



WORLD OF ISLAM AND WOMEN IN AYAAN HIRSI ALI'S MEMOIRS

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ABSTRACT

Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been extensively regarded as the most respected representative for Muslim women worldwide. In this capacity, she is a fierce critic of barbaric Muslim beliefs and practices that discriminate against women. In her memoirs "Infidel", "Nomad" and in her numerous media appearances, Hirsi Ali's life-story is presented as an account of Islam's destructive impact on the lives of women. She has accused the tyrannical belief system of the veil, multiple marriages (polygamy) and *baarri* system. She gradually began to move away from the signifiers of her cultural and religious background, discarding her *hijab*, distancing herself from the Somali community and became the voice of free women. This paper discusses the stance of Hirsi Ali against her own community and discloses the gender discrimination and various belief systems which are imposed upon women in the name of culture. Ayaan Hirsi Ali as represented by her own writing and political-public life, as well as the commentary responding to her work and persona, and reflects upon a central motif of discrimination in her work.

Key words: Polygamy, Veil system, Baarri System.

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Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young alas, she never wrote a word. . . Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. If we have the habit of freedom and

the courage to write exactly what we think; then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again, she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in

poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile.
(Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*,
1929)

She speaks of the "Enlightenment" with the zeal of the convert. Her ideal is a society in which every person reflects seriously on her conduct and is free to make her own decisions. But this creates problems where people are free, but do not reflect seriously; in any case, since it is clear that limits on behaviour have to be placed somewhere, antecedent to many individual decisions, the "Enlightenment" ideal that she espouses is rather too simple as an answer to the problems of human existence. Still, if anyone has the right to speak from experience about the benefits brought by the "Enlightenment", Ayaan Hirsi Ali has, because she has lived in both pre-Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment societies. She does so with both modesty and great eloquence. At the very least, her memoirs will help us to put our discontents into perspective. Islamic flaws are well-documented and are also supported by her personal journey as a former Muslim. Her memoirs deserve to be read by both Muslims and non-Muslims because of her clear articulation of the failures of Islam.

Since she first started voicing extreme criticism of Islam, Ayaan Hirsi Ali has attracted both death threats and vehement criticism from fellow feminists. Still, she has no intention of backing down. Hirsi Ali has been issued a damning Fatwa, but she remains one of the most well known critics of Islam in the world. She's also the founder of the AHA foundation, which seeks to end honor violence against women committed in the name of religion. A fellow laureate of the Lantos Prize is Irshad Manji, who argues that the entire religion of Islam requires reform. Like 19th-century French thinker Ernest Renan, she believes that the greatest service that can be done for a Muslim is to free him from the hold his religion has over his mind. She believes that the Koran should be openly, freely and publicly subjected to the kind of historical and philological scholarship that has long been practised on the Bible.

Globalization defined as the increasing interconnectedness of different parts of the world as economic, political, and cultural levels has

resulted in an intensification in the dynamics of social change across the developing or postcolonial world. Such rapid and intense social change produces anxieties in the societies and communities experiencing this change, anxieties which feminist scholars have shown to result in greater regulation of women. This was just as true of Europe during the period of capitalist modernization in the 18th and 19th centuries, and of colonized and decolonizing societies in the mid-20th century.

Issues related to women and gender in contemporary Muslim societies must be understood within the same framework. What passes for the victimization of women by 'Islam' is all-too-often part and parcel of a more global phenomenon. An increase in the moral and sexual regulation of women by communities and kin-networks as a response to political, social and cultural anxieties; such anxieties have intensified under economic and cultural globalization. The regulation of women and their sexuality is, after all, a common feature of all patriarchal societies, traditional or modern, and certainly not simply Muslim ones.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in her memoirs, tells us about various women such as her grandmother, mother, step mothers, sister, half sister, etc. through these women, she presents before us diverse pictures of women and examine various evil systems like veil system, *barri* system and polygamy in our society. It does not only exist in Islamic culture, but also in every culture. Her grandmother was a traditional woman. She followed each and every rule of her religion. She was married at a very early age. She was the second wife of her husband Artan. Here, we see the element of polygamy. Men can bear multiple wives. But women are not allowed to do so. Artan wanted a boy child because he had only one girl child from his first wife. That's why he married Hirsi Ali's grandmother Ibaado.

