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Analysis of Ethnic Experiences in AyaanHirsi Ali's Infidel

Abstract:

AyaanHirsi Ali's *Infidel* (2007) is more than simple cataloging of life's events as she brings out the absolute horror, verbal and physical abuse, poverty, death and forced marriages that numerous women faces. Even death threats failed to subdue Hirsi Ali's iron will and fierce determination as she continues to assert the rights of Muslim women and the need for reform of Islam. Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* describes her physical journey from Somalia, through Kenya, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia to Netherlands and U.S. and her intellectual journey from tribal culture through fundamentalism into Western liberalism. LailaLalami in her review in *The Nation* criticizes Hirsi Ali for her lack of knowledge about Islam while the American novelist and screen writer, Roger L. Simon hails her as "one of the great positive figures of our time, a modern Joan of Arc who surpasses the original Joan in a moral sense and is at least her equal in pure guts". In *The New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof calls her as "by nature a provocateur". Hirsi Ali's memoir powerfully projects the situation of Muslim women in various parts of the world. The present paper analyzes the ethnic experiences depicted in AyaanHirsi Ali's *Infidel*.

Key Words: Ethnic, culture

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Hirsi Ali's story is relevant because it narrates the tale of thousands of Muslim women around the world. It analyzes the various factors that affect people's lives, deaths, the way they think and explains why certain things remain unchanged. She says in *Infidel*,

This is the story of my life. It is a subjective record of my own personal memories, as close to accurate as I can make them ... It is the story of what I have experienced, what I've seen, and why I think the way I do. I've come to see that it is useful, and may be even important, to tell this story. I want to make a few things clear, set a certain number of records straight, and also tell people about another kind of world and what it's really like. (xx)

One of the issues that Hirsi Ali highlights is that of religious intolerance. She opposes the aversion that the Muslims have for the Jews and Christians. In *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali says that

her mother, Asha refused to move to Ethiopia and Kenya because they were Christians, the ‘unbelievers’. Saudi Arabia was God’s country, the homeland of the Prophet. She believed that the “Saudi Arabian law came straight from the Qur’an: it was the law of Allah” (37). While in Saudi, Hirsi Ali was made to believe that everything bad was the fault of the Jews. She thought that the Jews were like the djinns.

When the air conditioner broke or suddenly the tap stopped running, the Saudi women next door used to say the Jews did it. The children next door were taught to pray for the health of their parents and the destruction of the Jews. Later, when we went to school, our teachers lamented at length all the evil things Jews had done and planned to do against Muslims. When they were gossiping the women next door used to say, “She’s ugly, she’s disobedient, she’s a whore – she’s sleeping with a Jew” ... I had never met a Jew. (Neither had these Saudis). (47)

Hirsi Ali states that she, her brother Mahad and sister Haweya were taught to believe that being a Kiristaan, Christian was a great insult which meant impure. Ma also confirmed that the Ethiopians were Kufr.

Jobs at factories in Holland where she did menial jobs gave Hirsi Ali an opportunity to know more about the racism involved in the working-class society.

Working-class people spoke differently, and their interaction with migrants was not as easy going. At the biscuit factory almost all the workers were women and they divided clearly into ethnic groups: Dutch women on the one hand, and Moroccan and Turkish women on the other. They kept apart in the lunch room and on the factory floor as well. If a Moroccan woman was paired with a native Dutch woman, the work would be done shoddily and there would be constant conflict with packages piling up and falling on the floor, whereas if Moroccans worked together they made an effort to get the job done right. It was mutual xenophobia: the Dutch thought the Moroccans

were lazy and unpleasant, and the Moroccans said the Dutch stank and dressed like whores. Both groups saw themselves as superior. (220-221)

Racial prejudice and prejudice against women made Hirsi Ali dislike Saudi Arabia. She brings out the ethnic differences she encountered at school and in work places. In “The Race for Theory”, Barbara Christian states that the feminist theorists fail to “take into account the complexity of life that women are of many races and ethnic backgrounds (and classes) with different histories and cultures [...] Seldom do they note these distinctions because if they did they could not articulate a theory” (19). Hirsi Ali points out that ethnic difference were upheld by children at Muslim Girls’ Secondary school at Kenya.

With these children, too, it seemed every ethnic group was clearly distinct and splintered along lines of class and tribe. The Indians had an inaccessibly complicated system of social classes, all of them unbelievers to Muslim eyes. The Pakistanis were Muslims, but they too, had castes. The Untouchable girls, both Indian and Pakistani, were darker-skinned. The others wouldn’t play with them because they were Untouchable. We thought that was funny – because of course they were touchable: we touched them, see? – but also horrifying to think of yourself as untouchable, despicable to the human race. (68)

The Yemenis, Somalis, Indians and Pakistanis played and interacted with each other, but in the hierarchy of Muslim Girls’ Secondary School, the Kenyans were the lowest. “If you were a Yemeni called Sharif then you are superior to a Yemeni called Zubaydi. Any kind of Arab girl considered herself superior to everyone else: she was born closer to the Prophet Muhammad” (68).

