Despite her avowed atheism, author, political campaigner and former Dutch parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali has come to be widely regarded as the most authoritative (not to mention the most courageous) spokesperson for Muslim women worldwide. In this capacity, she has mounted a fierce criticism not only of Islam, but also of western liberals’ embrace of multiculturalism and anti-racism, which she sees as having provided a point of entry into western societies for barbaric Muslim beliefs and practices that discriminate against women. Her denunciation of Islam as a religion that is inherently discriminatory towards women draws upon long-standing Orientalist tropes. This well-established stereotype is provided with contemporary resonance by her claim that such beliefs and practices have found a safe haven within Muslim communities in the West and that Western liberal policies – and indeed Western values such as religious tolerance – have provides a means by which barbaric gender norms have infiltrated Europe, North America and Australia. While her narrative is conventionally described as representing a clash between ‘Islam’ and ‘the west’, Hirsi Ali also stands at the centre of western culture-wars over flashpoints such as immigration, multiculturalism, and feminism. This paper discusses the narrative and discourse generated by Ayaan Hirsi Ali as represented by her own writing and political and public life, as well as the commentary responding to her work and persona, and reflects upon a central motif of discrimination in her work.

1. Autoethnography and authenticity
Hirsi Ali’s viewpoints have gained a high level of international public exposure and influence, with her criticisms not only of Islam but also of European policies on immigration and multiculturalism seen as relevant across a wide range of issues and locations. Her books and opinion pieces (which have been widely reproduced in the Australian media) are frequently cited in discussions about Australia’s policies on immigration and multiculturalism. Her 2007
and 2010 visits to Australia generated extensive media coverage and debate (Deen 2007; Abdallah 2010: 258; Neighbour 2010; Weisser 2010).

In her memoirs *Infidel* and *Nomad* as well as her numerous media appearances, Hirsi Ali’s life-story is presented as both an account of Islam’s destructive impact on the lives of women and as a call to arms for the West to defend its Enlightenment tradition. Hirsi Ali’s biography, encompassing her childhood experience of female genital mutilation, her family’s life in Africa and the Middle East, her escape to Europe following a forced marriage imposed by her father and the events surrounding to the murder of her colleague Theo Van Gogh, has played a central role in ‘authenticating’ her critique of Islam and her calls for the disciplining of unruly Muslim communities since her entry into public life in the Netherlands (de Leeuw 2005).

*Infidel* chronicles Hirsi Ali’s upbringing in Somalia, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and Kenya and her migration to the Netherlands. Muslim women are presented as generally unreliable informants, since they are incapable of independent thought: ‘Islam was like a mental cage. At first, when you open the door, the caged bird stays inside: it is frightened. It has internalized its imprisonment. It takes time for the bird to escape, even after someone else has opened the doors to the cage’ (Hirsi Ali 2007: 286). Hirsi Ali, the enlightened ‘native informant’, is therefore uniquely qualified to sweep away the ‘fairy tales’ and reveal the ‘real world’ of Islam.

Hirsi Ali’s early childhood in Somalia was overshadowed by the imprisonment of her father, a prominent opponent of the government. She was raised by her mother and grandmother, neither of whom conforms to stereotypes of passive Muslim women. Her mother had demanded a divorce from her first husband before marrying the man of her choice. Her grandmother taught her daughters a traditional self-defence move: ‘run around behind a man, squat down, reach between his legs under his sarong, and yank his testicles hard’ (Hirsi Ali 2007: 9). Her father is described as a relatively enlightened man, who insisted that his daughters not be genitally mutilated. However, her grandmother, convinced that this would leave the girls unmarriageable, had the operation performed in their parents’ absence:

> Then the scissors went down between my legs and the man cut off my inner labia and clitoris. I heard it, like a butcher snipping the fat off a piece of meat. A piercing pain shot up between my legs, indescribable, and I howled (Hirsi Ali 2007, 32).

