

## The Controversial Memoir of a Muslim Woman

One of Europe's foremost critics of Islam is drawing attention stateside with her controversial new memoir, 'Infidel.' But how fair is the book?

By Lorraine Ali

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Feb. 26, 2007 issue - By age 14, Somalia-born feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali had survived genital mutilation at the hands of her grandmother, a fractured skull from her Qur'an teacher and brutal beatings from her devout Muslim mother. By comparison, her father was kind. The Somali rebel, who had largely abandoned his family to plan coups and marry three more women, only meddled when it came to arranging his 23-year-old daughter's marriage. When Ayaan refused, he disowned her.

A violent, loveless childhood. The splintering effects of civil war. The pervasive misogyny of her culture. Hirsi Ali's exceptionally harsh life story—told in her new memoir, "Infidel"—would elicit empathy from the coldest of hearts. But that's not the book's only purpose. Hirsi Ali, a 38-year-old Dutch citizen and women's rights advocate who now lives in Washington, D.C., is one of Europe's most infamous critics of Islam. She renounced her Muslim faith after the 9/11 attacks, decried what she regarded as the religion's brutality in lectures and interviews, and rode a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment all the way into the Dutch Parliament, where she gained a seat.

There's clearly an audience for Hirsi Ali in America too. The recently released "Infidel" (titled "My Freedom" in the Netherlands) has climbed to No. 6 on the New York Times best-seller list. The most indelible moments in this book are when the author evokes the details of her early years, then simply lets these scenes speak for themselves. "We told our father [Abeh] we didn't want to be girls," she writes. "Abeh would always protest and quote the Qur'an: 'Paradise is at the feet of your mother.' But when we looked down at them, our mother's bare feet were cracked from washing the floor every day, and Abeh's were clad in expensive Italian leather shoes."

But Hirsi Ali's memoir is as much about her political agenda as it is her life, and in between tales of her youth she wedges harsh and uncompromising declarations: "True Islam," she writes at one point, "leads to cruelty." If her coming-of-age story—and the saga of her nomadic family, who moved from prewar Somalia to Saudi Arabia, then Ethiopia and finally Kenya—were allowed to breathe on its own, "Infidel" would prove an eye-opening look into the plight of African Muslim women. But throughout the book, you can't help but feel manipulated, rather than moved. In describing the 9/11 hijackers, she comes up with an inflammatory conclusion tailor-made for her right-wing constituency: "It was not a lunatic fringe who felt this way about America and the West. I knew that a vast majority of Muslims would see the attacks as justified retaliation against the infidel enemies of Islam."

Other Muslim women interested in reform aren't exactly in step with Hirsi Ali. "I wish people had been nicer to her," says Muslim author and feminist Asra Nomani. "But I don't blame Islam. I blame really messed-up people who've used religion to justify their misogyny." As staunchly patriarchal strains of Wahhabi Islam infiltrate Muslim cultures outside the gulf region, many modern female followers are wondering how to embrace their religion without succumbing to its more sexist demands. And they're coming up with answers that don't require them to abandon either their religion or their culture. In the Middle East and South Asia, a strong majority of Muslim women recently polled by Gallup believed they should have the right to work outside the home and serve in the highest levels of government. Here in the United States, dozens of scholars like Ithaca College's Asma Barlas, Harvard's Leila Ahmed and Notre Dame's Asma Afsaruddin have challenged widely accepted interpretations of the Qur'an. "They are Islam's Martina Luthers," jokes Nomani. "They are my heroes."

Hirsi Ali is more a hero among Islamophobes than Islamic women. That's problematic considering she describes herself in "Infidel" as a woman who "fights for the rights of Muslim women, the enlightenment of Islam and the security of the West." How can you change the lives of your former sisters, and work toward reform, when you've forged a career upon renouncing the religion and insulting its followers? Hirsi Ali says overhauling Islam is not her responsibility: she just lays out "the facts" and leaves it to others to go about fixing this supposedly broken faith. But her facts are often subjective: at one point she characterizes "every devout Muslim who aspires to practice genuine Islam" as a follower of the Muslim Brotherhood. That may have been true in Hirsi Ali's experience, but it hardly speaks for the globe's 1.3 billion other followers. It's ironic that this would-be "infidel" often sounds as single-minded and reactionary as the zealots she's worked so hard to oppose.

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