electric blue. "Now, that's something Rayyan would wear," Hewitt says, while her mother points out how well the fabric would look in a curtain. The two quip back and forth in a familial mix of English and Urdu.

Hewitt stars as the character Rayyan in the runaway hit CBC sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, which premiered last year to a record 2.1 million viewers. The show, about the Muslim community in the fictional town of Mercy, Sask., is quickly racking up an international fan base, airing in France, Finland, Turkey, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

Hewitt says she's honoured to bring Rayyan to life. "I admire and look up to Rayyan as the first Muslim, hijab-wearing woman who's a female lead on a hit show in history. That's a really sacred thing, whether you believe in the religion or not."

Hewitt, 28, describes herself as typically Canadian — a mishmash of cultures. Her father,

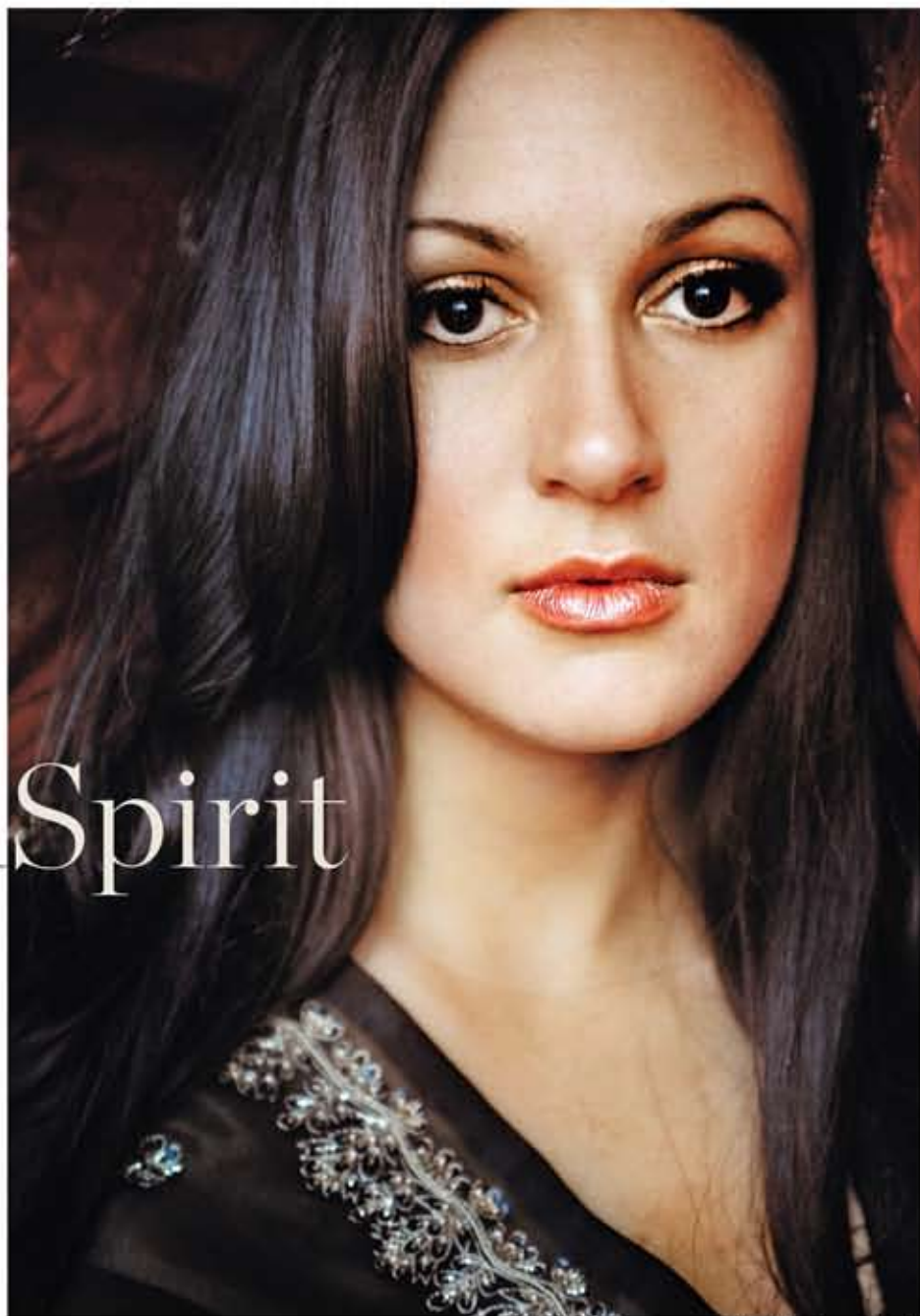


Photo by Lucas Oleniuk

Ken Hewitt, is from Wales, while her mother, Farida Azhar-Hewitt, came to Canada four decades ago from Pakistan, via the U.K. Both are academics at the University of Waterloo. The youngest of four girls, Hewitt grew up in small-town Elora, near Guelph. She has an insider's perspective and understanding of Islam, having spent much time visiting with extended family in Islamabad, but she was raised Anglican and considers herself primarily Christian.

