

## Ayaan Hirsi Ali – A Muslim Heroine -23<sup>rd</sup> February 2014

Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born in 1969 into a cattle-rearing warrior nomadic tribe living on the outskirts of Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia, the year that Somalia was taken over as a communist Soviet client state.

The tribal or clan system of her relatives had a typical three thousand year old Neolithic structure. Some clans, such as her father's, were predominantly warriors, others predominantly traders, others craftsmen such as blacksmiths and the rest just peasant farmers or herdsmen. But, living on the outskirts of a capital city, she was drawn into the global civilisation. Her father had learned languages and writing and taught them. He had gone to America in his youth and received degree in Anthropology from Columbia University, New York. He was a leader of the western backed resistance to the regime and spent long times in prison or in exile organising resistance to the Soviet style regime from Christian Ethiopia, Her grandmother, who lived with her and was also a powerful influence, was a true semi-desert nomad and despised her because she couldn't milk a goat without it kicking her over and has none of the herding and manual skills of her tribe. Her mother was a devout Muslim, quite fanatical might not be an unfair description, who wanted herself and her daughters to be *barri*.

### **Reading One “Barri”**

A woman who is *baari* is like pious slave. She honours her husband's family and feeds them without question or complaint. She never whines or makes demands of any kind. She is strong in service but her head is bowed. If her husband is cruel, if he rapes her and then taunts her about it, decides to take another wife, or beats her, she lowers her gaze

and hides her tears. And she works hard, faultlessly. She is a devoted, well-trained work animal. This is *baarri*.

If you are a Somali woman you must learn to tell yourself that God is just and all-knowing and will reward you in the Hereafter. Meanwhile everyone who knows about your patience and endurance will applaud your father and mother on the excellence of your upbringing. Your brothers will be grateful to you for preserving their honour. They will boast to other families about your heroic submission. (Note that word “submission”; Islam means submission) And perhaps eventually your husband’s family will appreciate your obedience, and your husband may one day treat you as a fellow human being.

If, in the process of being *baarri*, you feel grief, fatigue, humiliation or a sense of everlasting exploitation, you hide it. If you long for love and comfort, you pray in silence to Allah to make your husband more bearable. Prayer is your strength. Nomadic mothers must try to give their daughters this skill and strength called *baarri*. (p 12)

Islam is the path of obedience.

It was not her mother and certainly not her father but rather her grandmother who arranged for Ayaan’s brother to be circumcised and she and her sister to be genitally mutilated or ‘cut’. So at the age of six she lost her clitoris and her inner labia and her outer labia were sewn together, leaving only a small hole for the urine. Her sister, Haweya, never recovered mentally.

Ayaan’s devoutly Muslim mother persuaded her father to take a job in Saudi Arabia because she saw it as the country of the Prophet and nearer to pure Islam. So Ayaan and her sister Haweya lived in Riyadh where they experienced the extreme isolation of the genders from each

other. Saudi Arabia to Ayaan meant virtual imprisonment and intense heat and cruelty, with executions and stonings weekly and listening to women being beaten by their husbands at night. Her mother loved it because it was pure Islam. Her father did not. And then suddenly they were deported because of their father's political activities. Her mother insisted they went to Muslim Sudan but they were refused entry so they went to Ethiopia where their father's core political activity was based. There Ayaan learned the local language and enjoyed a freedom she had never had in Saudi. But her mother wanted out of this Christian country and so they went to live in Nairobi without their father who continued to direct his political struggle from Addis Abba.

In Nairobi Ayaan, on the insistence of her father, went to an English speaking school and a secretarial college where she was inducted into the British and American set of values. It may sound absurd that books by Jane Austen and the Brontes and even by Enid Blyton taught Ayaan that males and females could be equal and independent and have adventures together, (Blyton, you may remember, was later banned by the feminists for sexism) but they gave Ayaan a vision of a very different society. She progressed to Huckleberry Finn, the Thirty Nine Steps and books by Danielle Steele and Barbara Cartland. And she became almost addicted to cheap romances and thrillers.

