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Telling stories, creating (and saving) her life. An analysis of the autobiography of Ayaan Hirsi Ali[☆]

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SYNOPSIS

In this article the Dutch historian and biographer Mineke Bosch analyzes the autobiography of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who in 1992 was admitted to the Netherlands as a Somali refugee, and who in the wake of September 11, 2001 quickly rose to a prominent position at a national, and even international scale. Why did she publish an American ghostwritten autobiography at the age of 37? Was it a farewell document to the Netherlands – it was published first in a Dutch translation in October 2006 – or should we see the publication of *Mijn vrijheid* (My Freedom)/*Infidel* as a kind of credentials for the American nation? Bosch looks at Hirsi Ali's autobiography in the perspective of a long autobiographical tradition and strong feminist counter tradition with distinctive narrative lines, plots and counterplots, posing the question how Hirsi Ali presents her life. The reading reveals that the autobiography is indebted to the (male, archetypal and enlightenment) plot of individual accomplishment, as well as to a so-called "feminist orientalism".

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Romance without a happy ending

Half-way through Ayaan Hirsi Ali's story of her life, she describes a romantic episode in terms that might easily have been derived from the many novels and popular romances that she had devoured as a teenager. It begins with a visit to her mother's elder step-sister Khadidja in Mogadishu, Somalia, where the twenty-year-old Ayaan had been staying for a few months after completing her secretarial training course in Nairobi, Kenya. The step-aunt, who had engineered the marriage between Ayaan's mother and father many years

earlier, is well-off, and her dining-room is furnished with European antiques. When Ayaan collapses unceremoniously into a chair, overwhelmed by all the new impressions, her aunt scolds her for her bad manners in no uncertain terms. The text continues: "When she was finished, Khadidja commenced serving tea. I turned toward the door and was startled to see a young man standing in the doorway. He was strikingly good-looking, and he was grinning broadly at my predicament. Clearly he had witnessed the whole scene" (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 137).

Mahamud turns out to be a first cousin on her mother's side. "I politely gave Mahamud the news of my mother, trying hard to hold my gaze against the obviously sexual interest in his eyes. This man was looking at me as a woman, quite openly; it was almost carnivorous" (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 137). Ayaan had recently broken off her relationship with Abshir, a young imam of the Muslim Brotherhood, and on hearing this her aunt exclaims that she knows just the right man for Hirsi Ali – Mahamud. "When he smiled he seemed to be judging me in some very calculated way, from head to toe. I felt naked". A few days later, he arrives in his car to take Hirsi Ali and her sister Haweya out. Haweya had already told her about this handsome cousin, and was thoroughly enjoying the

[☆] Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography was simultaneously published in Dutch and German, in October 2006 (Hirsi Ali, 2006). The Dutch version, entitled *Mijn Vrijheid* [My Freedom] (Amsterdam: Augustus) was an authorized translation by Carla Benink, Els van de Pluijm and Janet van der Lee from the original American text, entitled *Infidel: My Life. The Story of My Enlightenment*, published in February 2007 (London: Free Press). Although Hirsi Ali at first had tried to write the autobiography herself, an American agent convinced her to have it ghostwritten by a woman, whose name has not been revealed. The Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, invited me to write a review essay probably in my capacity as the author of a biography of the icon of Dutch feminism Aletta Jacobs, and my critical work on gender and (auto)biography (resp. Bosch, 2005, 2006).

situation. Hirsi Ali writes: “Mahamud was utterly gorgeous, the malest man I'd ever seen, and I fell in love with him” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 138). But it is not exactly the *Valley of the Dolls*, nor a Barbara Cartland or Danielle Steele romance of which Hirsi Ali had consumed such a plentiful supply (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 69). The story is interrupted by explanatory passages written at a distance from the main narrative, from “another world”. For unlike Ayaan's previous boyfriends, Abshir and the Kenyan boy Kennedy, Mahamud makes no attempt to “make a sexual move”. Although “his loins were burning for mine [...] he never touched me. I was his cousin. Family honor was involved” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 138). And Hirsi Ali could not possibly make the first move, she explains. When Mahamud receives a grant to study in Russia, the aunt steps up her matchmaking efforts. There is no “big proposal scene”, but Hirsi Ali agrees to marry Mahamud, even though she knows rationally that the two are not compatible and that it is unwise to marry when her father and brother are not there to give their consent. A passage about clitoridectomy explains her decision: it is not only an excruciatingly painful intervention with lifelong consequences, but it also fails to achieve the intended effect: “I was simply consumed with lust for him. That's what it amounted to: a storm of hormones. I agreed to marry him just to be able to have sex” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 140).

It would have to be a clandestine wedding, since they could not wait to secure the approval of her father and brother. Against the official rules of the game of marriage, a mutual cousin gives consent on their behalf. Her doubts are assuaged by the assurance that it is in every way an acceptable union, “that no one can undo”. But the consummation of their passion proves a disaster. Since the marriage contract must first be registered officially, they are not given a document proving that they are man and wife. The most elegant hotel in Mogadishu, where Mahamud had wanted to take his young bride, refuses to give them a room. A second and a third hotel turn them away. And if the grimy surroundings in which they finally end up are not enough to quench her desire, the unedifying way in which Mahamud fumbles around and grinds away, and the pain he causes her, makes Hirsi Ali's disillusionment complete: “Jawahir, Sahra and all the other girls were right, I thought. Good girls are virgins who feel nothing at all” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 142).¹

Many different stories

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography, the original Dutch title of which translates as *My Freedom*, is a genuinely good read. Essentially we learn how an inquisitive, wild girl from a broken home in Somalia, in the African diaspora, develops into an elegantly-dressed, self-confident young Dutch woman with a clear political message who is currently making her grand debut on the world stage in the United States. But the power of the book lies in its mix of different plots and textual genres. It provides the appetizing and painful personal details that are native to confessional literature, anthropologically-flavored *couleur locale*, and a soap-like account of the family's ups and downs against the political background of cruel dictatorship and civil war. It shows an unknown, generous and affable side of the Netherlands, in which good-natured village police officers and volunteer workers at the Dutch Refugee Council patiently show bewildered asylum seekers the ropes. At the

same time Hirsi Ali, who served as an interpreter for other Somali refugees, conveys the atrocities experienced by these asylum seekers in their home country as well as in the Netherlands, where many immigrant women end up in shelters. These narratives are reminiscent of the nineteenth-century “Maiden Tribute” articles that opened the eyes of the Victorian bourgeoisie in England to the realities of sexually trafficked girls and women.