When my grandmother was about ten years old, her father, an Isaq herder, died. Her mother married her uncle. (This is a common practice. It saves a dowry and trouble.) When my grandmother was about thirteen, that uncle received a proposal for my grandmother's hand from a wealthy nomad named Artan, who was about forty

years old. Artan was a Dhulbahante, which was a good bloodline of the Darod. He was widely respected, skilled with animals, and a good navigator: he could read his environment so well that he always knew when to move and where to go to find rain. Other clan members came to him to arbitrate their disputes.

Artan was already married, but he and his wife had only one child, a daughter who was a little younger than my grandmother: when he decided to take another wife, Artan first chose the father of the bride: he must be a man from a good clan, with a decent reputation. The girl must be hardworking, strong, young, and pure. My grandmother, Ibaado, was all that. Artan paid a bride price for her. (Infidel, 5)

Hirsi Ali informed us that Islamic laws and principles justified child marriage because the Prophet Mohammed himself married a six year old child Aisha and he had sex with her when she only nine years old. The purpose of marriage in Islamic culture is to preserve the religion through the creation of a family. The family is meant to be "productive and constructive. In Islam, polygyny is allowed with certain restrictions; polyandry is not. The Quran directly addresses the matter of polygyny in Chapter 4 Verse 3, "...Marry of the women that you please: two, three, or four. But if you feel that you should not be able to deal justly, then only one or what your right hand possesses. That would be more suitable to prevent you from doing injustice." The Prophet accepts the marriage of multiple wives, but only if the husband's duties will not falter as a result. So, the marriage of her grandmother with Artan, is valid according to Islamic culture. She faced the same situation. She was married off by her father to a distant cousin living in Canada. In order to escape this forced marriage, she fled to the Netherlands, where she was granted asylum and then citizenship.

My mother had no protector in Aden- no father, no brother. Men leered and bothered her on the street. She began wearing a veil, like the Arab women who robed when they left their houses in a long black cloth that left only a slit for their eyes.

The veil protected her from those leering men, and from the feeling of vileness it gave her to be looked at that way. Her veil was an emblem other belief to be beloved of God, you had to be modest, and Asha Artan wanted to be the most proper, most virtuous woman in the city.

One day my grandfather Artan came to Aden. He told my mother that he had received a request for her hand in marriage and had accepted. My mother was about eighteen; she could not defy her father. So she stayed silent. A virgin's silence is the proper answer to a marriage proposal; it signifies a dignified consent. (Infidel, 7)

Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work "The Second Sex" remarks, "Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality". Commenting on the condition of the married women, "Beauvoir avers", "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society".

A woman who is baarri is like a pious slave. She honours her husband's family and feeds them without question or complaint. She never whines or makes demands of any kind. She is strong in service, but her head is bowed. If her husband is cruel, if he rapes her and taunts her about it, if he decides to take another wife, or beats her, she lowers her gaze and hides her tears. And she works hard, faultlessly. She is a devoted, welcoming, well-trained work animal. This is baarri. (Infidel, 8)

Hirsi Ali's works represent the lives of untold millions of Muslim women and their sufferings. She embraced Islam while she was growing up, but eventually began to question aspects of the faith it has. One day, while listening to a sermon about the many ways in which women must be obedient to their husbands, she couldn't resist asking, "Must our husbands obey us too?" (Infidel, 63) In her memoir, *Nomad*, she tells us about her half sister Sahra who was very obedient child of her father.