Ayaan and her sister, with their absent father's support, and their mother's grumbling opposition, finished their English-speaking school and graduated from a secretarial college. But when they decided to work their mother imprisoned them in the house for weeks because that was not what a proper **baari** Muslim woman should ever do.

Her Muslim mother arranged for a *ma'alim* or religious teacher to instruct her in the Quran but when she rebelled, he injured her so badly that her skull was broken and accumulated pressure of blood on her brain threatened to kill her. She was saved by some rich Somali relatives in Nairobi who get her into hospital and treated by Western medicine. Still she was sent to Quran school.

### **Reading Two** "Quran School"

We heard all about Hell. That was what Quran school was mostly about. Hell and all the mistakes that could put us there. The Quran lists Hell's torments in vivid detail; sores, boiling water, peeling skin, burning flesh, dissolving bowels, the everlasting fire that burns you forever, for as your flesh chars and your juices boil, you form a new skin. These details overpower you ensuring that you will obey. The *ma'alim* (religious teacher in Nairobi) whose class Haweya and I had to attend on Saturdays used to shriek out the taboos and restrictions, the rules to obey, spitting sometimes with the excitement of it: "You will go to Hell, and YOU will go to Hell, and YOU, and YOU – UNLESS! ..."

Hell in the Quran has seven gates. The heat and pain of burning are endless. The thirst is intense and causes so much pain, so much more than any thirst on earth that you start wailing for water. The searing juices from your burning body are thrown into your mouth. You long for Heaven. And this longing goes on for ever and ever. This intensely harsh, desert-like Hereafter was much more vivid to us than Heaven. In the Quran Heaven was a cool climate with breezes and delicious drinks; this was pleasant but rather vague." (p 80)

The worst curse was from a father who sent you to hell.

Ayaan went through a phase in which she strove to become a good Muslim like her mother. She began praying at all the appointed times in the day. She wore the strictest bodily and facial coverings, so much so that her Kenyan boy-friend described her as wearing a tent.

### **Reading 3** “The Power of the Hijab”

“I wanted to be pure and good and serve Allah. I began to pray five times a day, fighting to collect my thoughts through the whole long process. I wanted to understand better how to love the life that Allah, who was infinitely just, wanted for me. I asked my mother for money so a tailor could make me a huge black cloak with just three tight bands around my wrists and neck and a long zipper. It fell to my toes. I began wearing this robe to school on top of the school uniform that hung off my scrawny frame, with a black scarf over my hair and shoulders,

It had a thrill to it, a sensuous feeling. It made me feel powerful: underneath this screen lay a previously unsuspected, but potentially lethal femininity. I was unique: very few people walked about like that in those days in Nairobi. Weirdly, it made me feel like an individual. It sent out a message of superiority: I was the one true Muslim. All these other girls with their little white headscarves were children, hypocrites. I was a star of God. When I spread out my hands I felt I could fly.”

### **Reading 4** “The New Islam”

A new kind of Islam was on the march, it was much deeper, much clearer and stronger – much closer to the source of the religion – than the old kind of religion my grandmother believed in along with her spirit ancestors and djinns. It was not like the Islam in the mosques, where

imams mostly recited by memory old sermons written by long-dead scholars, written in an Arabic that barely anyone could understand. It was not a passive, mostly ignorant, acceptance of the rules: '*Insh'Allah*, "God wills it". It was about studying the Quran, really learning about it, getting to the heart of the nature of the Prophet's message. It was a huge evangelical sect backed massively by Saudi Arabian oil wealth and Iranian martyr propaganda. (p 87)

Ayaan plunged deeply into Islamic extremism but the more she studied it and discussed it the more doubting questions arose in her mind. She set out to convert her Christian Kenyan class mates. They said their parents had taught them about Jesus just as hers had taught her about the Prophet. "Still it bothered me. If we were created by Allah, and before our birth He had determined whether we would come to rest in Heaven or Hell, then why would we take the trouble to convert each other?"

