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### Suffering in Silence: An Analysis of Women's Experiences in AyaanHirsi Ali's *Infidel*

Abstract:

AyaanHirsi Ali in *Infidel* (2006) highlights the severe oppression that women encounters in various parts of the world. She examines several ways by which women are oppressed. Forced marriages, child marriages, polygamy, female genital mutilation and the neglect that a girl child faces can all affect the sense of self in women and girl children. Women are still not permitted to enter certain fields. The male dominated society is hostile and imposes more restrictions when women try to assert their rights. Though several women in the modern era are literate and are aware of their rights they still struggle against several severe problems. Her story has a positive impact on others in similar position as it indicates how she has reached the other side after enormous toil and suffering. There are stark descriptions of evil husbands who do not regard their wives as individuals and as equal partners. The lives of women were difficult. They had to be covered, be obedient, and accept everything without arguing. Her suggestions are valuable and her arguments are persuasive as she speaks from her own experiences.

Key words: oppression, women, rights

AyaanHirsi Ali in *Infidel* (2006) highlights the severe oppression that women encounters in various parts of the world. She examines several ways by which women are

oppressed. Forced marriages, child marriages, polygamy, female genital mutilation and the neglect that a girl child faces can all affect the sense of self in women and girl children. Women are still not permitted to enter certain fields. The male dominated society is hostile and imposes more restrictions when women try to assert their rights. Though several Muslim women in the modern era are literate and are aware of their rights they still struggle against several severe problems. In the Preface to *Women and Islam*, Fatima Mernissi says, “if women’s rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of male elite” (ix).

Hirsi Ali highlights the fact that young women were not allowed to marry men of their choice though Islam permits this. Hirsi Ali points out the way in which women are married against their will. Those who tied their knots against the wishes of their families were murdered for bringing ‘dishonor’ to their family. In *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali’s mother, Asha married her first husband, Ahmed because she could not defy her father. A virgin’s silence was the proper answer to a marriage proposal. Thus she was married to Ahmed whom she disliked. But soon after her father’s death she divorced her husband.

Hirsi Ali’s father, a westernized intellectual did not allow his daughter to marry the man of her choice. A woman was not allowed to have a will or choice of her own. Her father, Hirsi remained firm in his decision even when Ayaan refused to marry Osman Mahamud, the man Hirsi chose as her husband. She rejected the marriage as it would deprive her of her individuality. When she asked Osman Moussa, “What do you expect of a wife?” she was stunned by his reply: “You’re going to give me six sons. We will be a home for all the Osman Mahamud” (172). Hirsi Ali’s father arranged her marriage to Osman Moussa and the *nikah* was conducted even without her presence. But soon Hirsi Ali escaped to Germany and succeeded in divorcing Osman. This made her father furious and he severed his relationship

with her. He sent a letter to her that she had brought dishonour to her family and invokes Allah to punish her. She wanted to escape from the life that others had destined for her. She realized that in her society, “I could never become an adult. I would always be a minor, my decisions made for me. I would always be a unit in a vast bee hive. I might have a decent life, but I would be dependent – always – on someone *treating me well*” (187). Mernissi states in *Women and Islam*,

Traditional society produced Muslims who were literally “submissive” to the will of the group. Individuality in such a system is discouraged; any private initiative is *bid'a* (innovation), which necessarily constitutes errant behavior. The traditional society tried to stop the development of individuality at a stage that did not threaten the authority of the leader, creating a ghost of an individual, who would not have autonomy (identified with rebellion). (22)

Hirsi Ali finds that love marriages were terrible mistakes and had disastrous consequences in Somalian culture. There would not be clan's protection. One “sank into a hideous destiny of impurity, godlessness and disease. People like my grandmother pointed at you and spat at you on the street. It was the worst thing you could do to your family's honor: you damaged your parents, sisters, brothers and cousins” (79). Papanek points out in “Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelters” that a strong, positive relationship between the spouses is often absent in arranged marriages. Emotional attractions are not considered valid reasons for marriage (46).

Hirsi Ali refers to the wedding ceremonies in Saudi which focus on the superior status of man. The arrival of bridegroom was hugely significant for wedding ceremonies. The man would be sweaty, ordinary looking and sometimes much older with a long Saudi robe. But the women would all hush as if he is from another planet. “Every wedding was like this: all women falling silent, breathless with anticipation, and the figure who appeared, entirely

banal” (48). In “The Spell and the Ever-changing Moon”, Rukhsana Ahmed too points out that the joyful wedding songs only tell “lies” about “marital bliss, of loving husbands and contented days” (Yasmin and Farrukhi 137).

