

Infidel

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

New York: Free Press, 2007. 353 pages.

In *Infidel*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali's goal is to provide "a subjective record (p. xii)" of her extraordinary life, a life that straddles six countries – Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Holland, and the United States – in merely three decades. The book's title, however, suggests that this personal narrative probes well beyond the travels and escapades of a young African girl in times of deep economic strife and political instability. Rather, *Infidel* maps out a spiritual journey in reverse, what might be described as an anti-Islamic emigration "from the world of faith to the world of reason – from the world of excision and forced marriage to the world of sexual emancipation" (pp. 347-48).

The work is divided into two parts. The first, "My Childhood," tracks Hirsi Ali's early years on the move with her mother, sister, and brother as her father, beloved but perpetually absent, waged coup after coup against Muhammad Siad Barre with the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF). Often he was deported or jailed. As a result, family life for Hirsi Ali was far from ideal. After narrating her own birth, six weeks early, she muses, "[p]erhaps my parents were happy" (p. 17). Tales of economic destitution, political corruption, and a mother who possessed all the symptoms of a severe depressive or schizophrenic suggest the young girl suffered great physical and emotional violence throughout her early years.

Clearly, at a young age, her coping strategy was to lash out against her elders through ridicule and rebellion, despite the inevitable consequences. As a child, Hirsi Ali often spat at her grandmother. When her mother ordered her to make ink for the *ma`alim* who taught her the Qur'an, Hirsi Ali locked herself in the bathroom and refused to come out for hours. Another time, she was too tired to wash up the dishes after dinner, so she hid them all, crusted, in the refrigerator for a day. As a teenager, she devoured sensual romance novels and trashy thrillers that aroused in her sexual feelings, even though she "knew that doing so was resisting Islam in the most basic way" (p. 94). She also stole visits and kisses with a number of boyfriends, knowing full well her family's disapproval.

These seemingly petty alternatives to direct conflict with authority figures and institutions were, perhaps, the only avenues available to the young Hirsi Ali to assert any control over hostile forces that denied her power over her own existence. These episodes reveal a world that, for Hirsi Ali, is for-

ever bifurcated, harsh, and antagonistic. There are those who hold all the power and those who have no power but must secure it at any cost, whether through deceit, revolt, or sedition. This vision of an inherently dualistic world, with good and evil sides clearly demarcated, infuses her thoughts and governs her actions well into adult life.

The second section of the book, "My Freedom," continues these same themes, as Hirsi Ali embarks on a trip to Canada to join her new husband after an arranged marriage she never directly opposed. During a layover in Germany, she defies her father's wishes, her family's honor, and her husband's expectations to "escape it all, hide, and somehow make my own way, like someone in a book" (p. 187). On a side trip to Holland, she severs all familial ties and requests asylum from the Dutch government.

Initially, Hirsi Ali claims she was forced into a marriage against her will. After lawyers informed her that she would never receive refugee status for this reason, she crafted a false narrative "based on my experience leaving Mogadishu in 1991, and the experiences of the refugees in our house in Park Road" (p. 192) that was approved. She never reveals the exact content of the official document submitted to the Dutch government. Instead, Hirsi Ali provides extensive lamentations over her taking the place of individuals more deserving of refugee status. She exorcises her guilt by pointing to others who also lied about their status ("the camp was full of people with manufactured stories" [p. 197]) and by working to benefit people in need, which reassured her enough "to feel that I was still a good person" (p. 202).

In Holland, Hirsi Ali makes the most of her precious newfound freedoms, which she continually contrasts with her prior experiences of repression. She enrolls in the university and eventually secures an advanced degree in political science; she falls in love with a man "with light brown hair and big blue innocent eyes" (p. 251), a far cry from her Canadian spouse, who "neither repelled or attracted me" (p. 172) but "was already as bald as the bottom of baby Abbas" (p. 173). This critique would show no small measure of self-delusion as she claims to be open-minded; obviously, her mind was already set. She perfects her Dutch to the point of securing work as a translator for other Somalis. Eventually she is hired as a junior researcher in the Labor Party's think tank and then is catapulted to the status of a celebrated representative of the Dutch Parliament.

Throughout *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali drives home the point that all her success and all that she identifies as good and positive in her life is a result of her questioning and ultimately rejecting Islam. She leaves no doubt that her experiences of Islam bordered on nothing less than the horrific. Her enforced circumcision, performed in the name of Islam by her grandmother, left her

confused and in pain. A beating by an enraged Qur'an instructor left her with a fractured skull. Honor killings, forced marriages, and the suppression of free speech only reinforce her views, as they signal Islam's complete intolerance for reason, basic human rights, and liberal values.

The murder of Theo van Gogh by a Muslim extremist for his role in producing "Submission," which explores the "suffering of women in the name of Allah" (p. 307), seals her decision to abandon Islam completely, since a "peaceful tolerance of Islam is not possible" when "hands are still cut off, women still stoned and enslaved, just as the Prophet Muhammad decided centuries ago" (p. 347). For Hirsi Ali, Islam is monolithic, extreme, and violent. How many of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims would agree with this portrayal, however, is never entertained, since opposing voices are given no air.

Strangely, while embracing the role of an infidel, Hirsi Ali positions herself as a champion of Muslim women's rights. Her political platform was to bring to public awareness the numbers of Muslim women killed for committing adultery and for those involved in sexual abuse, incest, and illegal excisions. For Hirsi Ali, "Muslim woman" is synonymous with "victim" and "Muslim man" with "tyrant." Again, by painting all Muslim women and men with the same heavy brush, she, like her own oppressors, is silencing the voices of those for whom she claims to speak.

But many of her friends and family members, in fact, often belie the monolithic, evil Islamic enemy she aims to destroy. We learn how her father, who earned a degree in anthropology from Columbia and strove to "make America in Africa" (p. 16), embraced a nonviolent Islam. He opposed both male and female circumcision and insisted that his daughters be educated. Her mother, not all that unlike her daughter, left her own family at age fifteen for Aden, where she supported herself financially before marriage. Still, Hirsi Ali argues, "the values of my parents' world generate and preserve poverty and tyranny, for example, in their oppression of women" (p. 349).

The rather shrill and simple critique of Islam is thankfully drowned out by her near obsessive interest in self-presentation. Mostly, this autobiography reveals the machinations of a willful child looking to secure a petty indulgence lifted onto a geopolitical stage by her own penchant for self-marketing. In the end, Hirsi Ali is neither interesting enough nor important enough to warrant a read.

Kathryn Kueny
Director, Religious Studies Program
Clinical Associate Professor of Theology
Fordham University, New York