



ayaan hirsi ali islamabad

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IN 1993 AYAAN HIRSI ALI DID SOMETHING THAT WENT AGAINST EVERY lesson she'd learned since birth. Removing her headscarf, she ventured out of her refugee camp in the Netherlands with her head bare, exposed for every man to see. "Absolutely nothing happened," she writes. "If anything, I attracted less attention than when I was covering my head. Not one man went into a frenzy."

This episode, which is recounted in Hirsi Ali's memoir *Infidel*, was one of many that made the Somalia-born Hirsi Ali decide to campaign for Muslim women's rights. For years, she'd felt cheated by arguments that Islamic women should hide indoors because of their overwhelming sexual power, and that men could beat any woman who didn't submit to Allah's will. "What about the men?" she asked as a teenager at an Islamic debating group. "Shouldn't they cover? Don't women also have desire for male bodies?" Her questions were greeted with raucous laughter.

Ever since she took off her hijab, Hirsi Ali has been a lightning rod for controversy. Her feelings about Muslim women's oppression led her to question Islam's basic tenets, and her conclusions have been incendiary. She has argued that Islam suppresses freedom of thought; she has called the Prophet Mohammed a tyrant and a pervert. After 9/11, she infuriated Dutch liberals by arguing that the hijackers represented mainstream Islamic thinking. The politically correct Dutch government, meanwhile, was busy setting up madrassahs and paying welfare to tens of thousands of Muslim immigrants. "I have to wake these people up," Hirsi Ali remembers thinking, even as the death threats against her started pouring in.

How this self-described "good girl" became such a firebrand is a story that reads like a novel. Born into a high-ranking Somali family, Hirsi Ali was circumcised and repeatedly beaten in childhood. After a brief teen-

age flirtation with fundamentalist Islam, she decided religion couldn't answer her intellectual yearnings. Then, at 23, she fled Africa when her father arranged her marriage to a man she saw as "a pea-brain." Instead of joining her new husband in Canada, she escaped to the Netherlands, where she earned a degree in political science, became a citizen and joined the government as a member of the center-right VVD party.

Since then Hirsi Ali has never apologized for her outspokenness. When, in 2004, she wrote a screenplay for *Submission*, a short film about Muslim women's oppression, she knew the subject matter would anger many Muslims. Even so, few would have predicted the murder of the film's director, Theo van Gogh, in broad daylight months later in peaceful Amsterdam. His killer, the son of Moroccan immigrants, shot and stabbed van Gogh, then speared a letter to his corpse saying that Hirsi Ali was next.

Undaunted, Hirsi Ali stayed in the Netherlands until 2005, when a Dutch television channel aired an exposé revealing that she'd lied to gain refugee status. In the uproar that followed, Hirsi Ali left the government and moved to Washington, D.C., becoming a fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. Here, she's been predictably trashed by left-wing intellectuals and celebrated by the right. But no matter which party co-opts her, Hirsi Ali's message about how Muslim women suffer from domestic violence and honor killings remains strong and important.

With *Infidel* she has again shown that she can't be silenced. It's an amazing story, vibrantly told, and even those who don't agree with her have to give this gutsy woman credit for speaking out. Freedom of thought gives us the choice to embrace or reject Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Either way, don't expect her to disappear, or stop speaking, any time soon. ○