
Political Activism in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's Writings

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Paper Received on 25-02-2023, Accepted on 28-03-2023,

Published on 30-03-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.417

Abstract

The Somali-born Islam critic, political activist and social reformer, Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been recognized as one of the world's most influential voices in present debates on the role and status of Islam in Western societies and widely acclaimed champions of women's rights. Owing to the fact that her views are often seen as the reflection of her personal traumatic experiences, relatively little attention has been given to the political activism in her writings. Hirsi Ali's political activism or political stance is shaped mainly of two political ideologies: Islamic fundamentalism and Neoconservatism. She became part of the Islamic fundamentalist movement in her teenage years and joined an influential circle of neoconservative intellectuals after her arrival and study in the Netherlands. The present paper situates her writing in relation to these two formative intellectual influences. It traces the development of her views on political Islam and the West, which are derived from the Western tradition of democratic values.

Keywords: Political Activist, Islamic Fundamentalism, Neoconservatism, Democratic Values.

Content

Born in 1969, in Mogadishu, Somalia, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is one of today's most acclaimed authors, activists and renowned political figures boldly challenging the theological orthodoxy of Islam in general and fighting for the rights of Muslim women in particular. She came to be known to the world immediately after the murder of Theo Van Gogh with whom she worked in a short film titled Submission. The film is about the oppression of women under Islam.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiographies express her political beliefs, describing her unique set of political views. Her writings also highlight the people, events and experiences that shaped her political perspective. This includes the influence of her family, mentors and significant political events. Her autobiographies also reveal how her political beliefs evolved and changed over time, influenced by personal experiences, education and shifts in society. Her autobiographies provide a unique insight into the author's personal journey within the political landscape, showing how her beliefs and experiences have shaped her life and values. The present paper explores conflicts and challenges the author faced due to her political

beliefs, such as disagreements with family members and confrontations with authority figures.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's writings chronicle her upbringing in Somalia, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and Kenya and the awakening of her political consciousness in the Netherlands: "a journey from the world of faith to a world of reason—from the world of excision and forced marriage to the world of sexual emancipation" (Infidel 347-348). Her writings also describe her transformation from a traditional Muslim girl to a great champion of women's rights. In her remarkable memoirs Hirsi Ali exposes the destructive impact of traditional Islamic beliefs on individual freedom and dignity. She also puts up a strong resistance to the exploitation and oppression of Muslim women which is done in the name of religion and cultural values. She tells the uncomfortable truths of traditional Muslim families.

Two major political movements came to play a significant role in the life of Ayaan Hirsi Ali—Islamic Fundamentalism and Neo-conservatism. A defining aspect of both movements is the use of friend-enemy distinctions that shapes their respective political ideologies. Both are to a large extent each other's mirror image, feeding and reinforcing each other. The present chapter conceptualises the political activism in the writing of Ayaan Hirsi Ali in relation to these two formative experiences of her life. It also explores the way in which Hirsi Ali traces the fundamentalist character of Islam, which she embodies in her teenage and the neoconservative ideals which she espouses in her later political career. In order to fully

understand the political perspective in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's writings, it is imperative to comprehend the concepts of Islamic fundamentalism and neoconservatism that have played significant roles in Hirsi Ali's political activism and shaping her political viewpoints. The dimensions of these philosophical concepts are so extensive and all embracing that it is well-nigh impossible to confine them within the parameters of single definitions. However, for the purpose of this research, they have been defined in their broader sense.

The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles defines the term 'fundamentalism' as "The strict maintenance of traditional orthodox religious beliefs or doctrines; especially belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and literal acceptance of the creeds as fundamentals of Protestant Christianity" (Brown 1042). According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, fundamentalism is "a usually religious movement or point of view characterized by a return to fundamental principles, by rigid adherence to those principles, and often by intolerance of other views and opposition to secularism" (Pickett 712). Malise Ruthven, a writer and historian of the Islamic world, in his book *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* says, "The word 'fundamentalism' has passed into English usage to describe those Muslims who seek by whatever means to restore or establish an Islamic state. According to this view it is the task of the Islamic state to enforce obedience to the revealed law of Islam – Shari'a" (4). It is a religious movement which believes that the words found in religious texts are literally true

and cannot be challenged or questioned by new evidences or logical analyses. In fact, in the broader sense of the term, many of the major religions of the world may be said to have fundamentalist movements.

