



# The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam

By Ayaan Hirsi Ali

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Muslims who explore sources of morality other than Islam are threatened with death, and Muslim women who escape the virgins' cage are branded whores. So asserts Ayaan Hirsi Ali's profound meditation on Islam and the role of women, the rights of the individual, the roots of fanaticism, and Western policies toward Islamic countries and immigrant communities. Hard-hitting, outspoken, and controversial, *The Caged Virgin* is a call to arms for the emancipation of women from a brutal religious and cultural oppression and from an outdated cult of virginity. It is a defiant call for clear thinking and for an Islamic Enlightenment. But it is also the courageous story of how Hirsi Ali herself fought back against everyone who tried to force her to submit to a traditional Muslim woman's life and how she became a voice of reform.

Born in Somalia and raised Muslim, but outraged by her religion's hostility toward women, Hirsi Ali escaped an arranged marriage to a distant relative and fled to the Netherlands. There, she learned Dutch, worked as an interpreter in abortion clinics and shelters for battered women, earned a college degree, and started a career in politics as a Dutch parliamentarian. In November 2004, the violent murder on an Amsterdam street of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, with whom Hirsi Ali had written a film about women and Islam called *Submission*, changed her life. Threatened by the same group that slew van Gogh, Hirsi Ali now has round-the-clock protection, but has not allowed these circumstances to compromise her fierce criticism of the treatment of Muslim women, of Islamic governments' attempts to silence any questioning of their traditions, and of Western governments' blind tolerance of practices such as genital mutilation and forced marriages of female minors occurring in their countries.

Hirsi Ali relates her experiences as a Muslim woman so that oppressed Muslim women can take heart and seek their own liberation. Drawing on her love of reason and the Enlightenment philosophers on whose principles democracy was founded, she presents her firsthand knowledge of the Islamic worldview and advises Westerners how best to address the great divide that currently exists between the West and Islamic nations and between Muslim immigrants and their adopted countries.

An international bestseller -- with updated information for American readers and two new essays added for this edition -- *The Caged Virgin* is a compelling, courageous, eye-opening work.

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### Editorial Review

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Well-known feminist Ali was named as the next target of outraged Muslims in a letter pinned with a knife to the chest of slain Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, murdered in 2004. Ali was the screenwriter on Van Gogh's film *Submission*, which questions the individual's relationship with God through the eyes of five Muslim women. In this book, which includes the text of *Submission* and new essays, Ali criticizes Western nations for deliberately overlooking aspects of Muslim culture that oppress women. In their struggle to integrate ideals of individualism with respect for other cultures, the West leaves Muslim women at the mercy of a "culture of virginity" that oppresses women and threatens their liberty and their lives. Ali details abuses, from genital mutilation to arranged marriages of young girls to domestic violence, suffered by female Muslims. Ali, originally from Somalia and a member of the Dutch Parliament, challenges Western culture and Islam to honestly confront issues of religion and individual freedom in this compelling look at Islam and gender politics. *Vanessa Bush*

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#### About the Author

**Ayaan Hirsi Ali** was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, was raised Muslim, and spent her childhood and young adulthood in Africa and Saudi Arabia. In 1992, Hirsi Ali came to the Netherlands as a refugee. She earned her college degree in political science and worked for the Dutch Labor party. She denounced Islam after the September 11 terrorist attacks and now serves as a Dutch parliamentarian, fighting for the rights of Muslim women in Europe, the enlightenment of Islam, and security in the West.

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## Preface

### Breaking Through the Islamic Curtain

The attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, prompted the West to launch a massive appeal to Muslims around the world to reflect on their religion and culture. American President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and numerous other leaders in the West asked Muslim organizations in their countries to distance themselves from Islam as preached by these nineteen terrorists. This plea was met with indignation from Muslims who thought it was inappropriate to hold them responsible for the criminal conduct of nineteen young men. Yet the fact that the people who committed the attacks on September 11 were Muslims, and the fact that before this date Muslims in many parts of the world were already harboring feelings of immense resentment toward the United States in particular, have urged me to investigate whether the roots of evil can be traced to the faith I grew up with: was the aggression, the hatred inherent in Islam itself?

My parents brought me up to be a Muslim -- a good Muslim. Islam dominated the lives of our family and relations down to the smallest detail. It was our ideology, our political conviction, our moral standard, our law, and our identity. We were first and foremost Muslim and only then Somali. Muslims, as we were taught the meaning of the name, are people who submit themselves to Allah's will, which is found in the Koran and the Hadith, a collection of sayings ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad. I was taught that Islam sets us apart from the rest of the world, the world of non-Muslims. We Muslims are chosen by God. They, the others, the

*kaffirs*, the unbelievers, are antisocial, impure, barbaric, not circumcised, immoral, unscrupulous, and above all, obscene; they have no respect for women; their girls and women are whores; many of the men are homosexual; men and women have sex without being married. The unfaithful are cursed, and God will punish them most atrociously in the hereafter.

When my sister and I were small, we would occasionally make remarks about nice people who were not Muslim, but my mother and grandmother would always say, "No, they are not good people. They know about the Koran and the Prophet and Allah, and yet they haven't come to see that the only thing a person can be is Muslim. They are blind. If they were such nice and good people, they would have become Muslims and then Allah would protect them against evil. But it is up to them. If they become Muslims, they will go to paradise."

There are also Christians and Jews who raise their children in the belief that they are God's chosen people, but among Muslims the feeling that God has granted them special salvation goes further.

