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A passion for the future

by [Douglas Murray](#)

On Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Infidel.

Free Press, 368 pages, \$26

Ayaan Hirsi Ali has attracted many notable enemies in her life: not only the Muslim terrorists and wannabe-terrorists who threaten to kill her and who did kill her collaborator on the film *Submission*, Theo van Gogh, but also a strange band of pundits and politicians whom she has provoked and irritated out of their ideological comfort-zones. Struggling to come to terms with the current world situation, such people opt to attack the person who has identified the problem rather than deal with the problem itself.

In *Murder in Amsterdam*, Ian Buruma sneered at Hirsi Ali's "zealousness" in defending the values of the enlightenment. This condescending jibe caught on. In reviewing Buruma's book for *The New York Review of Books*, Timothy Garton Ash described Hirsi Ali as a "slightly simplistic enlightenment fundamentalist." From such nudging it was only a small leap to the suggestion expressed by Rageh Omar (formerly of the BBC, now, seamlessly, of Al Jazeera) in his memoir *Only Half of Me*: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the ex-Beeb man declared, is morally equivalent to Yasin Hassan Omar, currently on trial for trying to blow up the people of London on the morning of July 21, 2005. Fundamentalists the lot of them. Each is as bad as the rest. That's the gist of it, and for this to be an acceptable, indeed "sophisticated," line among Western intellectuals today says much about the degradation of the current debate.

Prior to the publication of *Infidel*, English-speaking readers had only one book of Hirsi Ali's to refer to. *The Caged Virgin* was a compilation of essays and interviews, which included the script of *Submission*, but it read like an interim book, leaving as it did many gaps and questions in the reader's mind. For a woman who has been voted one of *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People," the dearth of information about her in English is startling. It has not helped to clarify or rebut the confusions and falsifications published about her over the last five years, not least in relation to her withdrawn (and now restored) Dutch citizenship. Now here is *Infidel*, an autobiography that not only answers its author's critics, but also does so with dignity, restraint, and skill, simply by relating the story of a very remarkable life.

It was Evelyn Waugh who declared that "only when one has lost all curiosity about the future has one reached the age to write an autobiography." Thirty-seven is certainly very young to be writing an autobiography, but this is no ordinary book, and the author has had no ordinary life. The vast bulk is given over to the story of a precarious childhood, in Somalia, Kenya, and Saudi Arabia. It

describes the author's upbringing in a tribal and ideologically backward society that, when it meets the modern world, does so with sometimes comic, but more often tragic results.

The story of her circumcision—and that of her siblings—at the hands of tribal elders is described in wince-making detail but with a straightforwardness that leaves no room for either self-pity or bitterness. The same trademark resurfaces in numerous passages in the book.

And there is wisdom in this approach. For as well as being the story of one girl, the reader is aware—and the author even more so—that this is also a book about countless others who never have written, and never will write, their own stories. The reader senses this in Hirsi Ali's description of the gulf that existed for her and her childhood friends between what they once expected of marriage and what it actually amounted to. The young girl hooked on trashy-but-innocuous Barbara Cartland-style novels recounts stories of friends raped—essentially—night after night by unloved strangers onto whom they had been forced by marriage, and it makes for grim and salutary reading.

In such a narrative, there is a danger of survivor's guilt or self-justification but Hirsi Ali manages to avoid it. She is certainly aware of her own luck: "How many girls born in Digfeer Hospital in Mogadishu in November 1969 are even alive today?" she asks. "And how many have a real voice?"

Why am I not in Kenya, squatting at a charcoal brazier making *angellos*? Why have I been instead a representative in the Dutch Parliament, making law? I have been lucky, and not many women are lucky in the places I come from. In some sense, I owe them something. I need to seek out the other women held captive in the compound of irrationality and superstition and persuade them to take their lives into their own hands.

And here is one of the miracles of this woman and this book. For the reader is also aware that something more than luck has saved Hirsi Ali. Determination and fearlessness do not characterize only the Dutch phase of her life. Even before escaping an arranged marriage and finding sanctuary in the Netherlands, her life seems to have been propelled by a drive and instinct that has been vindicated at every turn.

Of course it is her Dutch experience that will draw many readers to the book. And the author deals with this period with extraordinary calm. Before the broadcast of *Submission*, she recalls, it was suggested for security reasons that perhaps the director ought to remove his name from the film. And she records van Gogh telling her with indignation: "If I can't put my name on my own film, in Holland, then Holland isn't Holland any more, and I am not me." Both points were soon proved. Van Gogh's murder led not to an attempt to deal with the problem, but a shutdown of the debate and a persecution of Hirsi Ali that is remarkable to read not only because of the horror of the details, but also because of the stain it leaves on a country that was once renowned as a haven of tolerance and civility. Yet despite her appalling treatment at the hands of colleagues, neighbors, and strangers, Holland—and indeed the West—is something that Hirsi Ali still rightly, and more firmly than ever, believes in. The story of her life's journey is in part—though only in part—the tale of the emergence of one of Western enlightenment's firmest, wisest, and doughtiest defenders. "Some things must be said," she affirms, "and there are times when silence becomes an accomplice to injustice":

Muhammad Bouyeri, Theo's murderer, and others like him don't realize how deeply people in the West are committed to the idea of an open society. Even though the open society is vulnerable, it is also stubborn. It is the place I ran to for safety and freedom. I would like to keep it that way: safe and free.

Hirsi Ali has a passion for, and I suspect a significant role in, the future. It is only through her, and the few people like her, that the future, and the freedoms so many of us cherish, will be defended, nurtured, and allowed to flourish. She is currently a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. It is Europe's loss. But her continuing passion, conviction, and example suggest that her existence at all

is a collective and long-reverberating gain.

Douglas Murray is the author of *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (Encounter).

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