Thus, fundamentalism pertaining to any religion may refer to the convictions of an individual or a group of individuals in the absolute authority of a holy scripture or teachings of a particular religious leader, prophet and/or God. They generally believe that their religion and/or religious scripture is beyond any form of criticism and should therefore also be emulated in its essence. In these belief systems, logical explanations and scientific evidences contrary to their faith are completely disregarded.

According to Wikipedia, "Islamic fundamentalism has been defined as a revivalist and reform movement of Muslims who aim to return to the founding scriptures of Islam" (Wikipedia). According to Oxford Dictionary of English, "Islamic fundamentalism appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries as a reaction to the disintegration of Islamic political and economic power, asserting that Islam is central to both state and society and advocating strict adherence to the Koran (Qur'an) and to Islamic law (sharia)" (Stevenson 709). John L. Esposito, an American professor of Middle Eastern religious studies and scholar of Islamic studies, in his book *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* argues, "The term [Islamic Fundamentalism] has been used interchangeably with similar terms such as Islamism, Islamic revivalism, Qutbism, Islamic extremism, Islamic activism, but also

criticized as pejorative, a term used by outsiders who instead ought to be using more positive terms such as Islamic activism or Islamic revivalism" (8).

The Islamist movement has its origins in the 1930s, when Abul-Ala Maududi, the leader of the Indian-Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami party and Hasna al-Banna, the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded a new political movement that aimed to revive Islam as a political order. Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian scholar and a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, built on the work of al-Banna and Maududi, with the goal of developing Islam into a holistic alternative for modern 20th century ideologies. Born in 1906 in a traditional rural context in Egypt, Sayyid Qutb first became a teacher, then a renowned intellectual and finally the most important figures of modern Islamism. The Middle East scholar Olivier Roy defines this movement as Islamism or political Islam, because it redefines Islam as a political ideology. This attempt at the modernisation of Islam was paradoxically given legitimacy by presenting it as a restoration, a return to the source, to the original texts and the original inspirations of the first community of believers under the Prophet Mohammed.

Like other Muslim philosophers of his generation, Sayyid Qutb searched for a formula to modernise Islam, in such a way that Western scientific and technological advancements could be assimilated without the accompanying Western human values. For that to happen, Islam had to be developed into a fundamentalist and all-encompassing social ideology. For Qutb, a reinvented Islamic

ideology had to function as an alternative to third world nationalism, socialism, secularism and liberal democracy. Islam, according to Qutb, is a doctrine that exists outside of human consciousness, as objective truth. Interpretation must be avoided as much as possible, so that human ignorance, individual desire, or group interests won't contaminate the purity of the doctrines. "[He] believed that Islam is a timeless body of ideas and practices forming a comprehensive way of life, rendering nonadherence to Islamic law inexcusable [and] interpreted Islam as a call to social commitment and activism" (Esposito 98). Hirsi Ali sees no difference between Islam and Islamism. Islam is defined as submission to the will of Allah, as it is described in the Quran. Islamism is just Islam in its purest form. She believes that Sayyid Qutb didn't invent anything, he just quoted the sayings of prophet Mohamed.

Apart from Islamic fundamentalism, neoconservatism is another significant political ideology that has substantially shaped the political activism of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Oxford Dictionary of English defines neoconservative as "relating to or denoting a return to a modified form of a traditional viewpoint, in particular a political ideology characterized by an emphasis on free-market capitalism and an interventionist foreign policy" (Stevenson 1789). Neoconservatism is a political movement that originated in the United States during the 1960s. Often addressed as neocon, the neoconservatives primarily advocate the assertive promotion of democracy and American national interventionism in international affairs,

including peace through strength and are known for espousing disdain for religious fundamentalism, communism and political radicalism (Wikipedia). It can also be defined as an outgrowth of the conservative political movement which is more moderate than traditional conservatism, especially in its promotion of democracy abroad and its embrace of military intervention. It holds that security is best attained by using US power to spread freedom and democracy, if necessary by force and without international cooperation. Neoconservatism has been criticized on several grounds, including the charge that its definitions of "freedom" and "democracy" are essentially American and so cannot be imposed successfully on other countries and cultures. Neoconservatives also believe that other countries are a threat to us if they have different domestic, political and social systems, so they must be defeated by all necessary means, including military force. They have emphasised the benevolent nature of America's dominant role in the world as a forerunner of democracy and human rights. Neoconservatives grew strength after September 11, 2001, when their view coincided with the perceived need for an assertive foreign policy to combat the terrorist threat to the USA.

