

SOMALI-BORN ACTIVIST AYAAN HIRSI ALI



Ayaan Hirsi Ali (pictured) is a Somali-born American activist known for her advocacy for women's rights and anti-Islamic views. She shares her story in an intimate interview with Lynn Wexler. (November, 2014)

A Portrait of Exceptional Valor

By Lynn Wexler

"It was Friday, July 24, 1992, when I stepped on the train. Every year I think of it. I see it as my real birthday: the birth of me as a 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 wanted some way to be me; so, I bolted into the unknown."

- Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, as a Somali Muslim, supported the fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989. She was 19 years old and a devout Muslim. After escaping to Europe in 1992 - fleeing from an arranged marriage - and eventually settling in the Netherlands having been granted asylum there, her views changed drastically. She turned against Islam and found solace as an atheist. She went on to receive a top-flight education but was forced to flee Holland following the ruthless murder of Theo van Gogh - her artistic partner on a film exposing the lies within Islam. She wrote a book, *Infidel*, about the truth and treacheries of her journey, and currently lives and works in an undisclosed location, serving as a fellow at the conservative think-tank, American Enterprise Institute.

In 2005, Hirsi Ali was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. She is the recipient of several awards for her work, including Norway's Human Rights Service's Bellwether of the Year Award, the Danish Freedom Prize, the Swedish Democracy Prize, and the Moral Courage Award for commitment to conflict resolution, ethics, and world citizenship.

Who is this outspoken, fearless woman of valor? This staunch critic of her past and ardent champion of human rights, who lives under the constant threat of death?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali has transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary by her courage to keep her rendezvous

with destiny, a moment too frightening for most to undertake. Thrust on a quest that would ultimately lead to estrangement from tribe, family and faith; the vicious death of her friend; threats to her life; harsh criticism; and an

often-unrequited advocacy for the truth about Islam that lies at the heart of increasing global turmoil and threats to freedom, Hirsi Ali stands by her calling with fierce resolve.

Courage doesn't always roar. Her refined deportment and effusive beauty aside, Hirsi Ali presses on in the face of fear and perseveres in the face of adversity. She wields her anger concerning brutality, injustice and intolerance, particularly against young girls and women, perpetrated in the name of Mohammed, as a weapon for activism. Having left the familiar behind, she has had the guts to suffer, with dignity, for the sake of a higher cause – human rights for all.

Hirsi Ali is a destined voice for those who are silenced, complacent, misguided, afraid, or too politically correct for veracity. She is as Mark Twain said, "It's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog."

Her valor is mighty, and one senses - from reading her book and hearing her speak - that past events are merely a preamble to what remains for her to accomplish.

WEXLER: Describe your upbringing as a child and adolescent.

HIRSI ALI: I was born in Mogadishu, Somalia. My father was a powerful man in Somalian society and one of the leaders of a rebel movement working against the dictator Siad Barré. My family had to eventually flee Somalia, traveling first to Saudi Arabia and later to Kenya. Saudi Arabia is a cruel and violent theocracy where women are oppressed and enslaved. At an early age, I wondered why the law of God dictated that I had to be forever inferior to men. Most of my adolescence was spent in Kenya, which was a more open society than Saudi Arabia – I could actually watch Western movies - but only relatively so. A rigid, fundamentalist branch of Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood, was just emerging at that time, spreading its influence throughout Kenya. I joined the Muslim Brotherhood and believed that Salman Rushdie should be killed for having blasphemed Mohammed.

WEXLER: How did you summon the courage to leave the familiar and venture into the unknown?

HIRSI ALI: I did not start out with courage. I only knew that I did not want my mother's life, nor to be married to man I did not know and to whom I would be a submissive possession. I had no thought at that time of losing my family or my faith. I was scared and sad. It wasn't until I saw the peace, freedom and prosperity available to all citizens that I understood there was another way, though I still had not considered abandoning my faith. The defining moment came after 9/11, when I understood that Osama bin Laden orchestrated such a tragedy by obeying the teachings of the Quran. I could no longer in good conscience remain a member of such a religion. I decided that western liberal culture is superior to Islamic tribal culture.

WEXLER: How did your transformation take place?

HIRSI ALI: The process was slow and I was apprehensive at each step. First, I removed my headscarf. Then I wore jeans, rode a bicycle, socialized with Dutch people, and Jews. I went to a pub though it took time to eventually have a glass of wine. Soon I dated and became serious with a Dutch man. My moral compass was now informed from within rather than by a doctrine from without.

WEXLER: What keeps Muslim women connected to a religion and a culture that binds them to a life of abuse?

HIRSI ALI: This occurs in several stages. It begins with violence against the mind. From childhood, you are taught

that horrors will befall you if you go against the teachings in the Quran. Next is the fear of banishment from family and community and the threat of being cast as an apostate, which is punishable by death. Then there is economic violence.

Your family will lose their sources of income. And finally, territorial violence...the family's homes will be destroyed. It takes a long time to dissolve the iron bars of a mental cage.

WEXLER: Why have Western societies been so remiss to criticize, and quick to accommodate, a dogma that has been intolerant in the reverse, and acts with violence to replace existing cultures with its own?

HIRSI ALI: Western societies...especially in Europe...have a fear of being called racist – understandable in view of past histories. This dread has led to an opposite reaction... tolerating *all* nations, beliefs, and religions...even those that oppress women, preserve ignorance, and violate human rights. This politically correct stance is a gross mistake. Some cultural practices, religious beliefs, and extreme dogma need to be criticized, changed, stopped at the portals of democracy, and even censured, no matter if they are of ancient heritage. They seek to reverse humanity's progress for the good, and return humankind to the darkness and suffering of the Middle Ages. Western society has a responsibility to prevent violent fanatics from imposing their will on free societies.

WEXLER: You refuse to be silenced no matter the extreme and daily adversities and dangers. What keeps you in the fight?

HIRSI ALI: I'm simply standing for truth. I'm calling evil out for what it is. Islam is not a religion of peace. If it were, people, especially women, would not be forced to live under the suffocating bonds of repression. Young girls would not be murdered and mutilated by their fathers and brothers for allegedly violating the creed. Women would not be relegated to lives as compliant slaves - handed off like property from father to husband - forever silent and submissive in the face of abuse and degradation. While not all react with force to its detractors, Islam nonetheless proscribes violence and conquering in the name of its dogma.

WEXLER: What do you say to those who dismiss you as vengeful toward Islam, and worse, a liar, having been traumatized as a child.

HIRSI ALI: I have lived the life that I stand up against. Those who make such claims are immersed in the fashionable sin of offence. I make no concessions to political correctness. The truth is clearly visible to all who wish to see. I cannot speak to self-imposed blindness. The bottom line is that the bedrock precepts of freedom, and the truth about a culture and religion that violently seek to destroy them, should not be compromised in the name of cultural diversity.

WEXLER: What is your message to our youth who are the ones responsible for taking the torch you will pass and continuing your work along the trails you have blazed?

HIRSI ALI: When you grow up in a First World country, in a democracy, with freedoms, individual liberties and human rights...it's possible to take those ideals...basic tenets... for granted. I was born into a world where those values are nonexistent...and what's worse, where the goal [of Islam] is to impose their view on the world. My message to the young people is to be grateful that they live in a democracy; to appreciate the freedoms they have and the prices paid to maintain them... freedoms that are their birthright. Guard those freedoms and do not take them for granted, and know that the U.S. Constitution is a superior document of governance...superior to any other document of governance to this day; and protect it at all costs.