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1 The Dutch edition is titled *Mijn Frijheid* (*My Freedom*): see Bosch 2008.
After Hirsi Ali’s father escaped from prison, the family resided in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and finally in Kenya. Hirsi Ali’s critique of Islam is authenticated by her dual claim to have been a participant in Islamic intolerance as well as a victim of Islamic patriarchy. *Infidel* relates how she falls under the spell of a charismatic female teacher, Sister Amina, while attending a Muslim high school in Kenya. Under Sister Aziza’s influence, she begins to pray regularly and to wear hijab and abaya. She experienced a sense of power from this dress:

> It had a thrill to it, a sensuous feeling. It made me feel powerful: underneath this screen lay a previously unsuspected, but potentially lethal, femininity. I was unique: very few people walked about like that in those days in Nairobi. Weirdly, it made me feel like an individual. It sent out a message of superiority: I was the one true Muslim (Hirsi Ali 2007: 85).

At Sister Aziza’s urging, she also begins to evangelise to Christian students and to blame ‘the Jews’ for the ills of the world. This assertive and politicised brand of Islam was ‘much closer to the source of the religion’ than her grandmother’s folk Islam, which synthesised the monotheistic religion with pre-Islamic beliefs such as spirit ancestors (Hirsi Ali 2007: 88). Hirsi Ali’s insistence that ‘true Islam’ is the Islam of contemporary political Islamism, as represented by figures such as Sayeed Qutb and Osama bin Laden, outlasted her adherence to Islamism, and forms a central element of her current critique.

The sense of empowerment that Hirsi Ali experiences after her discovery of Islamism did not end her troubles. Suffering from the miseries of exile and a deteriorating marriage, her mother sinks into depression and subjects her daughters to violent rages and beatings. But by Hirsi Ali’s account, it is a decision taken by her hitherto enlightened father that changes her life when despite her opposition, he contracts her marriage with a cousin living in Canada. En route to meet her new husband there, Hirsi Ali bolted for the Netherlands, where she claimed asylum and where she gradually began to move away from the signifiers of her cultural and religious background – discarding her *hijab*, distancing herself from the Somali community, entering into a relationship with a non-Muslim Dutch man, and studying political science at Leiden University. However, she continued to identify as Muslim until the events of 11 September 2001 led her to conclude that the violence mandated by Osama bin Laden was the inevitable outcome of Islam’s teachings. Having begun her political life with a Labour party-affiliated think tank, she quickly attracted public attention with a series of provocative interviews about Islam. As she became increasingly critical of multiculturalism, she was persuaded to shift her alliance to the right-wing VVD and become a member of parliament.
Her explanation for this political shift is her claim that left-wing multiculturalists were allowing Muslim women and girls to be subjected to religiously-mandated abuses such as genital mutilation and honour killing – a failure that she attributes to naivety rather than malice.

Hirsi Ali gained international attention after she collaborated with filmmaker Theo van Gogh on their film Submission Part I, which reiterated the perceived connection between Islam and violence against women by depicting abused women with verses from the Qur’an inscribed on their semi-naked bodies. Outrage against the film culminated in van Gogh’s murder by a Dutch-Moroccan youth who staked a death-threat addressed to Hirsi Ali to Van Gogh's body. In the wake of Van Gogh’s death, Hirsi Ali’s neighbours successfully filed a court case demanding that she move out of her apartment because of the security hazard that her presence entailed. She resigned as a member of the Dutch parliament after a television documentary drew attention to the fact that she had not fled directly from war-torn Somalia, as she had claimed in her asylum application, but from Kenya, where she had been a legal resident for many years. She countered that she had indeed been fleeing: not from a war zone, but from her family's attempt to force her into marriage. She was briefly threatened with the loss of her Dutch citizenship before her departure for the United States, where she took up a position at the American Enterprise Institute.