Neoconservatism has been an important inspiration for the political activism of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The ideology of Leo Strauss has provided a significant theoretical framework for the neoconservatives. Strauss, a Jewish refugee from the Nazi regime, who came to prominence at the University of Chicago in the 1950s and Paul Cliteur, the law

professor and former director of the VVD think tank, also served as an inspiration for the awakening of political consciousness in Hirsi Ali, who saw him as a Dutch counterpart to Salman Rushdie. In 2004, when the filmmaker, columnist and the critic of Islam, Theo Van Gogh, with whom Hirsi Ali produced a short film titled Submission, was murdered by a Dutch-Moroccan jihadist, the Netherlands came to perceive itself at the frontline in the global War on Terror. In her autobiography, Ayaan Hirsi Ali describes her appearance as a strong political figure and how she intervened in the political arena of the Netherlands exclaiming: "Allow us a Voltaire, because we are truly living in the Dark Ages" (Infidel 275).

Although the idea of neoconservatism in the Netherlands has been derived from the U.S. neoconservatism, there is slight difference between the two. While for U.S. neoconservatives, the superiority of Western civilization and the universalism of Western values or human rights served as an argument justifying foreign intervention, for neoconservatives in Netherlands, the main concern was domestic policy, primarily the issue of Muslim immigrants. Neoconservative perspectives concerning the superiority of Western values were primarily used to argue for the assimilation of immigrants in the Netherlands. The strategies of U.S. neoconservatives largely consists of hard power, most famously through military intervention for instance in Iraq, whereas Dutch neoconservatives have been focused on fighting Islam primarily through soft power or rhetoric. Consequently, freedom of speech became one of the most significant agendas of

the Dutch neoconservatives and the 'dialogue' with Islam served as the main argument for preserving basic human values. The Netherlands followed neoconservative philosophy, to a considerable extent, in a secular context, with a largely progressive sexual morality. Dutch neoconservatives defended basic human values, gay rights and women's emancipation against the perceived threat of Islam. Among the most prominent Dutch neoconservatives were the figures such as Cliteur, Ellian and Hirsi Ali herself who claimed to be atheists.

Thus, these two ideologies namely Islamic fundamentalism and neoconservatism are remarkably conjoined in the personal life of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, as chronicled in her autobiographical works, which are divided in two parts, echoing the divisions in her personal life: 'My Childhood' and 'My Freedom'. In the first part is recounted how Hirsi Ali's family, a prominent clan in Somalia, fled the country in 1976 during the dictatorship of Siad Barré, before the ensuing civil war. Their first place of refuge is Saudi Arabia, followed by stay in Ethiopia and finally Kenya, where they stayed for twelve years. There, Hirsi Ali came in contact with the Sahwa movement (Awakening Movement) or Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyya (Islamic awakening), a political movement that originated from the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Wahhabism. According to Wikipedia, "Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyy (Islamic Awakening) was a movement in Saudi Arabia from 1960-1980 which advocated for incorporating more reliance on Wahhabi principles into Saudi society" (Wikipedia). The most conspicuous

impacts of the movement were significant restrictions on individual liberties, religious freedom and women's rights. The movement's basic principles were influenced by the fundamentalist approaches of Qutbism such as theological denunciations of democracy and the belief that contemporary governments of the Muslim World have lost their bedrock convictions.

In her autobiography *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali describes how she became part of this movement, through the strict Muslim education she received at the age of sixteen in Kenya, given by a Muslim teacher named 'Sister Aziza'. In her routine classes Hirsi Ali is told by Sister Aziza that in order to be real Muslims, they need to pray daily and submit their inner selves to the will of Allah in their thought and practice. Hirsi Ali recounts her subsequent conversion, how she started to veil herself in a hijab and read Islamist texts with a community of like-minded believers. She writes:

I began to experiment with the headscarf. I wore it long, so the shape of my neck and shoulders could not be seen. I wore trousers under my school uniform, to hide my bare legs. I wanted to be like Sister Aziza. I wanted to be pure, and good, and serve Allah. I began to pray five times a day, fighting to collect my thoughts through the whole long process. I wanted to understand better how to live the life that Allah, who was infinitely just, wanted for me. (*Infidel* 85)

