

Reading Ayaan Hirsi Ali in Birmingham

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Personal Trauma and Public Voice

I am not just a woman who was born in a Muslim family; I am also a British citizen who loves her country and stands behind our soldiers who lose their limbs and lives fighting Jihadists and Islamists. I grew up with friends and neighbours from all walks of lives, gays, atheist, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists. My mother never taught me to hate or despise anyone from a different religion or culture.

So I admire Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali-born Muslim woman who fled an arranged marriage to live in Holland where she became famous as an MP, a writer, a fighter for Muslim women's rights and an opponent of terrorism. In her remarkable books *Infidel and The Caged Virgin* she tells us important truths that many of us have maybe suppressed. There are men who have written disparagingly about Ayaan who clearly have no idea how much courage that took. Ayaan shows us that personal trauma can be the spur to speak out against patriarchal communities which lock us away and religious preachers who say we are inferior.

Because of my Mum, my Islam was always different to the dry and rigid literalist Islam that indoctrinated Ayaan. But the 'caged virgin syndrome' she writes about resonated powerfully with me. I too was coerced into marrying a first cousin. The marriage was a mental prison, as I lived to a script others had written for me. I set myself free when I broke my silence, but freedom came at a price. I have been called mentally unstable by Islamists and my children have been harassed. But my children will live their lives authentically, and not be what others expect them to be.

After I divorced my husband I spent years believing I was inferior. I felt I had disobeyed my parents and would face the wrath of God. It took years of self-therapy to reclaim my authentic self. My depression was mixed with anger and I had to go back to my childhood experiences of oppression, to get rid of those tapes playing in my head. I redefined myself and my purpose in life, and I don't live in fear anymore. All of us who can say that have to thank Ayaan.

The end of multiculturalism

Ayaan understands what has gone wrong with the policies of multiculturalism. As a young child and teenager I grew up in an area where the majority was English but there were also Greeks, Chinese, Jamaicans and Indians living in the same community. Everybody got on and respected each other. My parents ran supermarkets, so we were integrated, if not allowed to assimilate as females because of the religion. And now the white people are leaving, the area has disintegrated, and it breaks my heart. Most members of my family have moved out.

The area has been Islamised. Mosques, mini-mosques and madrasas rise up on almost every street corner, but there is nothing for the youth. Drugs and crime has made the area unsafe for young girls. Social services and the police know what is going on. I have witnessed anti-west and anti-Jew posters and leaflets appear in shops run by young bearded Muslims. I watched the Islamists mobilise the Muslim community right under my nose. Before 9/11 the time I could not name it, but I knew something was not right, but it was being done in the name of Islam.

I left because there was no way I was going to raise my children as a lone mother in a community where the Imams or mosques did nothing to serve the community or teach a plural Islam. Even the schools were allowing little primary school girls to wear headscarves, and that has nothing to do with religion. The extremists have had over twenty five uncontested years to mobilise the minds of British Muslims and their backwardness now dominates some areas.

Multicultural polices are not working. I have witnessed a lot of appeasement of extremism. No other religion or race made the demands Muslims did in the local area, and I witnessed the friction it caused amongst the white people I worked with, some who were friends of mine and didn't have a racist bone in their bodies. When my son was approached by Islamist radicals and Muslim lads harassed my daughter if she went out, I had to leave.

The rise of Islamism

Ayaan understands why Islamism has arisen in the West. It's inconvenient to say this, but Islamists base their belief on the literal words of the Quran and stress their interpretations of the canonical texts. When extremists indoctrinate British Muslims with anti-Western and anti-Jewish propaganda, they use texts from the Quran, understood in a literalist spirit. Psychologically, they indoctrinate Muslims

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into believing that Jihad is Allah's will, and it is their religious obligation to implement that will on earth, and for doing so they will receive their reward in the afterlife as a martyr. That's how they create human bombs. Much of this goes uncontested and people need to wake up.