Though The Qur’an sanctions polygamy, the emphasis is on doing justice to the orphans and not on marrying more than one woman. Hirsi Ali felt her mother’s pain when her father left her for another woman. She detests Abeh for marrying several times. She writes, I thought about my father’s succession of wives and children: how he had abandoned his first children, and then us, and now had made another daughter, whom, I thought, he would surely abandon, too. I felt a sudden wave of compassion for Ma, with all her worries: trying to find us a decent house to live in, having to take charity from my father’s clan, and dealing with Mahad dropping out, and worrying about my wayward sister, Haweya. If my father had been with us, none of this would have happened. (93)

When Hirsi Ali asked her grandmother whether Abeh had another wife, she replied in a superior tone, “We won’t discuss your father’s wives,” she said. “We know that men marry. It will not be said of my daughters and granddaughters that they are jealous” (93).

In *Infidel*, Hirsi has also discussed the issue of child marriage. When Hirsi Ali’s grandmother, Ibaado was about thirteen she was married to a wealthy nomad named Artan who was about forty years old. Hirsi Ali’s father, Hirsi was the youngest son of Magan who at the age of seventy married his twelve or thirteen-year-old wife. Hirsi Ali says that while in Kenya the girls in primary schools left once they were betrothed. Her friend, Latifa’s father ordered her not to go to school. Her groom was older and she looked frightened. Women had no choice in matters concerning their lives. Hirsi Ali’s friend, the nine-year-old Halwa was betrothed to a cousin she had never met. Though she didn’t want to marry him, she couldn’t escape her destiny.

*Infidel* draws attention to the practice of female genital mutilation. Hirsi Ali states,

Female genital mutilation predates Islam. Not all Muslims do this, and a few of the peoples who do are not Islamic. But in Somalia, where virtually every girl is excised, the practice is always justified in the name of Islam. Uncircumcised girls will be possessed by devils, fall into vice and perdition, and become whores. Imams never discourage the practice: it keeps girls pure. (31)

Hirsi Ali says that the madrassah teacher in Mongadishu supported the kids when they assaulted another girl for being 'impure'. Like the kids he too called her *dammin*, dunce and *kintirleey*– "she with the clitoris". Imams in Somalia encouraged female circumcision. Though it is justified in the name of Islam, it is not practised in many Islamic countries. She graphically records the chilling event which was carried out when Haweya was four, Hirsi Ali five and Mahad six. The grandmother

... caught hold of me and gripped my upper body in the same position as she had put Mahad. Two other women held my legs apart. The man, who was probably an itinerant traditional circumciser from the blacksmith clan, picked up a pair of scissors. With the other hand, he caught hold of the place between my legs and started tweaking it, like Grandma milking a goat ... Then the scissors went down between my legs and the man cut off my inner labia and clitoris. I heard it, like a butcher snipping the fat off a piece of meat. A piercing pain shot up between my legs, indescribable and I howled. Then came the sewing: the long, blunt needle clumsily pushed into my bleeding outer labia, my loud and anguished protests, Grandma's words of comfort and encouragement. (32)

It was her sister, Haweya who suffered more because the women who held Hirsi Ali and Mahad were exhausted after the fights causing bad cuts on Haweya's thighs. Haweya who was cheerful and playful was never the same afterward. She became ill with a fever for several weeks and lost a lot of weight. She struggled to be alone, had horrible nightmares and stared vacantly at nothing for hours.

Hirsi Ali's Dutch friend, Ellen points out the absurdity involved in genital mutilation. When Hirsi Ali pointed out that it was done to keep girls pure, Ellen asks, "Pure form what? ... But you believe God created you, don't you? ... So the way God made us is the way God wants us to be. Why shouldn't we stay like that? Why does your culture feel we should improve on God's work? Isn't that blasphemy?" (216-7).

African women underwent several tortures to become wives and mothers. Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* and Ngugi WaThiong'o in *The River Between* have dealt with this theme. Female circumcision was regarded as a ritual purification which preceded the birth of the child. Celebrations were conducted on the occasion of circumcision. Women submit themselves and it is based on the deep-rooted belief that it is necessary to their womanhood. In *The Twice Colonized: Women in African Literature*, Roopali Sircar refers to Jomo Kenyatta's defence of clitoridectomy. Kenyatta in *Facing Mount Kenya* describes it as mere bodily mutilation which is at the heart of tribal law, religion and morality and the destruction of which would destroy a whole culture. He does not recognize clitoridectomy as a way of rendering women sexually subordinate.

Hirsi Ali highlights the role of silence in breeding injustice. She says, "However some things must be said, and there are times when silence becomes an accomplice to injustice" (xx). One of the factors which Hirsi Ali finds as the root cause of women's misery is their passivity. Women who thought themselves to be religious refused to act. They believed that one should accept fate rather than struggle to change it. Hirsi Ali narrates the case of a malnourished baby whom she met at the Kenyan border. Rather than attempting to save the baby, its mother informed Hirsi Ali, "Allah has given me this child, and if He wills it, Allah will take him away" (154). "She felt that she was being tested by Allah; she had to accept that the child would die if Allah wanted it to be that way. To show bitterness, or despair, would be to fail the test of faith. In fact, everybody seemed to be patiently waiting for this baby to die

in her lap” (154). But Hirsi Ali took the child to Nairobi hospital where the nurse declared, “The child will live” (160).