In addition, she grew to admire and support the Muslim Brotherhood and even supported the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie in 1989. She says, "...at age

seventeen, I mostly believed in the Brotherhood's values" (*Infidel* 107). She furthers writes:

We read Hasan al-Banna, who set up the Society of Muslim Brothers to oppose the rise of Western ideas in the lands of Islam and promote a return to the Islam of the Prophet. We read Sayyid Qutb, another Egyptian, who said preaching was not enough, that we must stage a catastrophic revolution to establish the kingdom of God on Earth. We thrilled to new movements called Akhwan (Brotherhood) and Tawheed (the Straight Path); they were small groups of true believers, as we felt ourselves to be. This was the True Islam, this harking back to the purity of the Prophet. (*Infidel* 108)

In the process of escaping from an arranged marriage and coming to the Netherlands as a political refugee in 1992, Hirsi Ali slowly started renouncing her Islamic belief. She describes the day of her arrival as her "real birthday": "the birth of me as a person, making decisions about my life on my own" (*Infidel* 188). While studying at the University of Leiden and learning Dutch, she found that the Netherlands, as a secular and democratic society, provided far greater freedoms than dictatorships in Africa and the Middle East. Her understanding of the Western social values, democratic set up and knowledge of the political thinkers provided impetus to awaken her political consciousness. David Schaffr and Michelle Koth in their jointly written article titled "Absolute *Infidel*: The Evolution of Ayaan Hirsi Ali" describe Hirsi Ali's political perspective in her book *Infidel* as follows: "One of the more unusual aspects of her career, described in detail in

Infidel, has been its political side, which in the highly charged atmosphere of the early twenty-first century has perhaps inevitably had strong overtones reaching well beyond her personal life” (2007).

In the Netherlands, Ayaan Hirsi Ali studied political science and then served as an elected member of the Dutch parliament from 2003 to 2006. While in parliament, she primarily focused on fighting for the rights of Muslim women in Europe, the enlightenment of Islam and security in the West. Eventually, she moved to United States and established a foundation, named after her, which aims to combat several types of crimes against women including honour killings, female genital mutilation, imposing veils on girls and women, forced marriages and beatings on wives, daughters and sisters. She believes that a country can progress only when it respects the rights of women and their freedom. She writes:

I was a one-issue politician, I decided. I am still. I am also convinced that this is the largest, most important issue that our society and our planet will face in this century. Every society that is still in the rigid grip of Islam oppresses women and also lags behind in development. Most of these societies are poor; many are full of conflict and war. Societies that respect the rights of women and their freedom are wealthy and peaceful. (Infidel 296)

From 1995 to 2000, while studying political science at Leiden, Hirsi Ali came into contact with the school of Dutch right-wing intellectuals inspired by U.S. Neoconservatism. She felt grateful to her teachers at Leiden who introduced her to the world of reason. She says, “My tutors at

Leiden introduced me to my faculty of reason” (Infidel 352). They devoted themselves to the promulgation of Western enlightenment values and the critique of religion, in particular Islam. After September 11 attacks, Hirsi Ali became part of a prominent neoconservative intellectual group, described in her book as the ‘Gent’s Club’. She refers to Frits Bolkestein, the erstwhile European Commissioner and the former Dutch politician of the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), probably the most prominent Dutch exponent of neoconservative ideas, as her “intellectual mentor” (Infidel 352). The influence of neoconservatism can also be found in her views on Islam, significantly inspired by the work of the neoconservative Bernard Lewis, the man who originally coined the term ‘clash of civilizations’, and the neoconservative author Samuel P. Huntington, who expanded on that thesis in his famous book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997). The American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington has rightly observed that “In this new world the most pervasive, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities” (28).

Hirsi Ali has presented her personal story as an illustration of neoconservative theory. In the subtitle of her book *Nomad* (2010a), she refers to her life as “A Personal Journey Through the Clash of Civilizations”. After a spectacular and controversial political career, first as the think tank of the Dutch social-democratic Labour Party (PvdA) then

as a parliament member for the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Ayaan Hirsi Ali moved to the United States in 2006, where she started working for the American Enterprise Institute, a renowned neoconservative think tank. She subsequently married the neoconservative author Niall Ferguson. With this remarkable journey of life, Hirsi Ali is one of the few people to have been part of both the Islamic fundamentalist and the neoconservative movement which are polar opposite. In this journey of ideological transformation, the strategic use of friend-enemy images and essentialism that is inherent to both Islamic fundamentalism and neo-conservatism provides a connecting thread.