Wahhabism and Salafism (the brand of Islam that Osama bin Laden believes in) has gone uncontested for too long in Britain. There is the growing influence of Mawdudi, the theoretical guru of the influential Pakistani Islamist organisation, Jamaat-e-islam. Many British Muslims follow Mawdudi, most notably the leadership of the Muslim Council of Britain. The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood is spreading, and Hizb ut-Tahrir continue to push the extremist teachings of Nabhani and Qutb on campuses. Different brands of radical Islam, but the same ideology: Muslims should return to a 'true Islam,' a Caliphate must be reinstated, and anyone who is not a Muslim is a 'Kuffar.' Muslim communities in Birmingham have been indoctrinated by this backward Islam for decades. The end result is men like Parvez Khan (who planned to murder a Muslim British Soldier in Birmingham).

My own father was indoctrinated in his old age as he attended Jammat-e-islam and Tablighi mosques. They persuaded him to use his money to build a huge madrasa in Pakistan. He was told that if any of the orphans whom he provided for in the madrassah memorised the Quran, then seven generations of his family would go to heaven. My dad totally believed this and was eventually buried within the compound of his Madrasa.

Who speaks for Muslim Women?

Ayaan's books break the silence about Muslim women's plight. I was a victim of domestic violence. I thought I had married a modern thinking British Muslim. My brother had warned me not to marry into a particular group of Muslims, mostly from Mirpur or Kashmir, saying to me 'They will never change. They are controlled by their extended families. They will always be backward in their mindset.' At the time, I dismissed his advice as discrimination, but it turned out to be true in many ways. Firstly, my husband hid our marriage because he was forced to marry a cousin who was only 16 at the time and he was 25. So I became a victim of a polygamous marriage which inevitably turned to domestic violence. When I asked him why he had come home late one night, he slapped me across the face and shouted 'don't question my authority. In our religion you are not allowed to speak to me like that.' It was a defining moment for me. He had used religion to control me. I once said

that it wasn't him I wanted to challenge, it was the Mullahs and Imams who taught him that women were inferior, should be submissive to their husbands, and could be slapped if they displeased. People don't want to hear this, but backward theology is being used to underpin women's oppression in the modern West.

Polygamy is a hidden epidemic. Muslim women who cannot speak English are afraid to approach authorities, Imams and Mullahs ignore our plight, and the community downplays this issue and labels women 'mad' or 'heretic' or 'loose' when they stand up for their rights.

There are some hopeful changes. In 2007 I went on a training course that Hazel Blears, the government minister, initiated to empower Muslim women. It was brilliant. Female professors and teachers taught us how to read the Quran from a gender perspective. We discussed the Quranic verse that has been interpreted as an instruction to 'scourge' the wife when she disobeys. One hijab-wearing woman said 'Oh, that verse only applies to a woman who may commit adultery.' I was very annoyed. I pointed out to her that I had been a victim of domestic violence and was not struck because I had committed adultery and, anyway, the law of the land says no one has the right to hit, slap or punch a woman. Muslims are not an exception. She could not argue back, after all, we had not gathered to apologise for texts that discriminated against us! If the verse doesn't sit right with us as reasonable or humane, we should reject the verse. Every Muslim woman must know that domestic violence, polygamy, and under age marriage of young girls is a crime in this country regardless of what the verse says.

The situation for millions of Muslim women is this: men believe they have the divine right to subjugate and beat them. You only have to watch the debates on Al Jazeera, and this Arabization is really influencing British Muslims. The mullahs or clerics discuss how not to leave bruises, or how lightly a man can hit a woman. But a slap eventually turns into a punch or a kick. Many Muslim women refuse to go to the police for fear of being accused of dishonouring their family or their husband. The UK now offers Muslim women the support of safe houses. (There is so such place for women in many Muslim countries.)

The Prophet was given an Egyptian slave who gave birth to his son Abraham. He didn't marry her but no one labelled the child a 'harami,' a bad term used for a child born out of wedlock. I live in a country where children are protected, valued and have rights. The term 'illegitimate' has been erased. Nevertheless, I know story

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after story of Muslim girls who abort an unwanted child because of the religious doctrine of fear that dominates our lives. This is the kind of hypocrisy that I fight.

A lone woman is more vulnerable in the Middle East or Pakistan. They are told that only marriage alone can protect them and save them from the eyes of vultures. A woman is nothing if she is not married. 'Caged' as a virgin, not allowed a proper education, coerced into a marriage and told to live as a 'good' Muslim woman under the protection of a husband, women come to believe they have no choices. Ayaan is right when she states that Muslim women can be trained to be docile. I have come across many, many Muslim women who have to live that kind of life. It is one of the reasons many Muslim men seek a wife from south Asia. One young girl was treated like a slave, she had no family here and the in-laws wouldn't even allow her to go to local classes to learn English or seek a life of her own but was expected to cook clean and slave for the whole extended family. She was on her feet for long hours in the kitchen whilst pregnant. She eventually collapsed and was taken to hospital. The in-laws were told to allow her to rest for the health of the child – the only time she had a break from household duties. Her husband took another wife (polygamy) and she has no choice but to accept this in silence.

