

Book Review: Infidel

Contributed by Sherry Elizabeth Saturno, MS, LCSW, ACSW, QCSW, C-SWHC, CSW-G

Book review of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*. Reviewed by Sherry Elizabeth Saturno.

Hirsi Ali, Ayaan. (2007). *Infidel*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 368 pages. \$26 hardcover. {mosgoogle right}

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, former member of the Dutch Parliament, outspoken feminist, and activist for Muslim women's rights, has riveted international attention for her memoir, *Infidel*, which traces an eventful history that began in Somalia. During Ms. Hirsi Ali's 38-year-old lifetime, she struggled with religious freedom and doubt, fled her homeland to escape an arranged marriage to a cousin she had never met, and was forced to undergo female circumcision.

She wrote the screenplay for Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh's *Submission*, a film for which he was shot to death by a Muslim fanatic, with a death threat to Ms. Hirsi Ali pinned to his chest with a knife. The film featured a Muslim woman questioning her faith wearing a sheer burka with verses from the Koran projected onto her flesh.

Ms. Hirsi Ali's journey began in Mogadishu, where her father, who opposed the country's political regime, was imprisoned for several years. Her family was impoverished and subsisted on her relatives' charity, moving to Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Ms. Hirsi Ali became uncertain about the fundamentalist Muslim faith and the requirement of women's will to be submissive to that of men. She learned English and Swahili, and escaped in reading mysteries and adventures, gradually looking to disassociate from what had been preordained as her fate.

In order to avoid an arranged marriage, she became a refugee in the Netherlands in 1992, citing political persecution. This act estranged her from her family and would later prompt her resignation from the Parliament, as a result of a lack of veracity she would later admit to involving her application for Dutch citizenship.

Learning Dutch, Ms. Hirsi Ali initially gained employment as a translator working with social services. She believed that violent crimes were still being perpetuated against Muslim women in the Netherlands and that the liberalism of the Dutch prompted the authorities to turn away, attributing these acts to ingrained culturalism.

"Holland was trying to be tolerant for the sake of consensus, but the consensus was empty. The immigrant's culture was being preserved at the expense of their women and children...." she stated.

She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in political science from Leiden University and became a member of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy. She was joined in the Netherlands by her sister, Haweya, who became plagued by mental illness and died after suffering psychotic episodes and a miscarriage.

Post 9/11, she postulated that there was a connection between terrorist attacks and radical Islam. Her disenchantment with Islam, her appeal for Muslim women to abandon a subservient role, and her incendiary remarks on the Muslim faith prompted her to receive death threats, which led her to the United States under a heavy security presence. She declared, "I do not seek to offend religious sentiment, but I will not submit to tyranny."

Deeply human and fascinatingly complex, Ms. Hirsi Ali conveys her message of hope and freedom in a clear and incisive voice. She has received numerous awards for her human rights work, and was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine in 2005. Brave and inspiring, *Infidel* speaks volumes of triumphing over adversity.

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