All these different stories enable Hirsi Ali to appear in a variety of roles: as a young girl playing hide-and-seek in the Great Mosque at Mecca, as a precocious teenager who bends but does not break under the unreasonable violence of her mother and grandmother, as a rebellious young woman who dates men in secret, as a devout Muslim woman who opts independently for a life governed by faith, as a Florence Nightingale among the refugees, as a successfully naturalized immigrant to the Netherlands, an eager student in Leiden, a committed interpreter and mediator, a woman seen as the possible savior of the Muslim community, and so on.

The “life” of Ayaan Hirsi Ali according to Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Ayaan Hirsi Ali had already discussed aspects of her life in many interviews, which may in turn have influenced her conception of it. The following brief synopsis summarizes the account (of what is traditionally conceived of as a “life”) given in her autobiography. She was born on November 13, 1969 in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, which (as is clear from the useful map included in the book) borders on Ethiopia and Kenya on one side, while on the other side only the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea separate it from the Arab peninsula. Her father, Hirsi Magan, was in prison when she was born, as a political opponent of the Communist dictator Siad Barre. Hirsi Ali grew up in a family consisting of her grandmother, her mother, Asha, who was the second wife of her father, a slightly older brother, Mahad, and a younger sister, Haweya. After her father's escape from prison, her mother tried to reunite the family in Saudi Arabia. But when Hirsi Magan finally turned up, far later than had been agreed, the seeds of mistrust had been sown and the parents grew apart. In 1979 the family was deported and spent a transitional period in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, amid Somali exiles whose resistance was bolstered by the Ethiopian government. In July 1980, Hirsi Magan moved the family, against his wife's will, to Nairobi, which had a large Somali community, and where Hirsi Ali would remain as a recognized refugee until 1992.

Her father eventually left her mother, who was becoming increasingly violent. Hirsi Ali endured frequent beatings from various sources, and at one point even ended up in hospital after a Koran teacher who taught her at home gave her a thrashing without the mother's knowledge. Hirsi Ali attended an English-language Muslim girls' school. Meanwhile she experimented with sex, drawing her inspiration from the popular romances she had read with her schoolmates. Other influences included her mild-mannered teacher, “sister Aziza”, and the radical Muslim brotherhood. In 1989 she supported the latter's protest against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. When her mother forbade both Hirsi Ali and her sister to take jobs after they had qualified as secretaries, and actually locked them up in the house, members of the local Somali community intervened. The two sisters traveled to

Mogadishu, where both obtained jobs at the United Nations after the mediation of an aunt. In this period Hirsi Ali turned down a number of marriage proposals. When civil war erupted in Somalia, the young women were forced to return to Kenya. It was a grueling journey, but their deprivations paled into insignificance compared to what Hirsi Ali witnessed a few months later, in refugee camps along the border with Kenya. Hirsi Ali went there to accompany a cousin who was trying to find his wife and children, and to act as his interpreter.

Around this time, her father, who had gone back to his first wife and was living in Nairobi, produced a serious candidate for Hirsi Ali's hand in marriage. The man was a wealthy Somali who lived in Canada. He was looking for an "unspoiled Somali bride" and the father liked the idea of having a strong connection with the West. Hirsi Ali did not want to marry the man, but could not refuse. She did not attend the formal marriage ceremony, and did not have to sleep with her new husband; that could wait until the festivities in Canada. She did get to know him a little better in the week before his departure, however. Because of the difficulties of obtaining a Canadian visa in Kenya, her father decided it would be better for Hirsi Ali to go to Germany and wait for the papers to be issued there. Once she arrived in Europe, she quickly learned her way around and fled to the Netherlands. She passed through the process of acquiring refugee status faster than the average, and happily seized the opportunity to work and improve her education. Having passed the obligatory Dutch language test, she studied social work for a year and then enrolled as a student at Leiden University. Within five years she had acquired a master's degree in political science, after which she secured a research post at the Wiardi Beckman Foundation, the research bureau attached to the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA). After 9/11 she became fully involved in the integration debate, voicing strong criticism of multiculturalism with its cultural relativist tolerance of Islamic practice in a western context. This debate had already taken on an air of urgency in the second half of the nineties when "new realists" began to attack established politics and practices of integration. Hirsi Ali especially focused on the oppression of Muslim women and the threat posed by the ever growing Muslim community to western values in respect of homosexuality and women's independence, even in marriage. Her star quickly rose. At the same time, she started receiving death threats.

In 2001, the leading politician and former transport minister Neelie Kroes, who became a Euro-commissioner in 2005, poached Hirsi Ali away from the Labor Party to stand for the 2002 parliamentary election as representative of the right-wing Liberal Party (VVD). The new member promptly gained about 35,000 preferential votes and became a member of parliament. Looking for a more imaginative means to spread her message even further, in 2004 she joined forces with the Dutch filmmaker and recalcitrant publicist Theo van Gogh. He helped her to make a short film, *Submission*, in which she displayed violence against women as a consequence of the laws set down in the Koran. With the permission of top members of the Liberal Party, and especially its leader and minister of finances, Gerrit Zalm, this film was shown on an up-scale television program *Zomergasten* (Summer guests), that is traditionally broadcast throughout August on Sunday evenings. The program stages a prominent

person who is asked to select his or her preferred movies, documentaries, news items or clips, and who is then interviewed for three hours about the selection. Muslims around the world found the film highly offensive. But it was Theo van Gogh, not Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was murdered because of it, on November 2, 2004, a fact that is given a prominent place in her autobiography in the form of an introduction that reads as a dedication.²