### **Reading 5 "Intellectual problems"**

One day when I was seventeen Boqol Sawm (her new religious teacher) turned to the verses on how women are supposed to behave with their husbands. We owed our husbands absolute obedience, he told the mothers and teenage girls who had gathered to listen to him. If we disobeyed them, they could beat us." Boqol yelled "TOTAL OBEDIENCE: this is the rule in Islam." It enraged me, and I stood up behind the curtain. And in a shaky voice I asked "Must our husbands obey us too?"

There is nothing wrong with that question but Boqol Sawm's voice rose hard and dry. Certainly not!"

I dug my nails into my hand to stop myself from shaking and went on, “Men and women are then not equal,”

Boqol Sawm said, “They are equal.”

But they are **not**, I told him. “I am supposed to totally obey my husband, but he is not totally obedient to me and therefore we are not equal. The Quran says on almost every that Allah is just, but this is not just.”

Boqol Sawm’s voice rose to a shout, “You may not question Allah’s word! His mind is hidden. Satan is speaking to you girl! Sit down instantly!”

I sat down but as I did I hissed “Stupid” under my breath.

I bought my own English edition of the Quran and read it so I could understand it better. But I found that everything Boqol Sawm had said was in there. Women should obey their husbands. Women were worth half a man. Infidels should be killed. (p 104)

### **Reading 6 “Emotional Currents”**

Inwardly I resisted the teachings and secretly I transgressed them. Like many of the other girls in my class, I continued to read sensual romance novels and trashy thrillers. Even although I knew that continuing to do so was resisting Islam in the most basic way. Reading novels that aroused me was indulging in the one thing a Muslim woman must never feel: sexual desire outside of marriage.

A Muslim woman must not feel wild or free, or any of the other emotions or longings I felt when I read these books. A Muslim girl does not make

her own decisions or seek control. She is trained to be docile. If you are a Muslim girl, you disappear, until there is almost you inside you. In Islam, becoming an individual is not a necessary development; many people, especially women, never develop a clear individual will. You submit: that is the literal meaning of the word *islam*: submission. The goal is to become quiet inside, so that you never raise your eyes, not even inside your mind.

The spark of will grew inside me even as I studied and practiced to submit. (p 94)

The first real love of Ayaan's life, a friend of her brother's, turned out to be a Kenyan atheist and religion made it impossible to marry. As she passed seventeen and then eighteen the question of marriages arose and, of course, she was the property of her father who could arrange one for her. But he was far away and when she went back to Somalia she came under the influence of an aunt, a powerful personality, who persuaded her that she could marry her cousin without the knowledge of either her father or her brother. This she very much wanted to do and she did, the day before he went off to Russia, making a difficult one night union apparently legal. But the legality of that marriage was definitely questionable and she was relieved to find that she was not pregnant.

Conditions in Somalia were becoming more and more desperate as it gradually became a failed state and Ayaan decided to return by road to Kenya where her mother still was. After a nightmare of a journey of starving children, rape, and the rule of the gun she and her party crossed the border which was steadily closing up as conditions worsened. Now we see a different kind of courage from Ayaan driven by a universal compassion. From the safety of Nairobi she went back over

the border when her brother would not move a finger and brought over the tribal children she felt she was responsible for. That is a heroic story in itself but it not a part of my story here of the courage of thought, of the heroism of the mind and of the defiance of an authoritarian religion of terror.

But now her father wanted to marry her to the son of a political comrade of his in Aden. She refused, risking her father's curse which would certainly send her to Hell. Then he arranged a marriage with a Somali who had grown up in Canada. This time she could not escape. She went through the ceremony. He flew off to Canada and shortly afterwards she flew to Germany on her way to join him. But Ayaan was very unhappy about all of this. In Germany she was bowled over by the order and cleanliness place. At first she was overawed, but being Ayaan, she soon set out to learn about to get around in Europe. As she made her way around it occurred to her that she had a clan member in a refugee camp in the Netherlands who was obliged, by the ethics of tribalism to help her. She decided to make a break for it.