Of all his many children, Sahra was the child with whom my father spent the most time, to whom he paid the most attention. She

still lives the *baarri* way, the way I was meant to live, as every good Somali girl must. She is obedient and submissive, but she is also conflicted; on the other hand, she wants the approval of our father, her mother, and the community, but on the other hand, she also, surely, wants to lead the life that is led by other girls her age who live in England. This sense of being conflicted must leave her in limbo. She starts a vocational course but doesn't see it through; she begins English lessons but doesn't complete them. She does this because if she were to finish those studies and get a diploma, she could then find a job. But that would surely mean working outside the home; she would be gone for hours and might have to mix with men. She might even find herself tempted to put on makeup and participate in the social life of an office. Such a life is too dangerous: it would attack her basic sense of who she is. Yet by not getting a diploma Sahra has to live with her own dependence. In this renunciation of her mind and skills, however, she derives bizarre reward of approval for being submissive. (18)

Ayaan recounts how the situation of women as a *baarri* in Islam is legislated by the Koran, which in the end perpetuates women's submission to men in the name of Allah. A Muslim woman is not measured by the virtue of her intelligence and kindness, but in her ability to put her husband's needs and desires above others in life. Women have been made to believe that obeying their husbands is the key to paradise. Hence, her devotion to her husband is crucial for the physical and emotional well-being of the family. Ayaan illustrates how her grandmother constantly justified the oppression of women and the out-dated traditions in accordance to verses from the Koran and gave her falsely interpreted warped perception of the Koran which resulted in her later renunciation of Islam. Ayaan's perception of Islam was based only on her experiences of the corrupted culture and society she lived in. However, in reality Islam as a religion provides equal power for men and women in

making responsible decisions in relation to their sexuality and sexual rights.

The Muslim's veil is but one facet of her noble status, a status due in part to the tremendous responsibility that is placed upon her. Simply put, the woman is the initial teacher in the building of a righteous society. Critics of the Muslim veiling tradition argue that women do not wear the veil by choice, and they are often forced to cover their heads and bodies. In contrast, many daughters of Muslim immigrants in the West argue that the veil symbolizes devotion and piety and that veiling is their own choice. To them it is a question of religious identity and self-expression.

The veil deliberately marks women as private and restricted property, nonpersons. The veil sets women apart from men and apart from the world; it restrains them, confines them, grooms them for docility. A mind can be cramped just as a body may be, and a Muslim veil blinkers both your vision and your destiny. It is the mark of a kind of apartheid, not the domination of a race but of a sex. (Nomad, 16)

Hirsi Ali became an atheist after growing up in a strictly observant Islamic family, a journey recounted in her memoirs. She became a target of terrorists when her friend, filmmaker 'Theo Van Gogh', was murdered in Amsterdam in 2004 for "insulting the Prophet," after the pair made a documentary critical of Islam's treatment of women. Before her intellectual awakening in the Netherlands, she lived in a society where customs such as the wearing of *Hijab*, *Burqa* and the concept of *Baarri* are observed in terms of honour and the protection of women from being stigmatised as immoral. She reveals how the Islamic religion gives men institutional power to construct laws that create an asymmetrical relationship between men and women which oppresses and dominates women. Ayaan's sudden awakening brought about positive changes in her life. She realised that society she lived in was barbaric and primitive. She broke the chains of societal norms to escape a culture that is corrupted by the illogical belief system.

Over the years, gender is sustained and justified by traditional cultural beliefs reinforced by patriarchal-religious institutions. A woman is therefore a 'nobody' and not a 'somebody' in society. As a result, women are held back from being equal members of society (Millet, 1990). The wretched life of genital mutilation, wearing of Burqa, Hijab and the concept of *Baarri* in the Muslim world are all governed by customs that satisfy men in the name of Allah. In her memoirs "Nomad" and "Infidel" narrated by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, embodies the brutality of such neurotic generational tradition in Somalia and Arab Saudi. Ayaan recounts the drastic changes that characterized her in life. Growing up in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya, Ayaan was a devout believer of Islam who soon realized the evolution of her beliefs, which in the end led to her intellectual awakening and activism in the Netherlands against gender inequality. In her memoir, Ayaan describes the unequal and unjust treatments of women in Islamic society. She graphically describes a society that tyrannises and brutalises women in order to protect them from being stigmatised as immoral and impure. Ayaan's awakening to a society that sacralises violence led to her battle against sexual exploitation and oppression of women to ensure that women are sexually liberated from patriarchy.