Because of the threats to her own life, Hirsi Ali disappeared from public life after van Gogh's assassination until January 18, 2005, spending most of the time under close guard in a bleak motel on the east coast of the United States. Her life remained fairly uneventful for a while until 11 May 2006, when she revealed in the VARA documentary *Zembla* that she had lied to the authorities on entering the Netherlands – prompting the immigration minister Rita Verdonk to strip her of her Dutch nationality (a decision later reversed under pressure from parliament).³ Though it was not Verdonk's actions that led Hirsi Ali to pack her bags and move to the United States, as she emphasizes in her autobiography, this episode did hasten her departure. An added factor was that in the same period, the Dutch courts granted a lawsuit brought by her neighbors, who had complained of the heightened risk posed by Hirsi Ali's presence in their surroundings. It was then that she accepted the offer of a job at the conservative think-tank the American Enterprise Institute.

Autobiography and truth

On September 29, 2006, Hirsi Ali presented the first copy of her autobiography (in Dutch) to Gerrit Zalm, whom she singles out as "stalwart throughout my candidacy and my political career" (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 300). In the weeks before and after this event, she appeared in several talk shows and gave a number of high-profile interviews. Glossies appeared with Ayaan Hirsi Ali on the cover posing as a fashion model.

One might well wonder why Hirsi Ali – at just 36 years of age – chose this moment to publish an autobiography. Was the event intended to mark her departure from the Netherlands? Or did it perhaps have more to do with her new journey to the United States, where she would have to hand over her identity papers and credentials? If the latter is the case, the book can be read as a full-blown "celebrity autobiography", dozens of which are published every day in the United States as by-products of the cult of celebrity, through which so many athletes, movie stars and politicians cash in on their often brief moment of fame. Like Hirsi Ali's book, these life stories are written by experienced ghostwriters, and it is not uncommon for the protagonist to confess that he or she has not actually read the text. It should be emphasized that Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book was not written by herself. According to her Dutch editor she tried to write it herself, but when that effort failed an American agent suggested that she should have it done by an experienced ghostwriter. In the *Zembla* documentary mentioned earlier one can even see Hirsi Ali lying on a couch, giving answers to questions posed to her by the ghostwriter (who is not shown) about her grandmother.

However, to suggest that "cash" was Hirsi Ali's main reason for publishing the book is too facile and too cynical for my taste. I would rather accept her own explanation: "I came

to realize that my story is significant and that perhaps it is important for me to tell it. I want to clarify a few things and set a few things straight, and I want to give a picture of the other world of my childhood and [to show] what really happens there". What these "few things" actually are never becomes entirely clear, but for someone interested in putting things straight, autobiography is the perfect genre: it is pre-eminently a genre suggestive of veracity. Someone who writes an autobiography undertakes to tell the truth in all its diverse forms, from vulnerable personal detail to public persona. Or as Hirsi Ali modestly remarks: "It is a subjective record of my own personal memories, as close to accurate as I can make them. (...) It is the story of what I have experienced, what I've seen, and why I think the way I do". (Hirsi Ali, 2007, xii)

The emphasis on telling the truth and recording reality as she experienced it acquires an added dimension in light of the 'enlightened person' she has grown to be. The crystallization of Hirsi Ali's individuality – which is somehow presented as the final goal of her life story – stems from the mission that she undertook after 9/11, which involved total dedication to the truth, rejecting the hypocrisy she believed had begun to compromise her faith, breaking with taboos and increasing the public's awareness of the way Islam was affecting Dutch society. She was introduced to the Enlightenment during her studies at Leiden – "Holland's oldest [and in the Dutch edition also "best"] university", which she further applauds as the place where "the Enlightenment had taken hold" and "where this commitment to freedom took hold of me, too". In her description Leiden is also inextricably linked to rationality and an empirical approach to truth. "Most of those courses in Leiden stressed the empirical. Just the facts: the facts themselves are a beautiful idea", she declares in obvious delight. "They were about method and reason. There was no place here for emotions and irrationality" (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 240).⁴

Autobiographical scripts and plots

It is precisely this pledge to tell the truth, that has made autobiography "the most popular form of fiction" among present-day readers (Conway, 1998, p. 3). The genre has followed in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century novels that could carry their readers away with their illusion of reality. The spell once cast by the novel has been broken for today's educated readers, and the autobiography has taken its place: it gives readers the illusion that they are looking over someone else's shoulders and vicariously undergoing the narrator's experiences.

But however much we may want to present the truth and nothing but the truth, reality can only be known in and through the stories we tell. Even our own experiences are mediated by text. Moreover, the autobiographer will always have to create order, to forge coherence in disparate events, feelings and desires. Neither the *bios* or "life" of the first-person narrator nor the *autos* or "self" are fixed beforehand; that is why James Olney, an authority on the genre, calls autobiographies "metaphors of the self":

[I]t is through that act [of writing, MB] that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a

certain form, assume a particular shape and image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors. But at this point, [...] the text takes on a life of its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing to do with an authorizing author. The self then, is a fiction, and so is the life, and behind the text of an autobiography lies the text of an "autobiography": all that is left are characters on a page, and they too can be "deconstructed" to demonstrate the shadowiness of even their existence (Olney, 1980, p. 22).

Moreover, there is nothing random about the order that is created by the process of writing, as has been shown by numerous publications on this genre over the past few decades, in both cultural history and literary studies. The book *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography* by the American scholar Jill Ker Conway, mentioned above, is a good example. Conway uses the concept of 'autobiographical scripts' for the ways in which people order their life experience, as plots inscribed in culture. These scripts differ according to the time and context in which they are written, and gender too proves to be significant, in her analysis, for the way a life history is shaped.