Hirsi Ali updates her story and expands her reflections on religion and politics in Nomad (Hirsi Ali 2010). While the ‘clash’ between Islam and the Enlightenment remains her focus, her discussion ranges across issues such as multiculturalism, feminism, tribalism, modernity, welfare, education and racism. She again uses her family as a starting point, responding to readers who had asked whether the experiences she had used as the basis for her critique of Islam in Infidel were representative of Muslim families in general. She writes that reconnecting with her family underlined her belief that her family's dysfunction was indeed ‘typical’. Moreover, ‘the dysfunctional Muslim family constitutes a threat to the very fabric of Western life’ (Hirsi Ali 2010: xix).

Hirsi Ali’s memoirs provide a compelling narrative not only of suffering and escape, but also of personal misguidance and redemption. Hers is a missionary narrative in which the ‘salvation’ story of the convert is set alongside descriptions of the benighted lives of those who are yet to see the light. And it is also a capitalist rags-to-riches tale of the rise of a disempowered refugee to membership of Time Magazine’s list of the world’s 100 most influential people (Manji 2005). Her critique of Islam is validated by her autoethnographic account not only of her former suffering, but also of her present success. While the former is
attributed to her family’s religious beliefs, the latter is ascribed to her discovery of the Enlightenment.

2. Islam in Europe: Threat, barbarity and discrimination

The presentation of the Hirsi Ali narrative as a warning heightens its sense of urgency and relevance. Muslim communities in Europe have come to be widely regarded as the enemy within, an alien force intent on conquest. While terrorist attacks are the most visible form of this onslaught, the perceived erosion of ‘Western’ Enlightenment social and cultural values is described as presenting an even more insidious danger. ‘Eurabia’ is said to be the West’s frontline in the war against Islam, and Europe’s experience is held up as a warning to other Western societies such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. While other writers such as Oriana Fallanci, Bat Ye’Or, Bruce Bawer and Christopher Caldwell have also promoted this world-view, Hirsi Ali’s testimony as a refugee who fled from a Muslim family in Africa only to find herself confronted by the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe is regarded as particularly compelling testimony (Fallaci 2002; Ye’Or 2005; Bawer 2006; Caldwell 2009).

Hirsi Ali’s warning against the Islamic threat is accompanied by a call for the west to adopt a more assertive attitude towards proclaiming the superiority of its own values and disciplining renegade migrant communities. The confrontation with Islam also requires disparate elements within the west to overcome their superficial differences in order to confront the threat posed by the common enemy of Islam, as well as to ‘rescue’ Muslims from the tyranny of their own religious community. The West’s internal differences of opinion are evidence of a shared Enlightenment legacy of free expression and debate – a legacy that Muslims do not share. She also depicts the West as being dangerously undermined by weak elements within its own culture in the face of infiltration by hostile outsiders, identifying several particular ‘weak points’ within the West that provide Muslims with vulnerable targets for manipulation.

Hirsi Ali is especially contemptuous of Western academics who dispute representations of Islam as barbaric and uncivilised:

Infuriatingly stupid analysts – especially people who called themselves Arabists, yet who seemed to know next to nothing about the reality of the Islamic world – wrote reams of commentary. Their articles were all about Islam saving Aristotle and the zero, which medieval Muslim scholars had done more than eight hundred years ago; about Islam being a religion of peace and tolerance, not the slightest bit violent. These were fairy tales, nothing to do with the real world I knew (Hirsi Ali 2007: 270).
She describes both fundamentalist Christians and Christians who would ‘appease Islam’ by participating in interfaith dialogue as ‘a liability to Western civilisation’, unlike Christians who stand firm against Islam while sharing the Christian message of a tolerant and loving God (Hirsi Ali 2010: xx). Despite her frequently stated atheism, Hirsi Ali believes that the Christian churches have an important role to play in the battle against Islam, calling for ‘a strategic alliance between secular people and Christians, including the Roman Catholic Church’ (Hirsi Ali 2010: 240).