Hirsi Ali says that Holland’s multiculturalism and its respect for the Muslim culture did not work. She despised the way in which the Muslim migrants separated themselves from the mainstream society. She points out that there were Somali women who despised the

Dutch and called them as racists. The Somali woman named Yasmin hated Holland. “She called the Dutch gaaloand kufr. Being nice in Somali terms means when someone gives you what you ask for. So if someone politely said, no, even if they explained why they couldn’t do something Yasmin and the others saw this as arrogance or racism” (198). Though Hirsi Ali doesn’t deny that there is discrimination in Holland she says that sometimes the claim of racism was used as a strategy to get what the migrants needed. Hirsi Ali’s friend Hasna informed her, “If you tell a Dutch person it’s racist he will give you whatever you want” (224). Hirsi Ali finds that the Dutch are too afraid of being labeled racist and this allows immigrant women to continue the practice of circumcision on kitchen tables.

Hirsi Ali points out the need to adapt to the western ways. She says, “People adapt. People who never sat on chairs before can learn to drive cars and operate complex machinery; they master these skills very quickly. Similarly Muslims don’t have to take six hundred years to go through a reformation in the way they think about equality and individual rights” (350). But unlike Hirsi Ali and Mahad, mother and grandmother upheld the values of the Somalian society and refused to change. She points out the need to share cultural values and experiences rather than accepting self-imposed isolation.

Hirsi Ali is accused for supporting West and for her love to be white. She describes her journey to the West as her move from “the world of excision and forced marriage to the world of sexual emancipation” (348). She says that she felt like Alice in Wonderland in Germany. She regards the day she landed on Holland, July 24, 1992 as her birthday. Every year she celebrates it as her real birthday: “the birth of me as a person, making decisions about my life on my own” (188). Before she reached Europe, she never realized that a woman had a right for a happy life as she was never allowed to speak her mind. She was surprised to find,

Men and women were sitting together, not at bars but with easy familiarity, as if they were equal. They held hands in broad day light, not hiding from any one, and everyone seemed to find this completely normal ... There was no social control here. 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". (185)

Hirsi Ali points out that the difficulty of Somalis to admit their guilt, their passive attitude and clan war stood in the way of their development. At the refugee camp there was "endless gossiping or the constant complaints that they were victims of external factors. Somalis never said, "Sorry" or "I made a mistake" or "I don't know": they invented excuses. All the group strategies to avoid confronting reality depressed me" (225). But Haweya was delighted to be able to say no. "No, thank you, I'm not coming". "No, I won't be there tonight". The Dutch, she thought was honest. Suddenly there was nothing to fight for. Everything was possible in Holland. Hirsi Ali's friend, Naima who was regularly beaten by her husband never complained of her husband's violence but was obsessed with Dutch racism. This, Hirsi Ali regards as a "comfort mechanism to keep people from feeling personally inadequate and to externalize the causes of their unhappiness" (232). She finds that the passive attitude of people in her native place, Somalia slowed down their progress. Somalis failed to have control of the situation at times of natural calamities. They remained passive and regarded it as signs from God to show that humans were misbehaving on earth. But the seemingly ungodly Dutch society blamed the government for failing to maintain the dikes properly.

In an interview with Boris Kachka, she claims that all cultures are not equal. She says, "When I was in Holland, the idea was, all cultures are equal and all are to be preserved. My idea was, no, all humans are equal but not all cultures are equal. In the culture of my parents,

we never seemed to be able to succeed in such basic issues as getting food, interacting and living in peace with each other, or adapting to our environment and the West, they've succeeded in all those I'd been taught Western culture's only bad. Maybe that's good for your self-esteem, but it wasn't taking us anywhere" (par 8). She believes that "Life is better in Europe than it is in the Muslim world because human relations are better, and one reason human relations are better is that in the West, life on earth is valued in the here and now, and individuals enjoy rights and freedoms that are recognized and protected by the state" (348).

Though the West certainly appears to be better, Western attitude and ways are not always the solution. Africa is not exactly the "Dark Continent", savage and uncivilized and West is not all goodness and purity. After having lived in Somalia, Kenya and Saudi Arabia with an absent father and abusive mother and undergoing brutal experiences she fails to see the faults associated with the West. Hirsi Ali falls in love with Europe. Perhaps the flaws that she witnessed in Europe are only minor defects compared to those that she witnessed in Muslim countries. In his review of *Infidel*, Ian Buruma points out that her portrayal of West is as naïve as those romantic novels she consumed as a young girl. As Buruma states, she "offers up the West as a caricature of sweetness and light, which is then contrasted not to specific places, like Somalia, Kenya or Saudi Arabia, but to the whole Muslim world". In her article, "The Infidel Europeans Love to Hate", Anne Applebaum, refers to the British feminist who complained that not only does Hirsi Ali paint "the whole of the Islamic world with one black brush", she also "paints the whole of the western world with rosy tints". She is blamed for presenting the darker side associated with Muslim life. She fails to acknowledge that Western men are not always admirable and loyal to their wives. There are battered spouses, neglected children and terrible relationships. The negative aspects of the Dutch society which Hirsi Ali witnessed were thinner than its positive aspects. The only negative

side that Hirsi Ali implies is the way in which women did prostitution as an honest day's work at the red-light district near the Central Station.

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