The Imams spend a vast amount of time spelling out how Muslim women should dress, live and behave. Once women step outside this script they may face excommunication, stigma, and, in extreme cases, honour beatings and honour killings. Ayaan is absolutely right to raise the alarm that this oppression doesn't just happen in far-away lands but is right here in Europe. The first case of a (dis) honour killing I remember was in the 1990s, when a 13 year old Muslim school girl in Birmingham was shot to death alongside her mother, just because she was caught talking to a boy in a local park. Half the community held this honour killing over their daughters to terrorise them.

Against Sharia Courts, against Polygamy

I strongly oppose Sharia courts. Only under the British law will Muslim women be treated as equal and full human beings. Under Sharia, Mullahs and Imams in Britain meddle in marriage, family law and inheritance, and women lose out. For goodness sake, one Sharia council in London is run by Suhaib Hasan, a reactionary Wahhabi-trained cleric and another is run by a jihadist mentor Anjum Chaudrey! Extremists are using the divorce plight of Muslim women to create Sharia courts

in order to advance their political agenda. They seek adherence to Sharia to gain power over women and the communities.

Some of these men advocate polygamy as their God-given right. Polygamy is a practice that is growing in our communities because mosques do not regulate Islamic marriages. These illegal marriages are not recognised under the British law hence Muslim men have the prerogative of committing polygamy outside the law. It's a subject I am passionate about because as a child, I watched my sister being sectioned under the mental health act when she found out that her husband already had a wife. She divorced him but never got over it and died a heartbroken woman.

Mosques must be made to stop these illegal marriages. In some Muslim countries, like Tunisia for example, polygamy has been banned. But in Britain, however, the Imams are asking for more privileges! I recently heard of a case in a Birmingham mosque where a husband would only give his wife an Islamic divorce if she signed away her rights to any of his properties. She was coerced by the leader into signing away her rights. If she had gone to a British court she would have been treated with justice.

Muslim women are in a paradox. They can get a civil divorce but they can still remain married 'Islamically.' It is a big mess thanks to mullahs performing marriages outside the law. There's no regulation and we need to be protected by the British law. A woman may need to go to a Sharia court to obtain a divorce against a husband, but it's a myth that we always need a cleric's ruling. A Muslim woman only needs two witnesses and there is no reason why a solicitor and another witness cannot grant her that divorce alongside her civil divorce.

Towards a Western Islam

It was partly through reading Ayaan Hirsi's defence of the West and its values that I began to realise how blessed I was. I was born in a democracy that aspires to treat all human beings equally, regardless of gender, sexuality, religion, creed and race. Here, human relationships are better, human life is valued, and there is more accountability, freedom, choice, educational opportunity, and security. To me Britain is the best place in the world. No one starves here, and there is freedom, fairness and respect for all.

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When I was a young teenager in the early 1980s, my father had started to attend local mosques built by Jamaat-e-islam (a brand of Islam that follows the teachings of Maulana Mauwdudi). One day he said to me ‘there will be mosques everywhere, Islam will spread, and the kaffir and the yahudis (meaning Jews) will go to hell as disbelievers.’ I remember being shocked; I thought of my wonderful school friends and asked myself what kind of God would want these lovely girls to go to hell? The fact is that I don’t think my dad ever met a Jew. He was just indoctrinated in his old age.

The prophet preached a just society where you must give to charity, look after the elderly, and take care of the orphan and the widow. But that is exactly what the West has done, while Muslim countries have failed to live up to this ideal. Islam must adapt to a democracy where the separation of state and religion underpins freedom of expression and freedom of choice, human rights, liberty, justice, and equal rights.

As westerners, we should acknowledge that our liberal civilisation is great because it gives the highest regard to human dignity, autonomy and sanctity. As British Muslims we should reform Islam until it is not at odds with that precious achievement. Islam is living in the past. Our mindset has been frozen and we have been silenced into submission... we can no longer follow our faith blindly without question.