Mahad, having more freedom than we did, was exposed to all sorts of adventures, but he also had to face much worse trials than we did. In Saudi Arabia the law requires women to hide and never step outside without being escorted by a male guardian. Our mother leaned on Mahad, her ten year old, to act as that legal male guardian for her whenever our father was away, which turned out to be most of the time. She indulged him with luxuries she would not have wasted on girls, but she also ordered him to take responsibility not only for his behaviour but also for Haweya's and mine. He acted as Ma's interpreter from Arabic, which we learned in school, to Somali. He was expected to decipher the world for her, to protect her and us, though he was only ten. Sometimes he heard the Saudi men say

lewd and ugly things to Ma. Sometimes they called her *abda* (slave) and other times *aswad* (black). Mahad would pretend not to hear them; he never translated those words. (Nomad, 43)

Ayaan's memoir also depicts the degree of women's subordination in Arab as far more abominable than women in Somalia.

And all the women in this country were covered in black. They were human like shapes. The front of them was black and the back of them was black, too. You could see which way they were looking only by the direction their shoes pointed. We could tell they were women because the lady who was holding our hands tightly to prevent us from wandering off was covered in black, too. You could see her face, because she was Somali. Saudi women had no faces (Infidel, 40).

Ayaan illustrates the imprisonment of women through the wearing of Hijab which serves to tame and teach a woman to accept her fate as a Muslim woman in society. Ayaan sees the hijab as a symbol of subjugation and male domination in the name of Allah, though she too once wore the Hijab in order to conform to societal norms and to be seen as a pure in the eyes of society. However, Ayaan eventually de-veiled herself when she saw the Hijab as a portable prison, which restricts a woman's freedom to express her views and opinions in the world. Ayaan therefore illustrates the backwardness and oppressiveness of the Hijab in a Muslim culture which condemns women to a portable fabric wall that disconnects women from engaging with the world completely.

Sahra told Haweya how awful it was to be married. She said her husband Abdallah, was repulsive. She told Haweya what it was like when Abdallah had tried to penetrate her after they were married: pushing; his way into her, trying to tear open the scar between her legs, how much it had hurt. She said Abdallah had wanted to cut her open with a knife, because she was sewn so tight that he couldn't push his penis inside. She described him holding the knife

in his hand while she screamed and begged him not to- and I suppose he felt pity for that poor fourteen year old child, because he agreed to take her to the hospital to be cut.

Sahra's wedding didn't end with a celebration: there was no bloody sheet to show off to the applause and ululations of the wedding guests. There was only a murmur of disappointments and doubt, a suspicion about Sahra's virginity and a snickering about her husband's manhood, before she was taken to the hospital to be made ready for Abdallah the next night.

The story frightened me: a huge group of people, a bloodied sheet- a kind of rape, organized with the benediction of Sahra's family. It didn't in the least seem like something that could happen to Haweya, or to me. But this was marriage, to Sahra: physical assault, public humiliation. (*Infidel*, 55)

Ayaan depicts the oppression and discrimination against women in a Muslim society in accordance with patriarchy which has been systematically embedded into the clearly orthodox culture and society to humiliate women. Haweya, her sister was a rebel in her society. She believed the veil is a tool of oppression used to alienate and control women under the guise of religious freedom. Haweya represented the new-age woman, a nonconformist. She was still a traditional Muslim, but she walked in normal skirts and blouses on streets because, according to her, nowhere in the Koran does it state that a woman's face and body must be covered in a layer of heavy black cloth. The veil restricts women and stops them from achieving their full potential in all areas of their life and stops them from communicating effectively as an individual. Behind closed doors, countless women are told to wear the hijab and confine themselves to the harem in the house. They are not allowed to go out or to choose who they can marry and are therefore kept down and docile by the threat of violence imposed by men. The harem and the veil, keep women hidden, unseen and unheard in society.