Hirsi Ali explains the ‘paradox’ of her position by saying the post-Enlightenment Catholic Church is no longer a source of religious persecution and may provide a satisfactory religious alternative for those Muslims who instinctively recoil from the violence of bin Laden, but are not yet ready to face the idea of a world without God. Moderate Christians have been deterred from evangelism by the desire to seem culturally inclusive, but their religion could offer Muslims a preferable (if equally delusional) placebo.

Hirsi Ali describes feminism (or ‘a certain type of feminism’) as another weak element in the western reaction to Islam and Muslims. Here, she takes up the question posed by Susan Moller Okin in her 1999 essay ‘Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?’, that is, ‘What should be done when the claims of minority cultures or religion clash with the norm of gender equality that is at least formally endorsed by liberal states (however much they continue to violate it in their practice?’ (Okin 1999). Hirsi Ali writes of a fantasy in which

[...]he wealthy women of the West… would surge forward to build a new edifice of freedom, strength, and plenty for the East, knocking down the old hovels and opening the visible and invisible prison doors to allow their sisters to see the light of day.

This is my dream. But frankly, I do not know if Western feminists have the courage or clarity of vision to help me realize it.

Like Christopher Hitchens and Pamela Bone, Hirsi Ali represents gender equality as a core western/Enlightenment value that is under siege from Islam, with hard-won achievements in the area of women’s rights under threat from Muslim communities determined to maintain patriarchal norms and practices after relocating to the west. Feminists could therefore be expected to play a highly active role in defending both their Muslim sisters and their own
societies against the threat posed by Islam. However, she argues that many feminists have prioritised their commitment to multiculturalism above their obligations to their own gender.

In describing how this ‘certain kind of feminism’ has failed in its responsibility towards Muslim women, Hirsi Ali cites an encounter between Germaine Greer and the Australian journalist Pamela Bone (see also James 2009). Bone had used the discussion forum after Greer’s lecture on the contemporary relevance of Jane Austen to ask ‘why it was that Western feminists seemed so reluctant to speak out against things such as honour killings’ (Bone 2007). According to Bone’s report, Greer responded by noting that ‘it’s just very tricky to change another culture’ and that women ‘here’ (ie Australia) also suffered from patriarchal oppression. “Odd that so many old feminists think racism is worse that sexism” (Hirsi Ali 2010: 255). This dismissal of a notable feminist icon has been widely cited as illustrating feminism’s irrelevance and failure, particularly with regard to the struggle to liberate Muslim women (James 2009).

3. Culture wars: ‘Enlightenment fundamentalists’ vs ‘moral relativists’

The issue of Islam serves as a vehicle for highly charged disputes over the question of the identity and values of ‘the West’. A quiz in The Times (with an illustration of Martin Amis broadcasting a speech bubble reading ‘Are you a phoney liberal?’) offered readers the opportunity to discover ‘Where do you stand in the new culture wars?’ by answering questions such as ‘Can honour killings and genital mutilation be placed in their ‘cultural’ context?’ and ‘Are freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of religions (and atheism) universal human rights?’ and checking their answers against a ‘phoney-ometer’ (2007). Among the questions was ‘Is Ayaan Hirsi Ali too critical of Islam?’ (Correct answer – No.)

The murder of Van Gogh and the threat to Hirsi Ali herself followed similar threats against during the 1990s against Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen. As Talal Asad wrote in 1997, public discourse generated in response to these threats displayed an ‘unevenness of moral concern’ for the safety of literary figures in comparison to the widespread torture and deaths of non-literary figures around the world (Asad 1997: 185). The threats to Rushdie and Nasreen (and Hirsi Ali) were regarded not only as endangering particular individuals but as assaults on non-negotiable principles such as freedom of speech. ‘One either stands with Rushdie (and now also Taslima) or one excuses the zealots’ (Asad 1997: 187).

