

Infidel

by Ayaan Hirsi Ali

About the Book

Infidel is the eagerly awaited story of the coming of age of this elegant, distinguished -- and sometimes reviled -- political superstar and champion of free speech. With a gimlet eye and measured, often ironic, voice, Hirsi Ali recounts the evolution of her beliefs, her ironclad will, and her extraordinary resolve to fight injustice done in the name of religion. Raised in a strict Muslim family and extended clan, Hirsi Ali survived civil war, female mutilation, brutal beatings, adolescence as a devout believer during the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and life in four troubled, unstable countries largely ruled by despots. In her early twenties, she escaped from a forced marriage and sought asylum in the Netherlands, where she earned a college degree in political science, tried to help her tragically depressed sister adjust to the West, and fought for the rights of Muslim immigrant women and the reform of Islam as a member of Parliament. Even though she is under constant threat -- demonized by reactionary Islamists and politicians, disowned by her father, and expelled from her family and clan -- she refuses to be silenced.

Praise for the Book

"A brave and elegant figure...an honest woman...No one who reads her [memoirs] will doubt the self-questioning and the rigorous honesty of her mind. Perhaps, as in Voltaire's short story 'L'Ingénu,' it is that too much honesty is sometimes unpalatable, even if it is couched in civil terms...She has an open mind that has released itself from the old straitjacketed frame of reference of Right and Left, she is instinctively, deeply antiauthoritarian and she is unlikely to stick to straight ideological lines. She will go on asking difficult questions."

— *Isabella Thomas, The Observer*

"Ayaan Hirsi Ali is one of Europe's most controversial political figures and a target for terrorists. A notably enigmatic personality whose fierce criticisms of Islam have made her a darling of...conservatives...and...popular with leftists...Soft-spoken but passionate."

-- *The Boston Globe*

"Too potent a social critic to be tolerated any longer [in her home country]...an unflinching advocate of women's rights and an unflinching critic of Islamic extremism."

-- *The New York Times*

Courtesy of Simon and Schuster

About the Author

Title: Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Known As: Hirsi Magan, Ayaan; Hirsi Ali, Ayaan

Dutch Human rights activist (1969 -)

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Personal Information

Born November 13, 1969, in Mogadishu, Somalia; immigrated to the Netherlands, 1992; married c. 1992 (left husband, c. 1992, then divorced c. 2002). Education: Attended the University of Leiden. Addresses: Office: The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1150 17th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036. E-mail: ayaan.hirsiali@aei.org.

Career

Writer and activist. American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, fellow, 2006--; served in the Dutch Parliament, 2003-06. Previously worked as a cleaning lady, translator, drug salesperson for GlaxoSmithKline, and Labor Party think-tank researcher.

Awards

Person of the Year, *Volksrant*, 2004.

Works

- *De Zoontjesfabriek: Over Vrouwen, Islam en Integratie*, Augustus (Amsterdam, Netherlands), 2003.
- *De Maagdenkooi*, Augustus (Amsterdam, Netherlands), 2004.
- *Insoumise*, R. Laffont (Paris, France), 2005.
- *Ayaan Verzameld: Essays En Toespraken*, Augustus (Amsterdam, Netherlands), 2006.
- *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (essays and other writings), Free Press (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Infidel* (memoir), Free Press (New York, NY), 2007.

Also writer and director of the eleven-minute film *Submission Part 1*.

Sidelights

Author Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a prominent defender of women's rights in Islamic societies. Born in Somalia, Ali was made to participate in an arranged marriage by her father and then subsequently fled to the Netherlands in 1992. Ali became a prominent figure in the Netherlands as she promoted Muslim women's rights and was voted to the parliament in 2003. The following year, she wrote a short film titled *Submission Part 1*. Shortly afterwards, the film's director, Theo van Gogh, was murdered by an Islamic extremist because of the film's exploration of women under oppression in some Muslim societies. Ali also received numerous death threats and had to go into hiding before coming to the United States to work as a fellow in the American Enterprise Institute.

As a result of her experiences, Ali has written two books. The first, titled *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, is a collection of essays, columns, lectures, interviews, and autobiographical sketches previously published in the Netherlands. The primary focus of the writings are the liberation of Muslim women who are under oppression due to certain beliefs held by both moderate and radical members of Islam, according to the author's claims. "Throughout the book, Hirsi Ali draws upon her experiences as a Somalian girl who was raised as a Muslim, educated in religious schools, circumcised at an early age, and forced into an unwanted marriage with a distant cousin," wrote Kathy Davis in the *Women's Review of Books*, "She makes a passionate and convincing argument for the necessity of freeing women from the constraints of tradition and religion, which rob them of their self-determination, turning them into little more than 'production plants for sons.'" Among the topics the author discusses are female circumcision and domestic violence, education, and legal equality.