An inspiration for me has been Professor Amina Wadud, author of *Women and the Gender Jihad* and the first female who led the Friday congregation and so created history in America and, recently, in Oxford. Radicals called her a ‘heretic’ but for progressive, liberal and secular Muslims she is an inspiration who opposes the male hierarchy in Islam.

Many Muslims already live as ‘reformed Muslims’ in the West. In Britain, two moderate voices are Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui and Dr Taj Hargey, both of whom support equality for women. Dr Hargey told me that he lost half his congregation recently when he supported Amina Wadad to lead the first Friday prayers in Oxford. He also disagrees with Sharia courts. Dr Siddiqui has been involved in finalising a standard Muslim marriage document to be used across the board in all Muslim mosques. It stipulates that the husband cannot commit polygamy. He supports Muslim women who wish to marry a non-Muslim. He has also advocated that the young be given more choice in marriage and should be allowed to seek

their own partners in Britain rather than from south Asia. I have the utmost respect for such men.

What surprises me is why our government turns to men like Tariq Ramadan, or Inayat Bunglawala from the MCB, for advice and not men like Haris Rafiq from the Sufi Council who promotes a modern British Islam.

I take the same view as the US writer Reza Aslan, author of *No God But God*. A Muslim reformation is under way. A Muslim feminism is emerging and the Hadiths that were fabricated by men are being challenged. Interpretations of the Quran are being scrutinised by more enlightened scholars. There are contradictory readings of the Quran but we have a choice about which interpretation we adopt as the Quran is ambiguous and is very difficult to understand or interpret.

Where next?

I recently read the MCB's favourite, Maulana Maududi, on '*Islamic Human rights*.' Well, it's not human rights as we understand it! He avoids the issues of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, apostasy, equality for women regarding inheritance, legal testimony, and equal rights to divorce or marriage to non-Muslims. He talks of 'Islamic dress,' and advocates the veil and chastity of Muslim women. There is no such thing as 'Islamic dress' of course! Arabic tunics, Burkhas, these are all products of a desert-Islam. Our identity as modern western Muslims is being distorted by these backward doctrines. Why does the Government indulge them? Why are we western Muslims not more energetic in challenging these doctrines?

As I study my religion, and other religions, the more I realise I am not just a Muslim. In a sense I am also a Christian, a Jew, a Sikh, a Hindu, because we all believe in God.

I have dialogue with God directly. My love and faith goes beyond the Quran, or prophets and its rituals. My journey is spiritual. The oppressive dogmas and the reactionary clerics, Jihadists and Islamists have blackened the good name of Islam. But I can choose not to believe what some Imam or scholar tells me by using the brain and heart God gave me to make my own decisions about what is wrong and what is right. It's important to listen to your own voice and not let the loud voices of Islamic extremists drown our humanity away.

I am not an atheist (though I have found atheists to be the most kind, humane and

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decent people compared to those who think they have the right to blow up innocent people in the name of their God). I do not believe in some of the majestic, magical prophecies, but that does not mean I do not believe in a higher power. When I consider nature, from the depths of the seas to the mystery of space, I believe there is a higher power that created us all. My relationship is with Him/Her/It directly, not the messengers.

I refuse to pray behind a man, or be segregated that's why I refuse to go to a mosque, even if they did let us in! I am a secular British Muslim who will believe what I want to believe and what is humanely reasonable and conceivable. My Islam is simple and straightforward to me, I don't need to wear religion on my sleeves to claim who I am. Islam needs to break free from medieval theologies. Only then will Muslim women be emancipated, Muslims should be campaigning against Jihadists and extremists to claim Islam back, only then can Muslims say Islam is a religion of peace. Right now the reality proves otherwise. We need to break our silence collectively against Political and radical Islamists first.

Sadly those who have the courage to speak the truth are often the ones who are intimidated, murdered and live with death threats as Ayaan has experienced. To me, that demonstrates something is seriously wrong with Islam in today's world. That's what I love about Ayaan – she says what she says without fear or apology. She says what many of us think but may never say because of the fear instilled into us. One has to respect her for that.

Gina Khan is a British Muslim woman who lives in Birmingham and campaigns against extremism. She has blogged at *Butterflies and Wheels*.

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