The response to Hirsi Ali’s work and persona is depicted as a litmus test of loyalty for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to core ‘Enlightenment’ values such as freedom of speech
and feminism. This framing of ‘the new culture wars’ represents ‘the West’ as united by the legacy of the Enlightenment while endangered not only from alien elements that have taken up residence within its territory, but from non-Muslim intellectuals who have failed to recognise and adequately respond to the threat of ‘Islam’. According to this discourse, the effort to discipline unruly Muslim communities requires the west to reclaim a clear sense of its own identity and the common intellectual heritage that is supposed to unite its disparate elements.

The danger posed by this internal security hazard is reinforced by external security threats. Bernard Henri Levy described Pakistan and Hirsi Ali as the two frontlines in the ‘war on terror’ – Pakistan as the headquarters of al Qaida and Hirsi Ali as ‘personally, a sort of frontline because she is always in danger of losing her life for defending the ideas of liberal civilisation.’ She is described as the counterpart to Cold War dissidents such as Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn: ‘Same battle, different terrain’ (Henri Levy 2006). Similarly, Paul Berman’s The Flight of the Intellectuals accuses Hirsi Ali’s western critics of repeating the moral failures of the Cold War: ‘The campaign in the liberal press against Hirsi Ali seems to me unprecedented – at least since the days when lonely dissident refugees from Stalin’s Soviet Union used to find themselves slandered in the Western pro-communist press’ (Berman 2010: 263).

The threat to Hirsi Ali's life and the consequent intrusive security under which she lives have rendered fraught any criticism of her work, so that those Muslims and non-Muslims who dispute her opinions are often represented as sharing a common cause with those who threaten her safety. Pascal Bruckner encapsulates this attitude, writing, ‘It’s not enough that Ayaan Hirsi Ali has to live like a recluse, threatened with having her throat slit by radicals and surrounded by bodyguards. She…has to endure the ridicule of the high-minded idealists and armchair philosophers’ (Bruckner 2007). The publication of Murder in Amsterdam, Ian Buruma’s account of Van Gogh’s death generated heated debate. Timothy Garton-Ash review of the book introduced the term ‘Enlightenment fundamentalist’ to describe Hirsi Ali – a phrase that was widely denounced as a dangerous contradiction in terms (Buruma 2006; Garton Ash 2007; Hitchens 2007).

Hirsi Ali’s call for widely disparate elements within the West to present a united front against Islam is mirrored by her supporters’ representation of Hirsi Ali herself as a banner that transcends national boundaries to represent the West as a whole. Hirsi Ali is represented as an articulate defender of Western/European collective values and her safety is therefore a collective responsibility. This rationale underpinned a campaign led by Bernard Henri Levi to
grant French citizenship to Hirsi Ali after the Netherlands withdrew her security funding because of her US residency. For Henri Levi and others, her lack of French residency or language skills was less important than her supposed embodiment of European values (2008). Loyalty to her cause was represented as a litmus test for non-Muslim as well as Muslim European citizens.

Similar conflicts regarding Hirsi Ali have been generated within Australian public discourse (Abdallah 2010; Neighbour 2010; Weisser 2010). Her calls during her 2010 visit for Australia to curb the intake of asylum-seekers and subject them to a test for “Enlightenment values” attracted particular attention, given the high profile of this issue in Australian public discourse. According to her own account, Hirsi Ali herself did not develop a commitment to the Enlightenment until after migration, when she undertook further studies at the University of Leiden, an issue left unexplored by her Australian interviewers. This may be due to an unspoken assumption that her stated reason for seeking asylum – her desire to escape a forced marriage – signified her readiness to embrace an as-yet unformed understanding of Enlightenment values. However, an assertive approach to matrimony is not incompatible with the Islamist values denounced by Hirsi Ali. The famous Egyptian Islamist and ally of Hassan al Banna, Zaynab al Ghazali, made her second marriage conditional on her husband’s understanding that her commitment to jihad took precedence over her commitment to matrimony (Hoffman 1985). Saba Mahmood documents a similarly independent attitude among grassroots women Islamists in Cairo (Mahmood 2005). Hirsi Ali’s renunciation of her family’s choice of husband does not in itself indicate that she would have passed a European “values test” at her point of entry.