Most reviewers gave high praise to *The Caged Virgin*. Writing in the *Library Journal*, Anna M. Donnelly called the book a "thought-provoking collection of essays." *America* contributor David Pinault called the author "the most controversial--and courageous--thinker to address the status of Muslims in Western societies today." Despite the laurels heaped by most reviewers, many also sounded a note of caution. For example, *Women's Review of Books* contributor Davis noted: "Read *The Caged Virgin* less as a contribution to understanding the complexities of multiculturalism or the complicated realities of the lives of Muslim women than as a manifesto or wake-up call. You will not always agree with what Hirsi Ali says, but she has managed to get the most important and troubling issues of the day on the agenda."

Ali followed *The Caged Virgin* with her memoir, *Infidel*. The author begins by providing the reader with a look at her childhood in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Kenya as she lives with a strict Muslim family and receives beatings for her free-thinking ways. The book then follows Ali's decision to flee oppression and obtain citizenship in the Netherlands, where she becomes a prominent activist, politician, and ultimately the target of Islamic radicals who make plain their intention to kill her. The author also details how her commitment to radical Islamic views was strengthened by the attacks of 9/11 in the United States, which helped draw her into the political arena.

"Crammed with harrowing details, Hirsi Ali's account is a significant contribution to our times," wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor of *Infidel*. Bill Williams, writing in *America*, noted: "*Infidel* succeeds both as compelling memoir and as timely social, political and religious commentary. Ali's blunt critique may help educate Western readers about a darker side of one of the world's major faiths." Once again, some reviewers questioned the "fairness" of Ali's take on Islamic life for women. Nevertheless, most commented that the book is a valuable look at some important issues for Islamic women. For example, *Weekly Standard* reviewer Abigail Lavin wrote: "You can take issue with Hirsi Ali's contributions to the debate over Islamic values and practices, but far more important is her unwavering commitment to the debate itself."

Further Readings About the Author

Books

- Ali, Ayaan Hirsi, *Infidel*, Free Press (New York, NY), 2007.

Periodicals

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- *Booklist*, February 15, 2007, Vanessa Bush, review of *Infidel*, p. 30.
- *Colorlines*, September-October, 2006, Falguni A. Sheth, "Fall of the 'Muslim Atheist': Hirsi Ali's Journey from Dutch Politician to Failed Asylum Seeker Reveals Much about Europe's Retreat from Multiculturalism," p. 11.
- *Daily Variety*, December 1, 2004, Marlene Edmunds, "Scribe Carries on Van Gogh Trilogy," p. 14.
- *Economist*, February 10, 2007, "Dark Secrets; a Critic of Islam," p. 88.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 1, 2006, review of *Infidel*, p. 1206.
- *Library Journal*, June 15, 2006, Anna M. Donnelly, review of *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, p. 90.
- *Marie Claire*, February, 2007, Lisa Henricksson, "What We Talk about When We Talk to ... Ayaan Hirsi Ali: This Month, the Former Dutch Parliamentarian, 37, Publishes a Memoir, *Infidel*, and Reveals What It's like to Be a Controversy Magnet," p. 180.
- *Nation*, June 27, 2005, Deborah Scroggins, "The Dutch-Muslim Culture War," p. 21.
- *National Review*, August 28, 2006, David Pryce-Jones, "Europe's Loss, America's Gain: The Story of Ayaan Hirsi Ali," p. 23.
- *New Statesman*, July 24, 2006, Fareena Alam, "Enemy of the Faith: Are Muslim Women Really Caged Virgins, Victims of an Inherently Misogynistic Theology? In Claiming This, Ayaan Hirsi Ali Is Guilty of Grossly Misrepresenting Islam, Writes Fareena Alam," p. 54.
- *New York*, February 12, 2007, Boris Kachka, "The Infidel Speaks: Ayaan Hirsi Ali Fled Fanaticism in Africa--and Holland. So What Does She Make of Her New Conservative Friends in D.C.?" p. 78.

