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**Renunciation and Reinforcement: The Politics of Representation in
Hirsi Ali's Infidel**



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Abstract

This study seeks to examine renunciation of faith vis-a-vis reinforcement of Western secular ideals in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*, placing it in the broader discursive field of Muslim life writing in the post-9/11 era. Employing the theoretical lens of Re-Orientalism together with an integrated analytical framework comprising McKerrow's Critical Rhetoric and Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study analyzes how Hirsi Ali's memoir, besides its functioning as a narrative of personal liberation, serves as a discursive intervention in global socio-cultural debates on religion, gender and identity in the post-9/11 climate. While Hirsi Ali triumphs over patriarchal and religious restraints and reclaims agency as well as recognition, her narrative simultaneously proves a provocative polemical project. Through its stereotypical depiction of Islam and Muslims, the text becomes instrumental in reinforcing Western hegemonic discourses that portray Islam as inherently violent and oppressive. The study further highlights a paradox in the Muslim life writing, particularly female narratives, where authors, in the process of challenging religious orthodoxy, are prone to reinforce secularist Orientalist frameworks, thereby complicating the politics of representation in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Renunciation; Muslim memoirs Post-9/11; Re-Orientalism; Stereotyping; Politics of Representation; Secular Ideals.

Introduction

Hirsi Ali's memoir traces her journey from her birth in a politically eminent family in Somalia. Her childhood remained unstable due to her father's political imprisonment and frequent relocations to Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya. The experiences of these relocations opened her to varying and various interpretation of Islam, which she internalized along with patriarchal expectations, and the traumatic experience of genital mutilation. Her early affiliation with religion was staunch in nature, which gradually changed due to her observing of critical contradictions between religious precepts and lived experiences. While in her early twenties, she was forced by her family to marry a distant relative, which she avoided by fleeing during transit and, later, sought asylum in Netherland. This act of patriarchal oppression further trigged her discontent with Islam and eventual renunciation of faith. In Netherland, she pursued her education, got impressed by secular liberalism and gained political prominence by being elected as Member of Parliament. Se attracted public attention through her strong criticism of religion and advocacy of women's rights. Her renunciation of faith, combined with her collaboration with Theo van Gogh in making the film *Submission* intensified public controversy, which led to murder of van Gogh and threats to her own life. The memoir concludes with the episode of her resignation from Parliament and relocation to American, where she is engaged in championing secularism, free speech and advocating women's rights in Muslim societies. Hirsi Ali's act of apostasy and advocacy of personal liberation as well as women's rights exemplifies a tension between individual testimony and ideological polemic, inviting critical engagement of both admirers and critics.

Objectives of Study

To critically evaluate how Hirsi Ali's memoir negotiates the tension between her personal testimony and ideological polemic in the post-9/11 climate.

To analyze how her renunciation of faith functions both as an act of personal liberation and reinforcement of Western secular ideals

To examine how paratextual elements contribute to the memoir's polemical enterprise and the ways in which they may reproduce Orientalist frameworks