4. Hirsi Ali as typical and as exceptional
One recurring thread in the discussion of Hirsi Ali is the debate as to whether her life should be regarded as either ‘typical’ or ‘exceptional’ for a woman of Muslim background in terms of either adversity or achievement. While Hirsi Ali’s supporters regard her story as typical in terms of suffering and exceptional in terms of achievement, her adversaries tend to take the reverse position.

Hirsi Ali herself is keen to emphasise her family is ‘typical’ of Muslim families. “Time and time again, I heard the question: How typical was your experience? Are you in any way representative? Nomad answers that question. It is not only about my own life as a wanderer in the West; it is about the lives of many immigrants to the West, the philosophical and very read difficulties of people, especially women, who live in a tightly closed Muslim culture
within a broadly open Western one” (Hirsi Ali 2010: xiii-xiv) This claim to represent a
universal female Muslim narrative has gained wide acceptance within western discourse,
where her story is represented as reflecting the lives of untold millions of Muslim women,
while simultaneously providing her with a unique perspective and sanctifying her options
through her experience of suffering.

To the extent that Muslim respondents regard her account of her youthful suffering as
credible, they stress that her experience is should not be regarded as reflecting a universal
narrative. This is because some of the practices she describes are limited to particular ethic
communities, while others were generated by her own family circumstances. As Australian
Muslim academic Jamila Hussain said when interviewed about Hirsi Ali’s visit to Australia
‘She’s obviously had some dreadful experiences, but they’re not typical’(Kearney 2007). Other
women who have experienced gender violence within Muslim communities strongly
refute Hirsi Ali’s assertion that Islam generated their suffering. The most dramatic illustration
of this was a televised meeting between Hirsi Ali and the Muslim women at a women’s
shelter in Amsterdam during which the women were shown the film Submission. This
encounter between Hirsi Ali and some of the women on whose behalf she claims to be acting
has since been widely discussed and analysed. The women at the shelter do not fit the
stereotype of the highly religious Muslim woman, as measured by the conventional indicator
of dress. However, they angrily rebut Hirsi Ali’s claim that Islam provides a mandate for
domestic violence, instead asserting that their religious faith provided them with the
confidence to exit their abusive relationships (Wichelen 2005).

Many Muslims also resist the depiction of Hirsi Ali’s achievements as exceptional and
only possible because of her willingness to renounce her religious background. While media
representations focus on Hirsi Ali as a symbol of disadvantage, in many regards she was
better resourced on arrival in Europe than most other refugees in terms of class and education.
While the schools she had attended in Saudi Arabia and Kenya may have fallen short of
European standards in many regards, they were intended to equip their students for a tertiary
and possibly an international education. Hirsi Ali disparages other migrants for their failure to
learn the language of their new location, and her success in rapidly acquiring sufficient
fluency in Dutch to undertake employment as a translator is testimony to her skill as a linguist
(and the daughter of a linguist). However, her education at an English-medium high school in
Kenya provided her with fluency in the contemporary global language to enhance her ability
to communicate immediately upon arrival in the Netherlands. Nor is she the only Muslim
woman immigrant to achieve a tertiary education and professional career, although her fame eclipses other success stories.

**Conclusion**

Hirsi Ali’s claim that western liberals have prioritised the struggle against racial discrimination at the expense of that against gender discrimination has received an enthusiastic welcome among conservatives who had not previously displayed a strong commitment to gender empowerment, as well as feminists such as Pamela Bone who see multiculturalism as undermining hard-fought victories. However, gender and racial discrimination are more effectively combated simultaneously rather than sequentially. Transversal campaigns (Yuval-Davis 1997) are necessarily more complex than the form of imperial feminism for which Hirsi Ali has become a champion. However, they offer far greater potential for combating gender and racial discrimination alike.
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