About twelve years ago, at age twenty-two, I arrived in Western Europe, on the run from an arranged marriage. I soon learned that God and His truth had been humanized here. For Muslims life on earth is merely a transitory stage before the hereafter; but here people are also allowed to invest in their lives as mortals. What is more, hell seems no longer to exist, and God is a god of love rather than a cruel ruler who metes out punishments. I began to take a more critical look at my faith and discovered three important elements of Islam that had not particularly struck me before.

The first of these is that a Muslim's relationship with his God is one of fear. A Muslim's conception of God is absolute. Our God demands total submission. He rewards you if you follow His rules meticulously. He punishes you cruelly if you break His rules, both on earth, with illness and natural disasters, and in the hereafter, with hellfire.

The second element is that Islam knows only one moral source: the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad is infallible. You would almost believe he is himself a god, but the Koran says explicitly that Muhammad is a human being; he is a supreme human being, though, the most perfect human being. We must live our lives according to his example. What is written in the Koran is what God said as it was heard by Muhammad. The thousands of *hadiths* -- accounts of what Muhammad said and did, and the advice he gave, which survives in weighty books -- tell us exactly how a Muslim was supposed to live in the seventh century. Devout Muslims consult these works daily to answer questions about life in the twenty-first century.

The third element is that Islam is strongly dominated by a sexual morality derived from tribal Arab values dating from the time the Prophet received his instructions from Allah, a culture in which women were the property of their fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, or guardians. The essence of a woman is reduced to her hymen. Her veil functions as a constant reminder to the outside world of this stifling morality that makes Muslim men the owners of women and obliges them to prevent their mothers, sisters, aunts, sisters-in-law, cousins, nieces, and wives from having sexual contact. And we are not just talking about cohabitation. It is an offense if a woman glances in the direction of a man, brushes past his arm, or shakes his hand. A man's reputation and honor depend entirely on the respectable, obedient behavior of the female members of his family.

These three elements explain largely why Muslim nations are lagging behind the West and, more recently, also lagging behind Asia. In order to break through the mental bars of this trinity, behind which the majority of Muslims are restrained, we must begin with a critical self-examination. But any Muslim who asks critical questions about Islam is immediately branded a "deserter." A Muslim who advocates the exploration of sources for morality, in addition to those of the Prophet Muhammad, will be threatened with death, and a

woman who withdraws from the virgins' cage is branded a whore.

Through my personal experiences, through reading a great deal and speaking to others, I have come to realize that the existence of Allah, of angels, demons, and a life after death, is at the very least disputable. If Allah exists at all, we must not regard His word as absolute, but challenge it. I once wrote about my doubts regarding my faith in the hope of starting a discussion. I was immediately confronted by zealous Muslims, men and women who wanted to have me excommunicated. They even went so far as to say that I deserved to die because I had dared to call into question the absolute truth of Allah's word. They took me to court to prevent me from criticizing the faith I had been born into, from asking questions about the regulations and gods that Allah's messenger has imposed upon us. An Islamic fundamentalist murdered Theo van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker who helped me make *Submission: Part I*, a film about the relationship between the individual and God, *in particular about the individual woman and God*. And he threatened to kill me, too, a threat that others have also pledged to fulfill.

Like other thinking people, I like to tap into sources of wisdom, morality, and imagination other than religious texts -- other books besides the Koran and accounts of the Prophet -- and I would like other Muslims to tap into them, too. Just because Spinoza, Voltaire, John Stuart Mill, Kant, or Bertrand Russell are not Islamic and have no Islamic counterparts does not mean that Muslims should steer clear of these and other Western philosophers. Yet, at present, reading works by Western thinkers is regarded as disrespectful to the Prophet and Allah's message. This is a serious misconception. Why should it not be permitted to abide by all the good things Muhammad has urged us to do (such as his advice to be charitable toward the poor and orphans), while at the same time adding to our lives and outlook the ideas of other moral philosophers? After all, the fact that the Wright brothers were not Islamic has not stopped Muslims from traveling by air. By adopting the technical inventions of the West without its courage to think independently, we perpetuate the mental stagnation in Islamic culture, passing it on from one generation to the next.

The most important explanation for the mental and material backlog we Muslims find ourselves in should probably be sought in the sexual morality that we are force-fed from birth (see chapter 3, "The Virgins' Cage"). I would like to invite all people like me who had an Islamic upbringing to compare and contrast J. S. Mill's essay "On the Subjection of Women" (1869) with what the Prophet Muhammad has to say on the subject of women. Both were undeniably interested in the role of women, but there is a vast difference between Muhammad and Mill. For instance, Mill considered his beloved wife an intellectual equal; Muhammad was a polygamist and wrote that men have authority over women because God made one superior to the other. Mill, a model of calm reason in the face of contentious issues, argued that if freedom is good for men, it is good for women, a position that today most of the modern world considers unassailable.

Yet any investigation into the Islamic trinity by a Muslim is thought to be an act of complete betrayal of the religion and the Prophet. It is extremely painful for a believer to try to question. And it is extremely painful for a believer to hear that other Muslims are questioning the Islamic trinity. Muslim's strong emotions and condemnations of people who do question the trinity impress outsiders, myself included, especially when they are expressed on a massive scale by entire communities and even nations, as has happened in Egypt, Iran, and Indonesia.

Think, for instance, of the murder of Theo van Gogh on the streets of Amsterdam, a Western city in a Western democracy, for exercising his free-speech rights to look critically at Islam in *Submission: Part I*, the film he and I made. While you may have heard of the death threats that have been made also against me for this film, you may not know that when I initially spoke on the immoral practices of the Prophet Muhammad, more than one hundred fifty complaints were made against me to the police and the gover...

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