Literature Review

The catastrophic event of 9/11 spurred a vast publication of literature related to Islam and Muslim societies, reflecting diverse perspectives. While some of these works underscore Islam's core values of peace, tolerance and compassion, there are numerous other works that perpetuate negative stereotypes, depicting Muslims as inherently violent and associating their faith with jihad and terrorism (Alwuraafi, 2019). Reductive stereotyping of other cultures for the purpose of general understanding is neither a novel practice nor is it confined to any singly society. However, as Bayat (2015) cautions, "things become more serious when stereotypical imaginations get articulated by systematic, 'scientific', and authoritative apparatuses of knowledge production." According to Merskin (2004), stereotypes are "over-generalized" and "reductionist beliefs" that associate fixed traits to members of a group and treat these traits as permanent. Elaborating on three levels of Orientalism, Said (1978) argues that the third level of Orientalism encompasses construction of Oriental "Other", particularly the Muslim Middle East, within American political and media discourse through process of negative reductionism and misrepresentation. Lisa Lau in her 2009 article "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals," introduced the concept of Re-Orientalism, an expansion of Orientalism and a phenomenon where the onus of representation lies with the individuals of Oriental community. In the 21st century, the East is no longer merely spoken of by the West; it has begun to speak for itself (Lau & Dwivedi, 2014). However, there is a paradox in such representation, as while the East begins to speak for itself in the 21st century, such representation is not free of distortion. Lau opines to this effect, "this representation is not exempt from being partial and skewed, and, moreover, it is still Western-centric" (Lau & Dwivedi, 2014, p. 2). Lau further posits that Re-Orientalism is a "provocative concept" that addresses the re-emergence of Orientalism in various forms through the "practices and discourses" of the re-Orientalists in the context of "global late-capitalist system" (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 8). Reflecting on the relationship between East and West, Lau maintains that "West continues to visit the East as tourist" and well-positioned member of the East function as "tourist guides" to the Western visitors. The Asian writers exhibit a tendency to stereotype, simplify and exoticize their "home" societies in line with the Orientalists (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 6). Another pitfall in the presentation of these "tourist guides" is that, while writing about the differences between the Orient and the Occident, they often engage in voluntary self-othering. This tendency springs from their perception that "there is a demand for low quality, exotically flavoured fare", which prompts them to consciously engage in catering to this demand to and "provide an unsustaining diet which will leave the consumer ever hungry, ever insatiate" (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 3). Voluntary self-othering has significant ramification, most important of which is identity crises leading to formation of a colonized and hybrid

entity, a legacy of colonial discourse, which according to Bhabha (1994) is the “effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (p. 87).

After the tragic incident of 9/11, readership of Muslim narratives increased manifold. This trend can be associated with the growing interest of Western audience in understanding Islam and Muslim societies. “In the years since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, an appetite has emerged in global reading audiences for testimonial writing about life under the influence of Islamist political ideology” (O’Gorman, 2018, p. 142). This “appetite” resulted in a mushroom publication of Muslim memoirs, particularly those authored by female writers centering around themes, such as, patriarchal oppression, torture, captivity, forced marriages. Lawton (2014, pp. 10-11) argues that in recent years, many books with themes like, captivity, abuse, escape, and strikingly similar cover designs and marketing strategies has been published in Europe. Many of such works, including the controversial ones, gained global recognition where authors published follow-up works. These accounts deal with them like forced, honor killing, “crimes of honor”, describing the cutely and violence suffered by the narrators in their pursuits of a “Western” lifestyle.

Research Methodology

They study employs an integrated framework combining McKerrow’s Critical Rhetoric and Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze Hrisi Ali’s *Infidel*. Raymie McKerrow (1989) articulated the core principles of Critical Rhetoric in his essay, *Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis* (Communication Monographs, 56(2), 91–111). Critical Rhetoric focuses on analyzing how power structures are formed and maintained through language and discourse and other practices of communication. The principles of McKerrow’s Critical Rhetoric centre around two poles: the Critique of Domination and Critique of Freedom. Critique of Domination aims to expose how rhetorical strategies maintain systematic inequities naturalize dominant ideologies. On the other hand, the Critique of Freedom postulates that freedom is not absolute or an already existing state, but rather a performative, discursive achievement that must be continually contested and created within power structures. McKerrow’s Critical Rhetoric emphasizes that discourse is never neutral, it functions ideologically and continuously, creating and sustaining power relations. It highlights the performative dimension of discourse as to how language constructs social realities, naturalizes authority and marginalizes dissent. This notion is particularly valuable to analyze Hrisi Ali’s *Infidel* where personal testimony transforms into persuasive polemic, aimed at constructing an ethos and credibility while simultaneously reinforcing secularist ideals and interventionist policies.