Hewitt has wanted to be on the stage since she was a child. "My parents took me to *The Nutcracker* ballet, and I couldn't even watch," she

recalls. "I just turned around and sulked in my seat. I remember thinking, 'What's wrong with me? I get so jealous when I watch people perform.'" Luckily, Elora had a dance school, where Hewitt studied various forms. "I needed ballet for the training and technique, but it's really the jazz and modern where I could let my soul fly."

As an adult, Hewitt headed to the big city in search of new horizons, and settled on a program in travel and tourism at Seneca College in Toronto. She hated it. In the meantime, she got the occasional dance gig and auditioned for TV commercials. Hewitt recalls one audition for an



Sitara Hewitt says she looks up to her *Little Mosque on the Prairie* character, Rayyan.

East Side Mario's ad. "I didn't get it because I couldn't act. But I just loved everything about being there: the sets, the people, the total environment. So I just threw myself into it, took every job I could get from bar mitzvahs to corporate events, anything to support my acting classes. I even did independent films that didn't pay. Whatever I could get to support my craft."

After several years of working in bars to make ends meet, the benefits of acting classes started to kick in. No opportunity was dismissed. Worst

models Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lopez. "DiCaprio started as a heartthrob, and I love his recent work in *Blood Diamond* and *The Departed*. He's just such a brilliant actor, beautiful man, and he uses his celebrity and pull in the industry to do projects that have depth." Hewitt hopes to achieve the same mainstream recognition for South Asians that Lopez — who also started as a backup dancer — has for Hispanics.

"Once you have so much celebrity that people care what perfume you're wearing and what brand your eyeliner is, you may as well do some important things in the world."

'I got to where I am by hacking away at terrible gigs'

experience ever? Hosting a game show called *Gutter Ball Alley*, where contestants dressed in adult diapers and were pelted with chocolate pudding. "I was the 'talking Vanna White' and did comedy skits," Hewitt says.

Hewitt landed her first big-screen dance role in Deepa Mehta's 2002 film *Bollywood Hollywood*. "I remember watching Lisa Ray and thinking, 'That's what I want to do, I don't care if I don't know how to do this, I'm going to learn, I'm going to do it.'"

"I'm a Capricorn and Capricorns are very slow and methodical, like a goat climbs steadily uphill. I wasn't discovered by a casting director. I got to where I am by hacking away at terrible gigs, and I still have a long way to climb."

Not surprisingly, Hewitt harbours international aspirations. She counts among her role

models Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lopez. "DiCaprio started as a heartthrob, and I love his recent work in *Blood Diamond* and *The Departed*. He's just such a brilliant actor, beautiful man, and he uses his celebrity and pull in the industry to do projects that have depth." Hewitt hopes to achieve the same mainstream recognition for South Asians that Lopez — who also started as a backup dancer — has for Hispanics.

Playing Rayyan, Mercy's hot-pink-hijab-wearing Lebanese-Muslim physician, wasn't exactly second nature for Hewitt, but she says she can still relate to the character. "I felt like she was a kindred spirit — she was biracial, grew up in a small town. Elora is totally like Mercy:

people are nice, kind, but they don't really know a lot about people from other cultures, so there's a lot of misunderstanding and racism."

Hewitt hasn't always identified with her character's pride in her Muslim heritage, but she remembers the pain and alienation she felt as a child on being called a Paki. "When you're a little kid, being different is really scary — I'm glad to champion my culture now."

On a more lighthearted note, Hewitt quips, "I really like that Rayyan is a Type-A personality. She does everything right and things always go horribly wrong. That's very similar to me, but Rayyan is more hardworking. She definitely has it all together."

Hewitt does work hard, in terms of getting it all together to play Rayyan. She meets regularly with a group of women from a mosque in north Toronto. She hones her inspiration for the character through the friendships she's established with these women, who come from all corners of the Muslim diaspora, just like the Muslim inhabitants of Mercy.

Hewitt chalks the show's success up to its universal appeal. "The general public has a curiosity about the lives of moderate everyday Muslims." She says reaction from all communities has been "overwhelmingly positive."

"At the end of the day it's a sitcom. It's light, it's there to entertain, to bring people together."

But she acknowledges the show isn't to everyone's liking. Concern over its purported inherent mockery of Islam continues to simmer in some communities across the country.

In both Hindi and Urdu, the literal translation of the name Sitara is "star," which seems appropriate. "I feel like there's a shooting star," Hewitt says, "and I'm hanging on to the end to try and catch it all the time."

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ON THE COVER
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