Marriage in Islam dooms women to their harems while controlling and restricting their freedom. Therefore marriage serves as a veil or a curtain that limits the physical boundary of a woman's existence in society in order to protect them from possible moral destruction and from committing adultery. Marriage is a gateway to domestic violence and wife-beatings. Dominating their women by violence is a privilege Muslim men cling on to doggedly and this is depicted through Ayaan's experiences living in Arab.

My grandmother, a second wife herself, used to say that our family was too noble to feel jealousy. Nobility in Somali nomadic culture is synonymous with self restraint, with resilience. A higher-status clan is more self-conscious, hence more stoic. Expressions of jealousy or any kind of emotion are frowned upon. My grandmother said she was lucky, and people called her spoiled, because after her older cowife died her husband didn't take another wife for many years, until my grandmother had had nine children. Even then, he only married again because eight of those children were girls.

My grandmother had thought her position was safe, because even though she had given birth to daughter after daughter, for years her husband did not marry another wife, to my grandmother's enduring shame, gave birth to three boys.

After my grandfather's new wife had her second son, my grandmother could no longer contain her shame and envy, and she left their home in the desert, ostensibly to look after her adult children, which included my mother. (*Nomad*, 25)

Arab women are far more suppressed and overpowered by men, culture and society. *Infidel* also illustrates the concept of polygamy and how it uncivilised Ayaan's grandmother and mother, and reduced her to the status of a commodity in life. Islam is used to justify the subjugation of women in society. Women are presented as a commodity to satisfy men's sexual needs and provide them male heir for the family. Marriage therefore tied her

grandmother and many other women in the shackles of male domination because women themselves see marriage as an important means of survival. Hence, they allow themselves to be beaten and placed in subservient positions because it is seen as widely legitimate for men to lead the family and women to follow passively as the rules. As a perfect Muslim woman, her grandmother was bound to obey her father's decisions because only a man has control over a woman's life and she is not allowed to defy the head of the family and therefore her silence is regarded as a sign of consent to the marriage.

Hence, it is clear that women are viewed as insignificant beings that are incapable of making marital decisions independently. Additionally, Ayaan's memoirs ridicule a culture that marries for financial security and not out of love. Marriages worked against the notion of the harem and the veil that confined women to the four walls of the house. Though Ayaan has escaped a horrible life in Somalia, she barely has achieved the substantial freedom that she longed for in life. She is still under close control of her bodyguards, dictated by them. She is liberated from the cruelties of a corrupted culture in Somalia but not entirely free from a religion that she detests because she will always suffer the haunting of radical Muslims who are waiting to slit her throat in the name of Allah. Hence, Ayaan will never walk in dark alleys, take the subways, walk under the day-lit streets, enjoy eating ice-cream in public or even stroll along the park with her child. She escaped all the way from Somalia to Holland only to be imprisoned once again in life but only this time it is based and dictated by her own will. Freedom is beyond reach for Ayaan, but she is still trying to making choices and decisions of her own. Ayaan has willingly accepted to live in seclusion because this is a man's world and to move against the norm that has been cultivated by society for centuries is something very deadly and dangerous. Hence, Ayaan ran away, escaped the de-veiled herself, ironically, only to be placed in a new harem and be re-veiled by society.

The present study attempts to present the violence against women in the name of religion, old customs and conventions. The concept of Baarri and

the wearing of the veil in Muslim societies are deeply rooted. In spite of, going through a journey filled with traumatizing pain to achieve freedom, the idea of equal freedom is still an illusion and is almost impossible for women because they are still dependent on men in some way or another. Ayaan Hirsi Ali emerges as a new hope for women. She fights with her heart and soul to live the life she always dreamed of. Her life was full of restricted freedom and dogmatic beliefs, which was once imposed on her. However, we can say that, Ayaan Hirsi Ali's journey will never end for the rights and justice of women.

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