The archetypal script for the autobiography is the ancient Greek epic in which the hero is put to the test again and again during a long odyssey, but eventually ends up in his rightful place, through his own actions and perseverance – and with a little help from the gods. This story makes itself felt in a variety of successive yet co-existing autobiographical plots such as that of the Augustinian hero (after Augustine's *Confessions*) who overcomes inner obstacles to reach conversion, the Rousseau-an secular hero (after Rousseau's *Confessions*) who flouts the constraints of convention and instead follows his natural intuition and emotions to achieve his personal goal, or the Napoleonic hero who serves Western progress in all sorts of ways. There is often some kind of "conversion" or new insight that creates a break between a "before" and "after" in the story. And the protagonists have a strong sense of self related to achievements in the public world. The emphasis on secular self-realization and individuality that acquired a fresh impulse in the Enlightenment has led many to see autobiography as a typically male fiction.

In contrast with this "egoistic" script a different underlying plot turns out to apply for women in general – that of the mystic who relates her mystical experiences, which revolve around the "insignificance of the will" and her relationship to a powerful Other (God).⁵ This plot also makes itself felt in secular women's tales, which are influenced, furthermore, by bourgeois preoccupations with romantic love, marriage, family life and property. Women's autobiographies do not so much record a painful conversion history, but often relate "sudden illuminations". And different though they all are, they tend to "record and dramatize self-realization and self-transcendence through the recognition of another" (Mason, 1980, p. 235).

The emphasis on what could be called effortless self development even applies to the "plots" in the autobiographies of famous nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminists, even if they mingle often with the dominant (male) script of Western progress and active self-realization. Jane Addams, for

instance, the founder of Hull House, a settlement house in a large immigrant neighborhood in Chicago, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933, suggests in her autobiography that she no longer recalls exactly how the plan for Hull House came about (Conway, 1998, p. 105–108). She even manages to create the impression that she never really had to work to achieve it, although her archives reveal that she toiled away at it day and night. And although the Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs, a contemporary and friend of Jane Addams, bases her own *Memories (Herinneringen)* largely on the secular heroic epic, her autobiography too is suggestive of a certain passivity.⁶ For instance, about her admission to university as the first woman in the Netherlands, she writes: “Despite the fact that the opposite is suggested by various articles about me, I will now set the record straight by stating that when I went to (the university in) Groningen I had no idea of the consequences of what I was doing” (Jacobs, 1996 [orig. 1924], 13). She admits that she was brought up in a liberal household, but it was in a village and contacts with the outside world were only through a newspaper that had to be shared among many family members. And she continues: “Combine that with the fact that the Dutch women’s movement was still in its infancy and I think the reader will now appreciate that this seventeen-year-old village girl was completely ignorant of the objectives later attributed to her” (Jacobs, 1996 [orig. 1924], 13).

Autobiography and difference

In the early days of second wave feminism, the critique of male individualism led feminists, such as Anja Meulenbelt, Verena Stefan, Marie Cardinal and Duygu Asena, to experiment with the writing of autobiographies that took “the other lives of women” into account.⁷ Instead of the individuality of the first-person narrator, it is frequently the collectivity of female experience that is at the heart of these stories. As the Dutch literary scholar Maaike Meijer has shown, the great impact in the Netherlands of Anja Meulenbelt’s *De schaamte voorbij (The Shame is Over)*, which was published in 1976, derived primarily from its radical departure from every literary convention:

The Shame is Over is subtitled “A personal history”. The traces of writing are clearly visible: the book relates its own origins, which underscores the self-education inherent to feminist *Bildung*. In the book in which “Anja” relates how she learned to live, we follow at the same time the story of how she learned to write that life down. Feminism is the art of inventing oneself, both in life and in writing. There is no language yet for the new vision of reality (Meijer, 1993, 820).

New “autobiographies” of this kind were only the beginning of the feminist preoccupation with stories about self. Now, many decades later, the postmodern emphasis on language, with the related “narrative turn”, as well as the introduction of “biographical method” and the use of “life histories” in the social sciences, has yielded a rich harvest of studies within women’s and gender studies analyzing “the fabrication of selves”.⁸ Important in the feminist study of autobiography is the impact of genre (how the life is narrated, pictured, in what contexts and for what goals etc.), the notion

of inter-subjectivity (the implication of self narration in cultural processes of representation, discourses, stories, ‘contexts’) and the use of personal narrative as an epistemological tool.⁹ Important is also the concept of “framing”, the way in which autobiographies or collections of life stories are introduced, illustrated and annotated, or how interviews are conducted.¹⁰

Feminist criticism of autobiography also looks at “intersectionality” in the formation of identities, and the way in which the “self” tries to narrate a cohesive life history, in a frequently ceaseless dialogue with the diverse aspects and categories of difference. For instance, Lena Inowlocki and Helma Lutz, in an intriguing analysis of an in-depth interview of a German-Turkish woman, following Jerome Bruner, use the concept of “recipes” that structure self-experience and make it bearable: “Through telling life stories in specific ways, these ‘recipes’ are engraved in our memories and become anchored, so that a life is not how it was led, but how it was narrated”. (Inowlocki and Lutz, 2000, 314.¹¹ Marjo Buitelaar, in a similar analytical context, uses the metaphor of the orchestration of different voices to produce a melody. In her reading of the life story of a relatively well-known Dutch-Moroccan woman, who wears a headscarf and is active in Dutch politics, she shows the anecdotes and stories that her protagonist tells about different aspects of her identity, in different contexts and with different audiences, and how she manages to strike a balance between them (Buitelaar, 2006). Buitelaar combines the Bakhtinian concept of the dialogical self with some of the methodological concepts that McAdams developed in *The Stories We Live By*: the presence of “key episodes” in a life story, and the related construction of different “images” (McAdams, 1993). The result of all this work in the study of autobiography is a destabilization of the autonomous individual subject, and of authentic experience or objective truth in favor of a more relational concept of an individual life.