- *New York Times*, April 3, 2005, Christopher Caldwell, "Daughter of the Enlightenment," profile of author; February 4, 2007, Laurie Goodstein, "Rebel without a Veil," interview with author.
- *Newsweek*, February 26, 2007, Eve Conant, "A Bombthrower's Life; Threats and Armed Guards Have Followed Provocateur Ayaan Hirsi Ali to America. But That Suits Her Just Fine," p. 39; February 26, 2007, Lorraine Ali, "Only One Side of the Story; One of Europe's Foremost Critics of Islam Is Drawing Attention Stateside with Her Controversial New Memoir, 'Infidel,' but How Fair Is the Book?," p. 38.
- *Progressive*, April, 2007, Nina Siegal, "Holland Wrestles with Immigration," p. 41.
- *Publishers Weekly*, December 18, 2006, review of *Infidel*, p. 57.
- *Report*, February 3, 2003, Colby Cosh, "One Who Got Away," p. 4.
- *Vogue*, February, 2007, Rebecca Johnson, "The Unbeliever; an Outspoken Critic of Islam, Ayaan Hirsi Ali Lives in Fear for Her Life--and Refuses to Be Silenced," p. 226.
- *Washington Post*, March 7, 2007, Neely Tucker, "True Unbeliever," profile of author, p. C01.
- *Weekly Standard*, March 5, 2007, Abigail Lavin, "Out of the Hijab; One Woman's Problem with Islam."
- *Women's Review of Books*, November-December, 2006, Kathy Davis, "You're Next," review of *The Caged Virgin*, p. 6.

Online

- *AEI* <http://www.aei.org/> (July 24, 2007), brief profile of author.
- *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> (December 23, 2002), "Moving Stories: Ayaan Hirsi Ali"; (June 29, 2006), "Profile: Ayaan Hirsi Ali."
- *Jerusalem Post*, <http://www.jpost.com/> (May 7, 2007), Caroline Glick, "Our World: Hirsi Ali's Challenge to Humanity," interview with author.
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- *Slate*, <http://www.slate.com/> (May 8, 2006), Christopher Hitchens, "*The Caged Virgin* Holland's Shameful Treatment of Ayaan Hirsi Ali."*

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Author Interview

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was born and raised as a Muslim in Somalia and is now the *New York Times* best-selling author of "Infidel" (Free Press), is an outspoken defender of women's rights in Islamic societies. A former member of the Dutch Parliament who speaks six languages, she's a freedom-fighter whose criticism of conservative Islamic cultures and their traditional mistreatment of women and children have made her internationally famous and brought her death threats. Hirsi Ali, who calls herself a "classic liberal" who desires the state to be limited to guarantee as much individual freedom as possible, is currently a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. She says "Infidel" -- the name she found herself being called when she would suggest some oppressive or backward aspect of Islam should be changed or reformed -- is her account of her transformation from "the world of faith to the world of reason."

Bill Steigerwald: Why did you write "Infidel" and what do you want it to accomplish?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Whoa! (laughs) I wrote "Infidel" to answer the question asked of me by my publisher, my colleagues, by associates in Holland -- "Ayaan, how did your own process of enlightenment go? How did your own journey from being born and raised in a pre-modern, devout Muslim family to an ultra-modern society like the Netherlands go? And what is it that you still value in the moral framework that you were brought up in, and what is it that you don't? And what is it that you value in our moral framework, and what is it that you don't?" "Infidel" is the answer to that.

Steigerwald: It is a personal story?

Ali: Yes. It's subjective. As I go from place to place promoting the book, that's what I emphasize -- it is my story.

Steigerwald: Who did you write the book for? Who is the audience?

Ali: Two audiences. One are those who have inherited the Western system of human rights and freedom and the institutions (that protect them) but who do not understand what it is not to have freedom -- in short, those who take freedom for granted. The other audience are those who share my Muslim background and who reject freedom on the basis of religious dogma or tradition, such as those who say, "I don't care to send my children to school" or "I'm going to circumcise my daughters because this is what we always used to do."

Steigerwald: What is the significance of the title "Infidel"?

Ali: That as someone who was born into Islam and brought up with Islam, every call for for change meets with the accusation "You are an infidel." After the 11th of September, Western leaders started to persuade Muslims all over the world to stand up and say, "This is not done in my religion." I started to download what bin Laden had said. Pretty much

the message of bin Laden is that every Muslim should stand up and fight the enemies of Islam. I started to download his speeches and he quotes abundantly from the Koran and the Hadith (written traditions of the Prophet Muhammad). Bin Laden's message is consistent. What he says, is in the Koran. What he says that the prophet did, it is true the prophet did. My reaction to that was, let's not turn away from that but let's acknowledge that our religion has very violent principles and by acknowledging those deviances, we can correct it. And that's when I was met with the accusation "You've become an infidel." Then in Holland, I started to point out the position of Muslim women in Holland and in Muslim countries. I said it is inferior and that inferiority and the violence against women and the subjugation against them is justified in the name of Islam. I said "Let's acknowledge that this deformity is within the religion and reform it." And the answer to that was always, "Oh, but you are an infidel if you say that." I said "Let's correct what the prophet Muhammad said" -- "No. The prophet was perfect, he was infallible. You don't correct what he said. If you do that you are an infidel."