As a complement to McKerrow’s Critical Rhetoric, Fairclough’s model positions discourse at three interrelated levels: textual analysis, which focuses on lexicon, grammar and rhetorical devices; discursive practice, which highlights how texts are produced, distributed and consumed; and social practice, which situates discourse in broader socio-cultural structures. Application of Fairclough insights to *Infidel*, reveals how the language of the memoir, its circulation in Western publishing industry and media in the context of post-9/11 socio-political climate amplify the narrative’s testimony and ideological intervention. Combined, McKerrow and Fairclough offer a pragmatic and comprehensive framework: while McKerrow foregrounds the

rhetorical strategies of Hrisi Ali's discourse, Fairclough methodically locates these strategies in the textual, discursive and social contexts. Together, the approaches enable a nuanced reading of *Infidel* both as a narrative of personal liberation and a discursive invention in global debates of gender, identity and religion.

Analysis and Discussion

Paratext and Praxis

Hirsi Ali's memoir begins with a significant paratextual framework that indicates its polemical dimension. Paratext, including such elements as titles, preface and chapter heading, are crucial in determining how a text is received. As Genette (1991) describes, elements of paratext position themselves in relation to text, facilitating how it is read and understood. In *Infidel*, the title along with foreword serve as rhetorical devices that signify memoir's direction, scope and ideological orientation. The title "Infidel" itself carries two contrasting connotations. In religious parlance, it denotes condemnation and exclusion referring to a person who rejects revealed guidance, while in the domain of secularist discourse, the same term is reappropriated as a symbol of defiance and intellectual liberation. Hirsi Ali's deliberate choice of this linguistic inversion speaks of his celebration of renouncing her faith and embracing secularists ideals. In this way, the title serves as a discursive praxis, preparing the readers to come across not simply a story of personal life but a narrative crafted around irreconcilable conflict and ideological resistance. In the same vein, the forward of *Infidel* written by Christopher Hitchens (2008), further extends the polemical horizons, critiquing the perceived backwardness of Muslim societies and attributing this stagnation to their religious beliefs. Affirming Hirsi Ali's argument, he notes that the "the cause of backwardness and misery in the Muslim world is not Western oppression but Islam itself: a faith that promulgates contempt for Enlightenment and secular values" (Hitchens, 2008. p. xiv).

From Fairclough's perspective, at the textual level the intentional lexical inversion of "infidel", reflects Hirsi Ali's appropriation of a term of religious condemnation into a secular insignia of honor. At the level of discursive practice, Hirsi Ali's confessional testimony is aimed at Western consumption and at the social practice level, the memoir is instrumental in fortifying the West-versus-Islam binary, attribute backwardness of Muslim societies to religion. McKerrow's critique of domination further illuminates how the paratextual framing predetermines the terms of debate, shaping the perceptions of the readers before the narrative itself unfolds.

Ruptured agency and the Politics of Subjectivity

Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* recounts her journey from a devout Muslim girl to a prominent secular scholar and outspoken critic of Islam. More than simply an account of her life, the memoir is deliberately constructed as a political project. Standing on the pedestal of apostasy, the memoir advocates a global argument against religious dogmatism. At the outset, she invokes the controversial film *Submission: Part I*, as an act of "defiance", depicting "Muslim women who shift from total submission to God to a dialogue with their deity... They tell Him honestly that if submission to Him brings them so much misery, and He remains silent, they may stop submitting" (Ali, 2008, p. xix). Foregrounding the memoir with his ideological framing, Hirsi Ali performs a dual gesture: orientating the Western readership to "another kind of world" while dedicating the work to "millions and millions of Muslim women who have had to

submit” which reflects personal testimony and representational politics. In doing so, Hirsi Ali assumes what Spivak critique as the role of “native informant”, whose representation “cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization” (Spivak, 1988, p. 90).

Weaponizing Personal Trauma as Global Indictment

Hirsi Ali underwent a traumatic experience of genital mutilation in her childhood, a practice particular to certain cultures. She admits that female genital mutilation (FGM) “predates Islam” and that “not all Muslims do this”, she highlights that “in Somalia... every girl is excised” and that the “practice is always justified in the name of Islam... Many girls die during or after excision, from infection. Then she describes the own harrowing ordeal, “[Grandma] caught hold of me and gripped my upper body... The man, who was probably an itinerant traditional circumciser... picked up a pair of scissors... caught hold of the place between my legs and started tweaking it... 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” (Ali, 2008, pp. 31-32). By vividly describing her personal traumatic experience as well as those of other women, in her memoir, Hirsi Ali portrays a bleak picture of misogynistic violence in Somalia and other Muslim-majority societies, which she explicitly attributes to Islam. The after-effects of such traumatic experience, according to Freud, “create conflicts in the ego which “split off” from the unity of the ego and are repressed”, only to return at later stages, often in dreams or other symptoms (Freud, 1959/1920, p. 8). Hirsi Ali experiences recurring memories of this horrible experience, which, later, proves one of the defining moments in her ideological transformation and rejection of Islam.