“From rags to riches”

Given the existence of a strong autobiographical tradition (and feminist counter tradition) and the narrative lines, plots and counterplots developed within it, the next question that arises is *how*, in what form, did Hirsu Ali want to present her life? In my analysis I want to take seriously the fact that in the Dutch context she was clearly identified and identified herself as a feminist even though in her autobiography she doesn’t even mention her involvement with the national, liberal feminist magazine *Opzij* and the women connected to it. Does she reflect on issues of gender and writing, or does her text confront matters of difference? Has her narrative any affinity with contemporary attempts at writing feminist autobiography? The answer is simple: her narrative corresponds perfectly to the classic standard (male, liberal) autobiographical plot in which personal success is the measure of will-power and autonomy. A derivative of this plot, the “rags to riches” story, is depicted almost literally in the full color photograph section of the Dutch edition.¹² The first photograph of Hirsu Ali portrays her as a rather pathetic young woman sitting huddled up and dressed in a highly unflattering outfit. Partly through the contrast with the men surrounding her, with their Western clothes, we see her as a

typical representative of a culture that keeps women down. In stark contrast, the last photograph of her presents a full-length view of her wearing an extremely elegant creation by Viktor and Rolf (though *borrowed*, a “Dutch” detail she does not flinch from revealing) at the *Time* 100 dinner in New York in 2005.

Hirsi Ali describes her life on several occasions as a journey, an odyssey from “the other world of my childhood” to this world. That journey, which leads from (dark) Africa to the (enlightened) Netherlands, takes her from chaos to order, from a world full of binding conventions, authoritarian methods of upbringing, and arranged marriages to a world of freedom of choice, ‘anti-authoritarian households’, and intimate partner relationships based on love, from a world full of superstition to one of knowledge and truth. The geographical journey coincides with one in time: from a primitive society to Western civilization. Hirsi Ali describes her grandmother, for instance, as still living in the “Iron Age”. She gave birth to her children in the fields, and in the year 1980 she kept a sheep in her fourth-floor apartment in Nairobi.

Rhetorically, this plot derives support from the book's division into two parts: “My Childhood” and “My Freedom”. One can scarcely imagine a more abrupt cut-off point: “It was Friday, July 24, 1992, when I stepped on the train [to the Netherlands]. Every year I think of it. I see it as my real birthday: the birth of me as a person, making decisions about my life on my own” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 188). This birth of Hirsi Ali's self (appropriately accompanied by a new name) in a sense erases her past, or at least puts the description of her youth at a permanent distance. The more we read of the book, the more frequently we hear how something is or works “here”, the more difficult it becomes to recall how complex and multi-layered her life in Africa was, and how full of ambivalences and contradictions. Did she not choose herself to wear the hijab and to attend meetings of the Muslim Brotherhood, even though one of her housemates regarded her mode of dress as “a complete joke” and fellow students avoided her as a “religious freak in a black tent”? Did she not have a whole line of boyfriends in spite of this, including an imam she used to kiss in secret after prayers? And how many self-confident and independent aunts and female cousins are not featured in the book, who – like her mother in fact – first build up independent lives of their own, marry, get divorced on their own initiative, and sometimes remarry and sometimes not. Even her relationship with her father and brother is not unequivocal, and her account certainly does not give the impression that they tried hard to restrict her freedom. I for one have yet to meet a brother who explains to his little sister that the bleeding she is experiencing is a perfectly normal thing for a girl, and who then gives her money to buy sanitary napkins.

Binary oppositions are always conceptually inadequate.¹³ They force us into either–or choices that foster unwarranted generalizations. Furthermore, polar opposites frequently mask the fact that one pole is the norm, from which the other is derived. It is more “logical” to define night as “not day” than day as “not night”, – and woman as “not man” rather than man as “not woman”. One of the fundamental insights that gender studies has yielded is that dichotomies of this kind always have gender-based overtones, in which the norm, or the universal, the more highly regarded, or the more powerful

carries connotations with “male”, while the deviation, the special case, the less highly regarded and less powerful carries the connotation “female”. The same applies to the categories of race and ethnicity: in a binary opposition, “white” and European/Western are always the (invisible, blank) norm in relation to “black” and “African/Oriental”.

The same applies to Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography. The black, devout Muslim girl from Africa is diametrically opposed to the grown-up woman in the west who was born on her journey to the Netherlands and who becomes engrossed in rational subjects such as political theory and philosophy. Through the contrast between there and here, and in the connection with matters that in the West are associated with white men, the black woman Ayaan Hirsi Ali emerges as an (almost unmarked) “individual”. The tendency to exoticize and Islamicize “the other world of her childhood”, which ensues from the dualistic nature of her book, is reinforced by Hirsi Ali's description of “another world” within the Netherlands, with which she becomes acquainted through her interpreting work. Within the Netherlands too, she discovered another world: the “awful places – the police stations, the prisons, the abortion clinics and penal courts, the unemployment offices and the shelters for battered women”, and she started to notice “how many dark faces looked back at me” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 243). In contrast with that world too, Hirsi Ali disappears as a “dark face” herself, and against the background of the enlightened Leiden where all the students “seemed to be white, with blond hair and light blue eyes”, (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 241) she almost acquires a halo.¹⁴ In the shelters especially it struck her moreover that most of these women came from Muslim countries. The conclusion we are led to draw is almost inevitable: Hirsi Ali would have to do everything in her power to liberate these women from that “backward Islam” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 289).¹⁵

Tales of the orient

The connection between Hirsi Ali's account of her life and the truth has naturally acquired an added, piquant dimension from the accusations of lies and deceit that have clung to earlier versions of her life story. Already in the introduction of her autobiography she promises to “set a certain number of records straight” (xii), and she does so later in the text by freely admitting these lies. The honest account she initially planned to relate to the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service, which revolved around her flight to escape from an arranged marriage to an unappealing cousin, would not provide grounds for admission to the Netherlands. So within a day she concocted “a story based on my experiences leaving Mogadishu in 1991, and the experiences of the refugees in our house in Park Road. This story was detailed, consistent, but it was an invention” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 192–193). And it earned her refugee status within the month.