### **Reading 7 "Choosing Individuality"**

"That first afternoon in Bonn a new idea crept up on me: I didn't have to go to Canada. I could disappear here. I could escape it all, hide and somehow make my own way, like someone in a book.

I wouldn't stay here in Germany....I would go to England. There I would be able to speak the language and understand the culture with its meadows and cows and the Queen and Mayfair and Whitechapel – I

knew it all, I thought from books and Monopoly games. I would go there. I had my Certificate from Valley Secretarial College with me: I would work, save money, study. Nobody would know where I was.

I didn't know how I would escape or what freedom might mean. But I knew what course my life might take if I went to Canada. I would have a life like my mother's and Jawahir's. I would not have put it this way in those days, but because I was born a woman, I would never become an adult. I would always be a minor, my decisions made for me. I would be a unit in a vast beehive. I might have a decent life, but would always be dependent – always – on ***someone treating me well.***

I knew that another kind of life was possible. I had read about it and now I could see it, smell it in the air around me: the kind of life I had always wanted, with a real education, a real job, a real marriage. I wanted make my own decisions. I wanted to become a person, an individual, with a life of my own.

Later:

It was Friday, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1992 when I stepped on the train. Every year I think of it. I see it as my real birthday: the birth of a real person, making decisions about my life on my own. I was not running away from Islam or to democracy. I didn't have any big ideas then. I was just a young girl and I wanted some way to be me; so I bolted into the unknown.

She found her relative in the Netherlands and on her advise, she applied for asylum, making up the kind of story that would have her accepted and changing her date of birth and name so that her father and his tribe would not find her. It was granted and a very different story begins.

At first it was a story of wonder at the way Western civilisation worked according to rules and in order, about policemen who could be helpful and a government that was honest, did not exploit you and would even look after you. Then it was about how she could expose more and more of her body and males would not go mad with desire as she had been taught and Allah would not strike her dead. Then it was about the fear of her father, that he would find her and have her killed. She already knew that he had cursed her to Hell and she would surely go there and that her mother had repudiated her. Then it was about the guilt she felt that she had lied effectively on applying for asylum when other refugees were refused it because they did not know how to work the system.

Her shame at accepting welfare and not working led her to take a factory job and then to train in accountancy, at which she was no good at all. She made friends with some Dutch Christians who helped her understand the country and its culture and led her to question her own culture. She already had good English, Somali, Ethiopian and some Arabic but now she set out systematically and industriously to learn Dutch. After a while her Social Worker told her Dutch was better than that of most of the interpreters working with asylum seekers and she applied and was accepted as an official in the service of the Dutch government. Now she could earn money and eventually buy a house of her own.

More than that, she studied and qualified through the Dutch educational system and gained entry to the University of Leyden, one of Europe's oldest and most prestigious seats of learning. She marvelled at Western thinking in Psychology but above all she wanted to study Political Science.

## Reading 8 “Western Values”

I came to realise how deeply the Dutch are attached to freedom, and why Holland was in so many ways the capital of the European Enlightenment. Four hundred years ago when European thinkers severed the hard bands of church dogma that had constrained peoples' minds, Holland was the centre of free thought. The Enlightenment cut European culture from its roots in old fixed ideas of magic, kingship, social hierarchy and the dominance of priests and regrafted it onto a great strong trunk that supported the equality of each individual and his right to free opinions and self-rule – so long as he did not threaten civic peace and the freedom of others. Here, in Leyden, was where the Enlightenment had taken hold. Here the Dutch let each other be free. And here this commitment to freedom took hold of me too.