Steigerwald: Is Islam inherently anti-western, anti-individual, or anti woman or has it has been perverted by its leaders?

Ali: The religion is the problem. The religion is anti-individual. And the notion of equality between men and women, or at least protecting their rights as equally valuable, is also another Western notion. Islam as a doctrine, as a religion, is opposed to all of that. There are leaders who want to change that and move forward, and they are the ones who are accused of being infidels. From really the time the religion was founded until now, they have either been exiled or killed or silenced in some way.

Steigerwald: Is there anywhere where Islam is practiced today that you would say is a model situation?

Ali: Not where sharia -- the law of Islam -- is implemented. Anywhere where sharia is implemented, you see incredible inhumanity. People's hands are cut off. Women are confined to their homes and are stoned. People are hanged. Homosexuals are hanged or must hide. That is Iran, Saudi Arabia ... Afghanistan under the Taliban. Parts of Somalia are now under sharia rule. Anywhere there is sharia rule, there is violation of human rights.

Steigerwald: What do you want Americans to learn or to understand after reading "Infidel"?

Ali: Become aware that you have these freedoms. Don't take them for granted. Protect them against predators with totalitarian ideologies, such as Islam.

Steigerwald: Do you feel that people are getting the message you want them to get from your book?

Ali: I feel that conservatives are getting the message -- and had gotten it before I even started coming to the U.S. I'm having difficulty getting the message to liberals and that

has to do with people who are opposed to the Bush administration but at the same time don't realize that Islam is a doctrine. And that for the agents of Islam, those who want to create a caliphate, it really doesn't matter whether you are a Democrat or a conservative. You are an infidel all the same.

Source Citation

Steigerwald, B. (2007). *Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Defiant Infidel*. Retrieved November 11, 2008, from Human Events website: <http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=20597>

Discussion Questions

1. Hirsi Ali tells us that this book is "the story of what I have experienced, what I have seen, and why I think the way I do" (page xii). Which experiences does she highlight as being integral to forming her current views on Islam?
2. "No eyes silently accused me of being a whore. No lecherous men called me to bed with them. No Brotherhood members threatened me with hellfire. I felt safe; I could follow my curiosity" (page 185). This passage refers to Hirsi Ali's initial impression of walking the streets in Germany. What other significant differences between the West and Islamic Africa did she observe during her first days in Europe? Upon arriving in Holland, what were her initial impressions of the Dutch people and the Dutch government? Did these change significantly as she lived there
3. How did Hirsi Ali's immigration experience and integration into Dutch society differ from those of other Somalians?
4. Discuss the differences that Hirsi Ali noticed between raising children in Muslim countries and raising children in the West. In particular, what did she notice about Johanna's parenting? How were Muslim parents different from Dutch parents in their instructions to their children on the playground? (see page 245).
5. In Hirsi Ali's words, "a Muslim girl does not make her own decisions or seek control. She is trained to be docile. If you are a Muslim girl, you disappear, until there is almost no you inside you" (page 94). How do the three generations of women in Hirsi Ali's family differ in their willingness to "submit" to this doctrine?
6. As seen through Hirsi Ali's eyes, what factors contributed to Haweya's death? How might members of her family describe events differently?
7. Although Hirsi Ali mostly refrains from criticizing her father, she publishes the personal letter he wrote her upon her divorce. Why do you think she included this letter? Were you surprised by any other intimate details of her life that she revealed in the book?
8. The events of September 11th caused Hirsi Ali to reread sections of the Quran and to evaluate the role of violence in Islam. Consequently, her interpretation of September 11th differs from those around her. What does she conclude? Do you agree with her analysis?
9. On page 295, Hirsi Ali lists the three goals she wished to accomplish by joining Parliament. By the book's end has she accomplished all three? How did her views of the Dutch government change over time?
10. Examine Hirsi Ali's relationship with her brother. How did Mahad's and Abeh's reactions to her political work differ?

11. Throughout her political career, Hirsi Ali has made several bold statements challenging the Muslim world. In your opinion, were these declarations worth the risk?
12. Has this book changed the way you view Islam? According to Hirsi Ali, is Islam compatible with Western values and culture? Do you agree with her?

Courtesy of Simon and Schuster