Like Sharhazad Hirsi Ali understood well that lives can depend on the telling of stories. The lesson that she might have drawn from the narrative restrictions of a refugee story from Somalia to be taken into account for asylum status, is that even the life histories that are written ‘in freedom’, are only to a very limited extent our own, truly personal property. Stories always have a context and are always looking for readers, and vice versa. Not only are we obliged – to be

intelligible – to draw on the familiar plots and genres that are in circulation, but sometimes we cannot help but tell the stories that our audience (the Immigration and Naturalization Service, a persistent journalist, the general public) can hear. To put it more strongly, you might say that to a large extent we do not choose our own stories, but the stories make us who we are, however much we may cherish the illusion of autonomy and freedom.

In the many discussions about religion with her orthodox Calvinist Dutch friend Ellen, the question of “whose story?” is highlighted in a very pregnant way. In these discussions Ellen's orthodox Protestant God appeared as a “kind, fatherly figure” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 216) with whom she had a relationship that “seemed to be about dialogue and love” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 215). In one of these discussions she presents Hirsi Ali with what would become the basic theme of her script for the film *Submission*: “In your religion there is so much Hell, and you pray because you have to. This is a master–slave relationship” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 216). *Submission* revolves around the fact that the Arabic word *islām* means submission, which in Hirsi Ali's account comes to mean fear and strict obedience, of women in particular, but not only of women. “I called the film *Submission, Part one*, because submission to Islam causes many other forms of suffering. I saw this as the first in a series of films that would tackle the master–slave relationship of God and the individual” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 314).

The identification of Islam with subordination or oppression, as expressed by Ellen and passed on to Hirsi Ali, is one of the central features of “Orientalism”, the term coined by Edward Said for the way in which the West has established its hegemony on perceptions of the Eastern “Other” (Said, 1995/1978; Abaza, 1999, 2003; Boer, 2003).¹⁶ The “imaginative geography” that is produced by orientalist discourse, contrasts the civilized West with the barbaric East, or Orient, where in the name of the Prophet, cruel dictatorships oppress their subjects. It applied as far back as the Christian context of the Crusades, but in the Enlightenment too, the Orientalist story was systematized and inscribed in the comparative conceptual framework in which Western civilization was depicted in stark contrast to the uncivilized East or Orient. Feminist postcolonial studies have documented the central role of “the feminine” in the orientalist project, and the foregrounding of “barbaric practices” such as female circumcision and arranged (or “forced”) marriages (often with minor girls), polygamy and harem life, different shades of veiling, honor killings or suttee in orientalist discourse.¹⁷ The content of *Submission, Part One*, therefore, with its unilinear focus on women's suffering, links up seamlessly with the orientalist images and stories about Islam that are inscribed in Western culture.

In *My Freedom* – or to use the American title *Infidel* – Ayaan Hirsi Ali also invokes the highlights of an oriental woman's biography. In the pictures mentioned above there is an abundance of exotic dress, even if some of the pictures were taken in Holland, and Hirsi Ali “dressed up” for the occasion. Moreover, in the story of her youth, the violence of Islam is represented by the primitive Koran teacher who beats her up, while she and her sister were treated harshly by their mother and grandmother to teach them female propriety. Most telling, however, is the explicit discussion of her female genital circumcision to which she was subjected at the same time as her brother and sisters. Interestingly it was not her

father's but her mother and grandmother's wish that the children were subjected to the painful procedure, as it was also her mother and her grandmother who get the blame for Hirsi Ali's violent youth. It suggests that in Hirsi Ali's eyes women are not just the victims of barbaric practice, but also the strongholds of a backward religion and through that, the perpetrators of “barbaric practices” that are meant to discipline women into proper behavior.

That the episode of the circumcision attracts the attention of the western readership already became clear in the immediate reception of the book, such as in the extensive interview that appeared in the Dutch periodical *Volkskrant Magazine* a week before the publication of her book. When asked to tell more about her circumcision, she initially reacts with some irritation at such curiosity, but then she also fuels the situation by giving a more detailed answer here than in her book, and by explicitly stating:

For me, the consequences were relatively mild. First of all, it didn't kill me, whereas a great many girls do die as a result of it. It takes me longer to urinate than a non-circumcized woman, and making love is perhaps slightly more complicated. But the feeling is there, the desire is there, I am able to achieve orgasm. I am fortunate to have been circumcised by a man. They are milder. Not every form of circumcision is equally terrible, but every form is equally repugnant (Kouter, 2006).¹⁸

The prominence of this “barbaric practice” in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's story of her childhood invites the reading of her autobiography as an orientalist and even anti-Islam story, addressed to a Western audience, in spite of the fact that female genital mutilation is not so much an Islamic as a cultural practice that is situated mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt.¹⁹ Just how difficult it is, even for a highly educated and well-read feminist writer from an Arabic background, to avoid a story of this kind in a Western context, is demonstrated by a study conducted by Amal Amireh on the reception of the Egyptian Nawal El Sadaawi's famous book on Arabic women *The Naked Face of Eve*, and its respective modifications for the British and American reading public:

The history of her reception in the West shows El Sadaawi struggling against misappropriation, but it also shows her accommodating the West's reading of her. It is a story of both resistance and complicity, and it begins with the reception of *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which marked El Sadaawi's official crossover to the West (Amireh, 2000, 219).²⁰

In the introduction to the first British edition of *The Hidden Face of Eve* in 1979, El Sadaawi sharply condemned all those women in Britain and the United States,

“who concentrate on issues such as female circumcision and depict them as proof of the unusual and barbaric oppression to which women are exposed only in African and Arab countries. I oppose all attempts to deal with such problems in isolation”. (Quoted by Amireh, 2000, 220–221)

