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A Feminist-Postcolonial Analysis of Power and Ideology in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*

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Abstract

This paper will examine Ayaan Hirsi Ali's memoir, *Infidel* which illustrates her journey from a child growing up in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Throughout, the text, the author lives in a society where customs such as female genital mutilation, the wearing of *Hijab* and *Burqas* and the concept of *Baarri* are observed in terms of honour and the protection of women from being stigmatised as immoral, before her intellectual awakening in the Netherlands. She reveals how the Islamic religion gives men institutional power to construct laws that create an asymmetrical relationship between men and women which oppresses and dehumanises women. Based on a concept by Lewis and Mills (2003), concerning the Harem and the Veil, this study will adopt a feminist-postcolonial approach to the discussion of two key issues in the memoir: (i) power and control; (ii) substantial freedom. This study will propose that freedom is never free, whereas power is nothing but an act of negotiation in which women learn to achieve a certain degree of autonomy whilst in confinement.

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1. Introduction

From an early age, women learn to resign themselves to the fact that violence against them is part and parcel of their natural environment, as related practices has been woven into the fabric of society to such an extent that even battering, sex slavery and female genital mutilation are seen as legitimate (Larson, 2010). Therefore, the mind of a woman is crippled and chained by centuries-old customs and rituals such as Nazeen, a ten year old girl from Somalia exemplified in the present study. Nazeen was happy with the Raggedy-Anne doll her mother had bought for her on the way to a party. However, she was terrified when she found herself in a dark room full of women. It was not a party anymore. Within minutes an old woman spread her little legs and removed part of her clitoris with an old razor blade. It was the season of female genital mutilation in Kurdistan. Nazeen bled heavily and was deluged with excruciating pain and trauma. The pain has since faded but the scars remained. Nazeen was a victim of a deeply corrupted and primitive society in the midst of a cruel custom because she has no control over her body and was ruthlessly treated like an animal.

Over the years, gender apartheid is sustained and justified via traditional cultural beliefs reinforced by patriarchal-religious institutions. A woman is therefore a ‘nobody’ and not a ‘somebody’ in society. As a result, women are held back from being equal members of society (Millet, 1990). The wretched life of genital cutting, wearing of Burqas and Hijab and the concept of *Baarri* in the Muslim world are all governed by customs that satisfy men in the name of Allah. *Infidel*, a memoir narrated by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, embodies the brutality of such neurotic generational tradition in Somalia and Arab Saudi. Ayaan recounts the drastic changes that characterised her in life. Growing up in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya, Ayaan was a devout believer of Islam who soon realised the evolution of her beliefs, which in the end led to her intellectual awakening and activism in the Netherlands against gender inequality. In her memoir, Ayaan describes the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Quran (Holy Book), the Hadith (Sayings of Muhammad) and Syariah law as factors contributing to unequal and unjust treatments of women in Islamic society. She graphically describes a society that tyrannises and brutalise women in order to protect them from being stigmatised as immoral and impure. Ayaan’s awakening to a society that sacralises violence led to her battle against sexual exploitation and oppression of women to ensure that women are sexually liberated from patriarchy. Hence, this study adopts the concept of the Harem and the Veil to discuss two key issues in the memoir: (i) power and control; (ii) substantial freedom. Using this approach this study will propose that freedom is never free, whereas power is nothing but an act of negotiation in which women learn to achieve a certain degree of autonomy whilst in confinement.

2. Methodology

In this paper, we have conducted a close reading of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Infidel*, an acclaimed autobiographical writing of a journey taken by one courageous woman as well as her unending battle against corrupted societal beliefs. The memoir revolves around Ayaan who is born into a traditional Muslim family in Somalia. She is disconnected from her own body and soul after the act of female circumcision was forced on her by her own mother and grandmother at the age of ten. This memoir explores how patriarchy reinforces matriarchy via religion and how matriarchy reinforces patriarchy to the extent of restricting women’s freedom and ripping off their individuality.

This present study aims to show how patriarchy is fabricated through the process of socialisation which begins in society thus restricting women’s freedom in such a way that they have no control over their mind, will and intellect. Apart from conducting a close-reading of the selected memoir, we are also employing Lewis and Mills (2003) Feminist-Postcolonial concept concerning the Harem and the Veil to reveal that the erroneous conclusions by the Western world regarding “uncontrolled male sexuality, repression of Eastern women through segregation and polygamous culture” (Huddleston, 2012, p.1) is indeed true to the extent of restricting women from enjoying freedom which proves that freedom for women is nothing but an illusion of the mind, whereas power is nothing but an act of negotiation in which women learn to achieve a certain degree of autonomy whilst in confinement.

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