It was the then VVD (The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) leader Frits Bolkestein who in the nineties first referred to the incompatibility of Western and Islamic values. He initiated the debates on immigration and multiculturalism that transformed Dutch politics. This theme of 'incompatible civilizational values' was subsequently taken up by Hirsi Ali as a basic framework for her political activism in the Netherlands. Samuel P. Huntington largely formulated the clash of civilizations in military terms. For the Dutch neoconservatives, the clash was framed basically as a rhetorical battle for the hearts and minds of the Western Muslim population.

The attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, prompted the entire Western world to launch a massive appeal to Muslims around the world to reflect on their religion and culture and separate religion from political affairs. The then British Prime

Minister Tony Blair, American President George W. Bush, and numerous other political leaders in the West asked Muslim organizations in their countries to isolate themselves from Islam as preached by these nineteen terrorists. This plea was met with indignation from Muslim countries 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 great resentment towards the United States in particular, encouraged Hirsi Ali to investigate whether the roots of evil could be traced to the faith she grew up with: was the aggression, the hatred inherent in Islam itself?

Hirsi Ali's doubts about the rigid and restrictive dogmas of Islam steadily loosened and the defining moment came after 9/11, when she realized that Osama bin Laden was accurately obeying the teachings of the Quran and that she could no longer in good conscience remain a member of such a religion. Inwardly, she embarked on "a psychological mission to accept living without a God, which means accepting that I give my life its own meaning (Infidel 281). She writes: I looked in the mirror and said out loud, 'I don't believe in God.' I said it slowly, enunciating it carefully, in Somali. And I felt relief. It felt right. There was no pain, but a real clarity. The long process of seeing the flaws in my belief structure and carefully tiptoeing around the frayed edges as parts of it were torn out, piece by piece – that was all over... From

now on I could step firmly on the ground that was under my feet and navigate based on my own reason and self-respect. My moral compass was within myself, not in the pages of a sacred book. (Infidel: 281)

A prominent aspect of the political activism in Hirsi Ali's writings is a critical examination of certain interpretations of Islam, particularly those that she sees as oppressive to women and detrimental to individual freedoms. She holds that a single Islam does not exist, instead there are many Islams. She writes: "There are as many Islams as there are Muslims. One Muslim considers Islam to be as identity; another, a culture; a third, purely a religion. For yet another, Islam represents everything at once: identity, culture, religion, as well as a political and social guide" (The Caged Virgin 9). But despite these many dimensions of Islam, Hirsi Ali observes that, "all Muslims share the conviction that the fundamental principles of Islam cannot be criticized, revised, or in any way contradicted" (The Caged Virgin 9). Ayaan Hirsi Ali is known for her critical views on Islam, particularly regarding issues related to women's rights and religious freedom. Her writings have often questioned aspects of Islamic doctrines and cultural practices, including topics such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages and domestic violence in Muslim-majority societies. She argues that certain rigid interpretations of Islam can lead to oppressive practices and violence. She asserts that "Islam is a culture that has been outlived" (The Caged Virgin 80). She calls it "an unchanging, fossilized culture"

(The Caged Virgin 80) and finds the teaching of Muhammad outdated.

Hirsi Ali argues that people are unwilling to believe that Allah has nothing to do with predicament of mankind, economic backwardness and the political instability rather it is the man himself who has created such situation for himself. However, historian Bernard Lewis believes that the delay in Muslim development arises out of Muslims' feelings of grievance against Westerners (The Caged Virgin 18). On the other hand, the founders of radical Islam like Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-banna, believe that "the umma, the community, can flourish only if its members keep to the letter of the Koran and the Hadith, the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad" (The Caged Virgin 19). They are of the opinion that Muslims have diverted from the path that the Prophet Muhammad outlined for them and have thereby brought their sufferings upon themselves.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a strong advocate for secularism and the separation of religion from politics. Her writings emphasize the importance of secular values and individual freedoms as a means of protecting human rights, particularly in societies where religion holds significant sway. She explores the incompatibility of Islam with democratic values, often discussing the challenges faced by Muslim societies attempting to balance Islamic principles with democratic governance. Ayaan Hirsi Ali discusses the importance of promoting secular values within Muslim-majority countries, advocating for change from within these societies.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been critical of Western immigration policies, especially in relation to the integration of immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries. She raises concerns about cultural clashes, religious intolerance and extremism in multicultural societies. She strongly criticizes the Dutch government's immigrant integration policies. She observes that many people in the Islamic world have a very strong desire to emigrate to one of the rich countries in the West, but they do not want to comply with the value system and standards of these countries. She asserts that if the Muslims want to progress in the Western countries, they need to behave according to the values and standards of their newly adopted home country. This is one of the reasons behind her criticism of the multicultural policy of the Dutch government because it denies the fact that cultural and religious standards can have negative effects and retard the integration and emancipation of peoples, particularly Muslims.