Rather than highlighting their differences, women in the West and the East should be seeking common ground. In

the revised introduction to the American edition in 1982, El Sadaawi again defends Islam against the West's ignorance (and its Orientalism), but she adopts a milder tone, and she herself refers to clitoridectomy this time as a "barbaric" practice. But besides producing revised introductions to her work, she altered the work itself in ways that may be read as pandering to Western "taste". For instance, she changed the original title, *The Naked Face of the Arab Woman*, into *The Hidden Face of Eve*. She also omitted a number of chapters and passages in which the author criticizes the capitalist exploitation of women, and shows that Arab women clamored for equality earlier than their Western sisters. More telling than the omissions, however, are the additions. Besides a chapter entitled "The Grand-Father with Bad Manners", she added a chapter entitled "Circumcision of Girls", and gave the entire first section of the book the dramatic title "The mutilated Half". In this way, El Sadaawi leant over backwards to fulfill the Western public's "insatiable appetite for an exotic and oppressed 'other'", and the additions ended up providing the passages that are most frequently quoted and most often used in education. The reception did the rest. In 1982 the book was reviewed under the title 'About the Mutilated Half'; in 1991 "one writer could remember only that Sadaawi's book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, [is] about her experience of undergoing a clitoridectomy in her native Delta villa" (Quoted by Amireh, 2000, 226, 227). Another example of how in the west Arab women's life experiences are exoticized and orientalized is the way in which the American scholar Margot Badran (with the best of intentions) framed the memories of the Egyptian feminist Huda Sharaawi (1986) for the American edition, which was given the meaningful title *Harem Years*. (Golley, 2003, p. 49–52).

Between respect and repudiation

To read Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography is confusing to a postmodern feminist who has learned to observe and live with the complexities of difference and equality, self and other, agency and victimization, and who believes in multiculturalism as a (difficult but engaging) process of active interaction and hybridization in an age of globalization. The fact that her life and her life's mission are written in a language steeped in a kind of "feminist orientalism" makes her feminist position ambiguous, to put it mildly. And so does her close alliance with the vocal representatives of "new realism" in the Netherlands, among them prominent right-wing liberal politicians, enlightenment fundamentalist publicists and anti-Islam university professors. The fact that Hirsi Ali had a few prominent liberal feminist champions, among them Cisca Dresselhuys, editor-in-chief of the thirty five year old feminist monthly *Opzij*, and Euro-commissioner Neelie Kroes, who campaigns for more women in top positions, does not alter this evaluation. Cisca Dresselhuys had already invited strong criticism from feminists for her statement that she would welcome a head-scarved woman in the editorial office only in the rank of administrator, not as editor.²¹

Cisca Dresselhuys is not even mentioned in Hirsi Ali's life story, and neither is Hirsi Ali's most vocal and clear feminist critic, Anja Meulenbelt, the pioneer of Dutch second wave feminism, who is still active in feminism and politics today.²² In response to Cisca Dresselhuys who had compared the

criticism Hirsi Ali had to endure with the way in which Anja Meulenbelt had been denounced in the seventies for her 'rigidity' and her capacity for unnerving 'happy housewives', Meulenbelt wrote that the similarity was only partial. She saw some comparison in the way in which Ayaan Hirsi Ali used her own personal history of becoming an individual as a source of inspiration for her politics. But there the similarity ended:

When I had written *The Shame is Over*, I didn't know what awaited me. What happened was not just a defensive reaction, but to my surprise many thousands of women (and a few men) recognized themselves in that book and took heart from it in their efforts to change. I do not see that happen with Hirsi Ali. On the contrary, the women she claims to liberate turn from her. Her following, according to all the reactions in newspapers and websites, consists predominantly of Dutch autochtones²³ who already were convinced of the backwardness of the Islam. They believe that the Islam causes violence against women and homophobia, that the Islam is incompatible with true democracy and that headscarf can symbolize only one thing: women's oppression. That is an image of the Islam, which denies the existence of many different versions and a large diversity (Meulenbelt, retrieved April, 18, 2007).²⁴

Meulenbelt is right in stating that both she and Ayaan Hirsi Ali used "personal narrative" in framing a specific kind of politics. But the content of Meulenbelt's personal story was in many ways very different from that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's. While Meulenbelt (who wrote the book herself) had to search for language in order to show her life "as a woman" – and not so much as an individual life, but as part of the collective of "women" –, for Ayaan Hirsi Ali those concepts are meaningless. She and her ghostwriter only know the straight language of individualism and personal accomplishment, which also informs fundamentalist liberalism. It is a language that puts self and other, equality and difference in diametrical opposite positions, as well as feminism and religion, Enlightenment and Islam.²⁵ This autobiography was meant first and foremost to serve Ayaan Hirsi Ali herself.

In conjunction with so many of my feminist colleagues I have sincerely wanted to respect the voice Ayaan Hirsi Ali succeeded in giving herself, and in some respects and at some moments that is not difficult. Reading her autobiography, however, has strengthened my conviction that she poses as a feminist, rather than actually being a feminist, even if I am a staunch believer in the multiplicity of feminisms, and recognize that we all play our different roles. I do wish that she had listened to other (than *Opzij* liberal) feminists' stories and – in the tradition of second wave feminism – really had tried to find "words of her own" to tell the story of "her own life". Had she done so, the book would probably have reached far fewer people, but it might have made her freedom more "real".

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Endnotes

¹ The Dutch translation is strikingly free here: “Good girls are virgins who feel nothing at all”, reads in Dutch: “Brave meisjes paren als de geiten van mijn oma”: “Good girls mate like the goats of my grandma”. It invokes a favorite expression by Theo van Gogh, the film director and publicist who was killed for his role in the making of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Submission*, and who time and again referred to Muslim immigrants as ‘Goat fuckers’ (Buruma 2006, p. 9). It would be interesting to do a systematic comparative analysis of the Dutch and British/American editions. Especially in the ‘framing’ of the text (the introductions, the choice of illustrations and the way they are included etc.), there are striking differences.