Sometimes I could almost sense a little shutter clicking shut in my brain, so that I could keep reading my textbooks without struggling to align their content with my belief in Islam. Sometimes it seemed as if every page I read challenged me as a Muslim. Drinking wine and wearing trousers were nothing compared to reading the history of ideas.

People had contested the whole idea of the basis of God's power on earth, and they had done it with reasoning that was beautiful and compelling. Darwin said creation stories were a fairy tale. Freud said we had power over ourselves. Spinoza said there were no miracles, no angels, no need to pray to anything outside ourselves. God was us and nature. Emil Durkheim said humans fanaticised religion to give themselves a sense of security. I read all this and then had to try to stuff it all behind the little shutter in my brain.

In every way to read these books on Western History was sinning. Even the history of how modern states formed confronted me with the contradictions of my belief in Allah. The European separation of God's world from the state was in itself **HARAM**. The Quran says there can be no government without God; the Quran is God's book of laws for the conduct of worldly affairs.

The 9/11 twin tower attacks threw Ayaan into ferment of discussion, even in public.

### **Reading 9 "The Crunch"**

For centuries we Muslims had been behaving as though all knowledge was in the Quran, refusing to question anything, refusing to progress. We had been hiding from reason for so long that we were incapable of facing up to the need to integrate it into our beliefs. And this was not working; it was leading to hideous pain and monstrous behavior.

We Muslims had been taught to define life on earth as a passage, as a test that precedes real life in the Hereafter. In that test everyone should ideally live life in a manner that resembling, as closely as possible, the followers of the Prophet. Didn't this inhibit improvement in improving daily life? Was innovation therefor forbidden to Muslims? Were human rights, progress, women's rights all foreign to Islam?

By declaring our Prophet infallible and not permitting ourselves to question him, we Muslims had set up a static tyranny. The Prophet Muhammad attempted to legislate every aspect of life. By adhering to his rules of what is permitted and what is forbidden, we Muslims suppressed the freedom to think for ourselves and to act as we chose. We froze the moral outlook of billions of people into the mind-set of the Arab desert in the seventh century. We were not just servants

of Allah, we were slaves.

The little shutter at the back of my mind, where I pushed all my dissonant thoughts, snapped open after the 9/11 attacks, and it refused to close again. I found myself thinking that the Quran is not a holy document. It is a historical record, written by humans. It is one version of events, as perceived by the men who wrote it 150 years after the Prophet Muhammad died. And it is a very tribal and Arab version of events. **It** spreads a culture that is brutal, bigoted, fixated on controlling women, and harsh in war.

The Prophet did teach us a lot of good things. I found it spiritually appealing to believe in a Hereafter. My life was enriched by the Quranic injunctions to be compassionate and show charity to others. There were times when I, like many other Muslims, found it too complicated to **deal** with the whole issue of war against the unbelievers. Most Muslims never delve into theology and we rarely read the Quran; we are taught *it* in Arabic, which most Muslims can't speak. As a result, most people *think* that Islam is about peace. It is from these people, honest and kind, that **the** fallacy has arisen that Islam is peaceful and tolerant.

But I could no longer avoid seeing the totalitarianism, the pure **moral** framework that is Islam. It regulates every detail of life and subjugates free will. True Islam, as a rigid belief system and a moral framework, leads to cruelty. The inhuman act of those nineteen hijackers was the **logical** outcome of this detailed system for regulating human behavior. **The** world is divided between "Us" and Them"—if you don't accept Islam you should perish.

It didn't have to be this way. The West underwent a period of religious warfare and persecution, but then society freed itself from the grip of violent organized religion. I assumed—I still assume—that the same process could occur among the millions of Muslims. We Muslims could shed our attachment to those dogmas that clearly lead to ignorance oppression. In fact, I thought, we were lucky: there were now so many books that Muslims could read them and

leapfrog the Enlightenment just as the Japanese have done. We could hold our dogmas up to the light, scrutinize them and then infuse traditions that are rigid and inhumane with the values of progress and modernity. We could come to terms with individual expression.

