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Author(s): Therese I. Bjørnaas

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Book Reviews

Nomad: From Islam to America: A Personal Journey through the Clash of Civilizations

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

New York: Atria Paperbacks, 2013. 320 pages.

ISBN-13: 978-1439157329

\$12.00

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Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali-born politician, writer, and activist, and American citizen known for her strident criticism of Islam and her advocacy for women's rights. In her memoir *Nomad*, published in 2010, she attempts to alert the Western world to the dangers of Islam by appealing to her own experience as one of its victims.

Nomad describes Ali's escape from the oppressive Muslim environment into which she was born and her gradual migration to the liberated West. It includes detailed accounts of horrific physical and mental abuses inflicted upon her by her family in the name of Allah, her escape from an arranged marriage, her political career and controversial expulsion from Holland, and her continuing stand against an Islam that could sanction the murder of innocents after 9/11. Those personal experiences of abuse in the name of Islam by her parents served as "evidence" for how horrific Islam is.

Ali describes her arrival in the United States as a clean break from her religious upbringing, and as a first taste of genuine freedom in a world where Western women are not confined by patriarchy to the private sphere, encouraged to get an education, allowed to support themselves by working, to wear the clothes they want to wear—where women, in short, have about the same rights as men. Relying upon an Enlightenment rationalism, Ali entirely rejects the Islam she knew as a girl, and promotes instead a set of "universal" Western values that Muslims

must adopt if they want to eradicate social injustice. In the West she discovers a “reformed and partly secularized Christianity,” a religion she describes as “a useful ally in the battle against Islamic fanaticism,” one wherein “Christianity of love and tolerance remain one of the west’s most powerful antidotes to the Islam of hate and intolerance” (xxiv). She does not elaborate what she means precisely by “reformed,” nor does she address the possibility that moderate or even progressive Islam may be as useful, if not better, an ally for countering Islamic fanaticism.

Representing herself as an insider who has experienced the appalling effects of Islam first-hand, Ali speaks for her fellow Muslim women who have grown up in a patriarchal culture that values them primarily for their virginity. She writes, “Growing up, I was taught that it is more important to remain a virgin than it is to stay alive;” “women are the breeders of men, and women’s honor lies in their purity, submission and their obedience” (153). Personal confinement to the private sphere is “common everywhere that there are Muslims,” she says, and is based on Quranic passages which declare that “a husband may confine his wife within the home, even until she dies there” (163). She warns her Western audience not to be naïve in their assessment of Muslim immigrants and their anti-Western agenda.

Ali also attacks what she describes as a naïve Western multiculturalism, for instance drawing attention to a “feminism of resentment” that exhibits an “almost neurotic fear of offending a minority groups’ culture,” and consequently fails to adequately critique patriarchal traditions within non-dominant cultures (229). Feminist ideology notwithstanding—or possibly even because of it—her memoir might be described as a neo-colonial critique, an essentializing of all Muslims in an effort to accentuate the superiority of the West over and against “Islam.” Striving to provoke the Western reader into condemning the supposed injustices present in dominant forms of Islam, Ali’s book at times seems to perpetuate Islamophobia and racist stereotypes, as she calls the superiority of Western civilization “not simply my opinion but a reality I have experienced and

continue to appreciate everyday” (245).

Critically, she fails to make adequate distinctions between the views of the Islamic majority and the views of anti-Western fundamentalists. As one account of one woman's experience of Muslim patriarchy and Western liberation, Ali's *Nomad* is compelling. However, its episodic narrative is unconvincing as an ideological critique of an Islamic faith that represents the experiences of over a billion professing adherents. Pitting Islam against the West at every turn, Ali completely vilifies the faith she has rejected, but fails to give adequate weight to forms of Islam with which she is less familiar.

Nonetheless, *Nomad* may serve other useful purposes in an instructional setting. I would recommend this book for a course on Islam as an example of how dangerous it is when the West constructs its own image of Islam based on individual accounts and experiences that come from ex-Muslims. Additionally, this book might be a good source for critique in order for students to understand the intrinsic relationship between power and knowledge: whose stories are told and whose are left out.

Therese Ignacio Bjørnaas
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.

Therese Ignacio Bjørnaas is a doctoral candidate in systematic and philosophical theology at the Graduate Theological Union. A native of Norway, she serves on the steering committee of the GTU's Women's Studies in Religion. She recently obtained the Certificate in Islamic Studies from the GTU's Center for Islamic Studies.