² For an effort to understand the murder of Theo van Gogh, see Buruma (2006). The Dutch title translates as *The death of a healthy smoker*.

³ *Zembla* is a critical documentary program from the originally socialist broadcasting association VARA, and NPS (Dutch Program Foundation), a public broadcasting organization.

⁴ Implicitly she is referring here to some of her mentors in the debate on ‘enlightenment’ who can be categorized as ‘enlightenment fundamentalists’ or ‘new realists’, such as Leiden professors Paul Cliteur, author of several works against multiculturalism and cultural relativism, and Herman Philipse. Philipse wrote *Atheïstisch manifest. Drie wijsgerige opstellen over godsdienst en moraal*. [Atheist manifesto: three philosophical philosophical essays on religion and ethics.] (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1995; reprinted in 2004), which led to her “conversion” (Hirsi Ali, 280–282). Explicitly she refers to Spinoza, Kant, Mill, Voltaire, Popper.

⁵ See also Mason (1980).

⁶ A detailed analysis of Aletta Jacobs's autobiography, and its usefulness for the biographer, may be found in the introduction to my biography of Jacobs: Bosch, M. (2005): The biographer and her sources (Bosch, 2005, p. 13–33).

⁷ The Dutch feminist Anja Meulenbelt wrote *De schaamte voorbij* (1976) (*The Shame is Over*; Meulenbelt, 1980), the German writer Verena Stefan *Häutungen* (1975) (*Shedding*), the French writer Marie Cardinal *Les mots pour le dire* (1975) [*It should be said*] and the Turkish writer Duygu Asena *Kadinin adi Yok* (1987) [*Woman Has No Name*]. All of these books were major best sellers.

⁸ The formulation is from the title of Boter (2005), which is an interesting example. Boter analyses autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives by women of color.

⁹ E.g. Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield (2000); The Personal Narrative Group (1989), Jelinek, (1980).

¹⁰ E.g. Golley (2003).

¹¹ The reference is to Bruner (1987). See also Bruner (2002).

¹² There is a remarkable difference between the Dutch (hard cover) version of her autobiography and the American (paperback) edition. Most of the Dutch pictures are full color, and it has more pictures of her. The American sample seems to emphasize her “Africanness”. The aspect of differences in the framing of the different versions, need further attention.

¹³ My first introduction to the logics of binary thinking was by the analytical philosopher Else Barth when I was a student at the University Groningen; see also Meijer (1991).

¹⁴ Much more could be said about the way in which Hirsi Ali “farms out” gender and color to her youth and to migrant women in the Netherlands. The description of the shelters in Hirsi Ali's texts evoke associations with the way in which the “harem” is an almost indispensable element in texts about Arabic women.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the discursive shift in the debate on migration in the Netherlands from class (guest workers) or race (blacks or Turks) to culture/religion (Muslims): Bruinissen (2006) and Peters (2006).

¹⁶ The concept of “Orientalism” has attracted critiques by writers from many different parts of the world (and many different periods). My own introduction to it was through Said's book and readings in the context of an analysis of Aletta Jacobs's travel letters, esp. Boer (1992). See Bosch (1999).

¹⁷ For the function of “barbaric practices” in the discourse of “new realism,” see Lutz (2002) and Peters (2006). See also S. Gilman (1999), who claims that the circumcision of boys was also considered barbaric in nineteenth-century anti-semitic discourse. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, probably in an effort to escape a focus only on women, at some point launched the idea of a prohibition on male circumcision. It very quickly disappeared.

¹⁸ Translation by me.

¹⁹ The majority of Dutch Muslim women come from Morocco and Turkey, where female genital mutilation (FGM) is not common practice.

²⁰ Amireh does not specify the “public” at issue here, but it was obviously largely a feminist readership. I should like to thank Gul Ozyegin for drawing my attention to this article.

²¹ The speech Dresselhuys held at the *Opzij* meeting on the occasion of International Women's Day, March 8, 2001, was explained in the editorial in the April issue of *Opzij*. Two distinguished feminist critics, Baukje Prins and Sawitri Saharso had already reacted in the national newspaper *De Volkskrant*, March 15, 2001. Some time later Helma Lutz gave an analysis of the debate in the main *Genderstudies journal*: “Zonder blikken of blozen. Het standpunt van de (nieuw) realisten”. *Tijdschrift voor genderstudies*, 5/3 (2002) 7–17. They all accused Dresselhuys of an intolerant equality feminism. Lutz made a comparison between Dresselhuys and Susan Moller Okin's view that ‘multiculturalism is bad for women’.

²² Anja Meulenbelt (b. 1946) is currently a member of the Upper House of Parliament for the Socialist Party, and elected substitute Member of the Unified Left Party in the Council of Europe (Strasbourg). She is heavily involved in the debate on integration and Islam and is an informed critic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, having lived in Gaza herself. She keeps an interesting weblog.

²³ In the nineties in the Netherlands, the binary of “alochthonen” (allochtonen) and “autochtonen” (autochtonen) was introduced and is still widely used to refer to ‘foreigners’, immigrants etc. ‘Turks’, Moroccans etc. versus ‘native Dutch’. The rationale behind this was to introduce symmetry and avoid ‘othering’ that terms such as ‘foreigners’, ‘migrants’, ‘minorities’ implied. It recognized in a way that migrants could also be Dutch especially see and generation children, however, the strategy did not really work and many Turkish Dutch, Moroccan Dutch etc. people feel offended by the term allocation.

²⁴ A shortened printed version appeared in the Dutch daily national paper *de Volkskrant*, 11 September 2004: Meulenbelt (2004).

²⁵ How paradoxical Hirsi Ali's emphasis on personal autonomy is, was recently documented in an analysis of Ayaan's authorship which revealed that from the start of her public career she had very willing ‘speech-writers’ and editors Alies Pegtel, “Ayaan”. Series of 8 articles in weekly *HP-De Tijd*, January–February, 2007.

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