To think this way, of course, I had to make the leap to believing that the Quran was relative – not absolute – not the literal syllables pronounced by God, but just another book. I also had to reject the idea of Hell, whose looming prospect always frightened me from making any criticism of Islam. I found myself thinking one night, “But if that is so then what do I believe, truly, about God?”

Months later she went on holiday and took with her a book from her Dutch partner of some five years. It was titled “The Atheist Manifesto”.

I read the book, marveling at the clarity and naughtiness of its author. But I really didn't have to. Just looking at it, just wanting to read it—that already meant I doubted, and I knew that. Before I'd read four pages I already knew my answer. I had left God behind years ago. I was an atheist.

I had no one to talk to about this. One night in that Greek hotel I looked in the mirror and said out loud, "I don't believe in God." I said it slowly, enunciating it carefully, in Somali. And I felt relief.

It felt right. There was no pain, but a real clarity. The long process of seeing the flaws in my belief structure and carefully tiptoeing around the frayed edges as parts of it were torn out, piece by piece—that was all over. The angels, watching from my shoulders; the mental tension about having sex without marriage, and drinking alcohol, and not observing any religious obligations—they were gone. The ever-present prospect of hellfire lifted, and my horizon seemed broader. God, Satan, angels: these were all figments of human imagination. From now on I could step firmly on the ground that was under my feet and navigate based on my own reason and self-respect. My moral compass was within myself, not in the pages of

a sacred book.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali became a Dutch citizen. She wrote, as a journalist, in the Dutch press and debated on television. Her views soon meant that her house had to be protected and she needed a police escort wherever she went. She joined the Dutch Liberal Party. She was elected to the Dutch Parliament in January 2003. Then she gave an interview in which she described the Prophet as a pedophile and all Hell broke loose. She said that the Prophet had taken his nine year old niece to bed with him when he was fifty four and that according to the laws of Holland that made him a pervert and a criminal. The Dutch security police snatched her out of a restaurant and took her out the back through the kitchen and set about putting her in a secret place in the Hague which it was going to cost over a million Euros to make safe with reinforced glass and security cameras.

She had made a short film with a man called Theo van Gogh about Muslim women who had defied the Islamic system. It was called Submission. In 2004 Theo van Gogh was murdered on the streets of Amsterdam in broad daylight. In April 2006 a Dutch court ordered that she leave the safe house she was renting from the state because her neighbors had a right to argue that they felt unsafe because of her presence in the building. Dutch security flew her to a safe place in the USA for seventy five days but she came back for the opening of the Dutch parliament.

Finally the Dutch minister for integration announced plans to revoke Ayaan Ali's citizenship on the grounds that she had lied as she entered the country. A huge political fight between the parties in the Dutch Parliament broke out and she was about to be deported. Meanwhile she had been offered a place in an American political think tank called the American Enterprise Institute and she accepted. It was only after she had left Holland that parliament voted to let her retain her Dutch citizenship.

In the USA she has renounced her Muslim religion and, as an apostate whom the Prophet in the Quran decrees must be killed, she has a body guard everywhere she

goes. She was made Time Magazine Woman of the Year in 2005 and one of its 100 most influential people. She was Reader's Digest European Woman of the Year in 2006. She received Norway's Human Rights Bellweather of the Year Award, the Danish Freedom Prize, and the Swedish Democracy Prize and the Moral Courage Award for commitment to conflict resolution, ethics and word citizenship and the Martin Luther King, jr. Unsung Heroes Award. She continues to write and campaign. In 2008 she established the Ali Hirsi Foundation which aims to combat several types of crimes against women including female genital mutilation, enforced marriage and honor violence.

Finally she met and married an academic historian from Britain, lives with him near Washington DC, and, in spite of the efforts of the blacksmith at the command of her grandmother when she was only six, she has a child, a daughter, by him.