An opponent of multiculturalism, she further points out that multiculturalists pay no attention to the private lives of the cultural groups they are defending. She remarks that it is precisely in the private lives of the people that differences in power and the repression of women manifest themselves most clearly. Susan Moller Okin, a professor of political science and a feminist has rightly remarked: "...the fact that many Western governments pursue a policy geared to the preservation of group cultures is in conflict with their constitutions which, after all, set down the principles of individual freedom and the equality of men and women" (The Caged

Virgin 6). Hirsi Ali believes that Muslim women in the West will benefit more from the democratic values that offer them good opportunities to shape their lives according to their own desires. She presents herself as an example and this is why she feels responsible for preserving and protecting the democratic system to which she personally owes so much.

Another essential element of Hirsi Ali's work is the division she makes between the 'secular and Enlightened' West on one side and a 'backward' Islam on the other. This 'us' versus 'them' concept is one of the important elements of her political activism. Terms like progress, equality, secularism, freedom, and justice are associated with the West while things like backwardness, religious fundamentalism, gender inequality, orthodoxy, and abuse of power are connected to Islam and Islamic countries. She is often afraid that Muslim migrants may not bring these concepts back to the Western countries. She addresses the role of Western governments and institutions in promoting human rights and freedoms, especially in Muslim-majority societies. She has called for Western countries to take a stronger stance in supporting reform in such societies.

Hirsi Ali emphasizes the importance of freedom of expression, particularly in the context of openly discussing and critiquing religious beliefs and practices, despite the potential for controversy and backlash. She has been a proponent of free speech and has faced threats to her own safety due to her outspoken views. Her works also touch on the importance of addressing radicalization and combating terrorism. She discusses the need for strong

counterterrorism measures to prevent Islamic extremism. Ayaan Hirsi Ali challenges the notion of cultural relativism, arguing that not all cultural practices should be tolerated, especially when they violate human rights. She critiques the tendency to excuse harmful practices in the name of cultural sensitivity. Hirsi Ali in her memoirs also tackles political and ideological conflicts, such as the clash of cultures and provides a platform for examining the consequences of these conflicts on societies and individuals.

In the discourse pertaining to the issues in Islam, she is both a former insider and a well-informed outsider. To modernize and moderate, Hirsi Ali in her book, *Heretic*, suggests five things that need to change within Islam: first, "Muhammad's semi-divine and infallible status along with the literalist reading of the Qur'an, particularly those parts that were revealed in Medina" (*Heretic* 24); second, "the investment in life after death instead of life before death" (*Heretic* 24); third, "Sharia, the body of legislation derived from the Qur'an, the hadith, and the rest of Islamic jurisprudence" (*Heretic* 24); fourth, "the practice of empowering individuals to enforce Islamic law by commanding right and forbidding wrong" (*Heretic* 24) and; fifth, the imperative to wage jihad, or holy war (*Heretic* 24). Basically, through these religious reforms she emphasizes the motto 'to live, let live and embrace life'.

Today, Hirsi Ali is no longer a member of the Dutch parliament. She lives in America, in Washington DC, where she works for the conservative think-tank, the American Enterprise Institute. Yet the death threats have

not gone away. Hirsi Ali sometimes feels dejected and thinks of giving up her crusade against Islam. Despite all this, she continues to speak out and to work on her new book, one based on an imaginary conversation in New York between the Prophet Mohammed and the great 18th century liberal thinker, John Stuart Mill.

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How to cite this article?

Suresh Kumar & Prof. Gulab Singh " Political Activism in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's Writings" Research Journal Of English (RJOE)8(1), PP:406-417-2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.1.417