This narration, however, needs to be critically analyzed when placed in the broader discursive frameworks. Through the lens of Re-Orientalism, Hirsi Ali risks reinforcing Western stereotypes of Muslim societies as inherently oppressive, framing her personal trauma as emblematic of generalized cultural pathology. This propensity resonates with what Mohanty (1988, p. 67) critiques as the contours of Western feminist discourse, which constructs “third-world women” as powerless and homogenous group” and victims of particular socio-cultural system. Therefore, such framing of women as in case of Hirsi Ali, while based on lived experiences, inadvertently flatten the complex socio-political milieu of Muslim societies, thereby reducing them to reductive binaries.

McKerrow’s Critical Rhetoric provides another analytical dimension to the above discussion, exposing cultural and social mechanisms behind such rituals as FGM. Hirsi Ali’s depiction of FGM transforms her mutilated body into a site of resistance where ideological violence is revealed through corporeal details. On the other hand, the graphic narration of the process of FGM aligns with Fairclough’s insights on socio-cultural role of language and discourse, particularly in the backdrop of 9/11 where such narratives, though intended to expose patriarchal oppression, also reinforce dominant Western perceptions. Furthermore, by conflating cultural practices, like FGM, with religious precepts the memoir contributes to Islamophobic discourse in the wake of 9/11.

Renunciation as Political Move

Hirsi Ali conceptualizes Islam as a “mental cage”, implying that even after opening of the door the “caged bird stays inside: it is frightened. It has internalized its imprisonment. It takes time for bird to escape, even after someone has opened the doors to its cage” (Ali, 2008, pp. 285-286). The metaphor of “cage” illustrates the polemical thrust of Hirsi Ali’s project who models Islam as a confining and oppressive force. Her renunciation is, therefore, more than merely a private act of faith rejection; it is a calculated political move which enables her to gain global recognition. The memoir thus serves not merely as autobiography but as a manifesto of secular emancipation. From McKerrow’s perspective on discourse as having performative and driving influence, the imagery under discussion reinforces stereotypical notions of confinement and oppression, often associated with Islam and Muslim societies. In the light of Fairclough’s insights, the image of “frightened” bird, who has lost its capacity to escape despite opening of the doors, illustrates how power exerts influence not only through external coercion but also through internalization of repressive norms.

Conclusion

In the light of foregoing, Hirsi Ali’s *Infidel* establishes itself not merely as an act of reclaiming agency but as a critical intervention in global discourse on religion, gender and identity in the backdrop of 9/11. Through her description of the harrowing experience of genital mutilation, the metaphorical construction Islam as a “mental cage,” paratextual framing of the title and foreword, Hirsi Ali transforms personal testimony based on her individual experiences into a polemical project. From a Re-Orientalist perspective, she performs the role of a “native informant,” aligning her projection of Islam and her society, particularly the portrayal of Muslim women as “powerless, homogenous group and as victims of a singular socio-cultural system,” with the perceptions and expectations of Western readership. By negating and neglecting the contextual elements, she flattens the socio-political dynamics of Muslim societies, thereby reproducing Orientalist binaries. Ultimately, *Infidel* as a specimen of Muslim life writing in the post-9/11 climate invites critical engagement to see how insider-authored texts can both challenge and reproduce Orientalist assumptions shaped by internal and external socio-political dynamics.

Important Note:

This research paper is an adapted and expanded version of a chapter from my recently completed PhD thesis, yet to be defended at the University of Faisalabad. The chapter has been substantially revised and reframed to stand alone as a scholarly article for the readership of Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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