Another instance that Hirsi Ali highlights is the case of a Turkish woman who was beaten almost every night by her husband. The woman stayed near Hirsi Ali’s apartment. When Hirsi Ali informed the police they pointed out that they were helpless as the woman hadn’t filed a complaint. Hirsi Ali states that unlike her mother and other Somali women who pretended there were no problems, the Dutch women faced things. Hirsi Ali met the Dutch woman, Johanna who taught her to face problems clearly. She was fascinated by the Dutch ways. She states, “All my life I had watched my mother veer off and pretend problems weren’t there, hoping Allah would just make them disappear on their own. But Johanna faced things. She said what she wanted; she was clear and direct instead of avoiding issues that were difficult” (218-219).

Hirsi Ali noticed that in the awful places where she visited as a translator like the police station, the prison, the abortion clinics, penal courts, the unemployment offices and the shelters for battered women the number of black migrant Muslim women were comparatively higher. In women’s shelters she visited, there were more women from Muslim countries like Morocco, Turkey, and Afghanistan along with some Hindu women from Surinam. But there were hardly any white women. The family and community of Dutch women supported them when they were abused by their husbands. It was almost impossible to rescue the Muslim woman who believed, “Allah gave me these circumstances and, if I am patient, Allah will remove this misery” (244). They believed that they were serving Allah and earning a place in Heaven while being mercilessly abused. Women who were abused always returned to their husbands believing that if you refuse your husband and he rapes you that is your fault (244). Hirsi Ali examines the rights of Dutch women which Muslim women are deprived of. “Most women in Holland could walk the streets on their own, wear more or less what they liked,

work and enjoy their own salaries, and choose the man they wished to marry. They could attend a university, travel, purchase property. And most Muslim women in Holland simply couldn't" (279).

The inability to produce a male progeny has deep psychological reverberations in a patriarchal society. Aversion for girl child is another factor that stands in the way of self-realization. The birth of girls was not a matter of joy. Hirsi Ali's grandmother, Ibaado gave birth to twin girls – Asha and Halimo alone under a tree. When she returned home leading her goats and sheep and her newborn twins, nobody was impressed by the exploit because "she was only bringing home two more girls" (8). She says that it was Mahad who was preferred in their house. He accompanied mother or grandmother when they went out and both Hirsi Ali and Haweya were not allowed to go out. Mahad did not want his friends to know that he played with his sisters. "Mahad was increasingly conscious of his honor as a male. Grandma encouraged him. She used to tell him he was the man of the house. Mahad never asked permission to leave the house" (26-27). In Saudi young boys were in charge of the household. They would turn off their mother's TV program and order their older sisters off their chair.

The psychological traumas drain woman of her personality and will. The leading Islamic feminist, Nawal El Saadawi elaborates in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, regarding the 'Sexual Aggression Against the Female Child' that the first aggression experienced by the female child in society is the feeling that people do not welcome her coming into the world. Brought into a world in which their 'presence is not celebrated, the female child becomes immediately subordinate, often neglected. This subordination continues to manifest itself more fully in infancy. The child is made to believe that her sexual organs are something to fear and should be treated with caution, especially the part that much later in life she begins to know as the hymen. This loss of self, Saadawi argues has transformed the female child into "... a slow process of annihilation ... of her personality and mind ... A girl who has lost her

personality, her capacity to think independently and to use her own mind, will do what others have told her and will become a toy in their hands and a victim of their decisions". Thus the loss of self, will and independent thought prepare a female child to a life of subordination.

Women were not regarded as equal to man, but as useful commodities. When Hirsi Ali and Haweya told their father that they did not want to be girls, he quoted the Qur'an:

Paradise is at the feet of your mother!" But when the children looked at them, "mother's bare feet were cracked from washing the floor every day, and Abeh's were clad in expensive Italian leather shoes. We burst out laughing every time because in every sense of the word, Paradise was not at her feet but at his. He was important, he was saving Somalia, he had lovely clothes, and he went outside when he wanted to. And we, and she, were not allowed to do as we wished. (50)

As Hirsi Ali and Haweya were girls, a sense of responsibility was drilled into them. They were beaten for refusing to do household works. Haweya who was immune to pain was beaten more. But her stance was "Just refuse". Hirsi Ali who did the housework got low marks than Mahad and Haweya and was regarded as retarded. Mahad's authority in the household was encouraged.

Her story has a positive impact on others in similar position as it indicates how she has reached the other side after enormous toil and suffering. There are stark descriptions of evil husbands who do not regard their wives as individuals and as equal partners. The lives of women were difficult. They had to be covered, be obedient, and accept everything without arguing. Her suggestions are valuable and her arguments are persuasive as she speaks from her own experiences. Hirsi Ali founded the AHA Foundation in the U.S., a non-profit humanitarian organization to protect girls and women from the customs and practices that violate human rights. AHA fights genital mutilation, forced marriage, denial of education to girls, denial of free speech, honor violence and other such crimes.

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