

FINAL ANALYSIS

Ayaan Hirsi Ali on freedom

AYAAN HIRSI ALI may be the world's preeminent Muslim anti-Islamist. Born into a strict Muslim tribe in Somalia, she fled to the Netherlands to avoid an arranged marriage and was eventually elected to parliament. After she made a film condemning Islamic radicalism, her coproducer Theo Van Gogh was murdered—and the killer warned Ali she was next. She now lives in hiding, but remains a major critic of radical Islam.

How did your traumatic early experiences affect how you look at the world?

I had no idea they were traumatic. All the girls around me were circumcised. We were all beaten. Arranged forced marriage is the Somali tribal culture and tradition. I knew no better.

How does it feel to have so much more freedom now?

In a way, it's easier if you're just told what to do. This is why Muslim women send me letters saying life in America or Europe is more difficult than when they were with their families.

How does it feel to live in hiding?

For people from a clan society, survival as a way of life comes naturally. I've learned to suppress my emotions.

You went from a Muslim to an anti-Islamist.

It was thrilling and frightening. It also came at a high cost. I wouldn't change anything, except the death of Theo.

Do you have survivor's guilt about his murder?

Yeah. Every time I think about it. We all knew it was tense and there was an abstract threat. We just didn't know exactly what it was going to look like. I regret that we underestimated that.

Is it easier to bear now that several years have elapsed?

It just won't go away. It affects everything I do.

How have you changed?

I've become more patient. I've become more accepting that some things just won't change. That's not because people are Muslims but because people are human beings.

What surprises people most about you?

People say, "You are very different from the fire-spewing feminist we expected." They describe me as soft-spoken and hesitant.

What does it feel like to be hated?

That's awful. In a way that's even worse than the death threats. Some people just hate me because someone has told them I say about the Prophet this and about the Quran that. The man who killed Theo van Gogh did not know him, had never interacted with him, and never met him.

What would you say to young women?

In the West the law is such that you can't be forced into marriage. At least it's your own freedom. When you do good things, you feel proud and grateful. And when you make mistakes, you have the dignity of learning from those mistakes yourself.

—Jay Dixit



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