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Ayaan Hirsi Ali: daring or dogmatic?

Debates on multiculturalism and emancipation in the Netherlands

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is probably one of the present-day's most controversial politicians. Born in 1967 in Mogadishu (Somalia), she came to the Netherlands as a refugee in 1992 and has graduated in political science. She was active within labor party till 2002 when she switched to the liberal party. She became the member of the Dutch Parliament for the same party in 2003. She is famous for her radical standpoints against Islam in general and the Islamic community in the Netherlands in particular. The same standpoints assumingly became the base of some threats from Islamic community that drove her into temporary hiding in 2002. This event, however, gave her more visibility in the media and politics and made her one of the most wanted TV guests.

In 2002 I first saw Ayaan as she appeared in a discussion program on Dutch television. At that time, I saw a strong woman who fought for her ideas: someone who dared to distance herself from her traditional, Islamic background and by doing so, positioned herself against the traditional Islamic community in the Netherlands. Her arguments on the incompatibility of Islamic belief and women's emancipation were sharp. She stood up for the rights of Islamic women, who she believed were suppressed by Islamic tradition and law. I found Hirsi Ali's approach to the emancipation of Islamic women attractive and identified with her for different reasons. Firstly because 15 years ago I left my homeland Iran as a refugee from an Islamic regime, whose suppression in the name of Islam I had experienced both because of my political background (as a leftist) and because of my gender. Secondly, I also strongly concerned with the emancipation of women, particularly of women who share my own background: women from Islamic countries.

However, my identification with Ayaan did not last long. The woman, I initially considered a pioneer for the emancipation of Islamic women, turned out to hold dogmatic views that left little room for nuances. I soon realized that Ayaan had become a welcome mouthpiece for the dominant discourse on Islam in the Netherlands that pictures Islamic migrants as problems and enemies of the nation. Who could better represent the dominant view than a person with

an Islamic background? Therefore, predictably, Ayaan soon became a prominent figure both for the media and in politics.¹ She sailed on the conservative ideas in the Netherlands that push migrants - the most marginalized group in society - even further into isolation. But before pursuing my discussion, it is necessary to introduce its context.

A brief history on immigration discourses

In spite of the longer history of immigration, strongly linked to colonialization, the discourse in the Netherlands is dominated by the arrival of the so-called “guest workers” in the late 1950s. Postwar economic growth and the need for unskilled labor forced the Dutch government to look beyond its borders, fostering labor contracts first with Italy and Spain and later with Turkey and Morocco (Wilterdink 1998: 58). In the 1980s the Dutch government started to focus on the integration of this group of immigrants when it realized that migration, viewed as temporary, had gained a more permanent character (Entzinger 1998: 68, ‘t Hoen and Jansen 1996: 6). The approach during that period focused on integration of immigrants on a group-basis did not exclude the maintenance of the immigrants’ own identities (“integratie met behoud van eigen identiteit”). Later, from 1990s, this approach was criticized as being one of the major reasons for the isolation of immigrants in the society and therefore shifted to integration on an individual basis (Entzinger 1998: 71).

It was in the light of these changes that the cultural background of the migrants from Islamic countries was pictured as even more problematic for their integration into the Dutch society. The low economic position and social isolation of these Islamic migrants made them the underclass citizens of the Dutch society. As the underdog in Dutch society it is not strange at all that the problems of the society became related to this group of migrants. The stereotypes related to this position are also no surprise at all: uneducated so dumb, uncivilized and thus criminals and so dangerous. This atmosphere of blaming the victims, enabled the rightwing political movement to gain political popularity for their anti-immigration ideas. In the beginning of the 1990s it was Bolkestein, the leader of the liberal party (VVD), who gained attention through his claims about the negative social, cultural, and economic impact of the migrants on Dutch society and about the need to deal with the integration of minorities with “toughness”(see *de Volkskrant*, September 12, 1991). By doing so, he touched on issues that used to belong to the extreme right or the Center Democratic Party (CD) in the Netherlands. Whereas the unpopular CD party only had a minor platform, Bolkestein’s ideas, which were very similar to those of the CD, reached many because of the rather sophisticated way he presented them. Bolkestein emphasized the

incompatibility between Islamic and Western values, suggesting that (un-integrated) Islamic immigrants were the main problems of Dutch society and could endanger Western achievements. He blamed the government for not being rigid enough on both integration policy and regulations related to asylum-seekers, which supposedly led to a growing percentage of criminality and increasing numbers of asylum-seekers entering the Netherlands. In his view the only successful immigration policy was to limit the entrance of new immigrants and focus on the integration of already existing immigrants in the Netherlands. The only way to do this was to leave politically correct attitudes behind and pressure immigrants to completely integrate into Dutch society.

Even though Bolkestein's assimilative/restrictive approach was celebrated by some who regarded him as a person who was direct enough to express their own discomfort with immigrants, there were others – the majority of political parties and intellectuals – who distanced themselves from his approach. Though Bolkestein's ideas influenced the discourse on migration in the beginning of the 1990s, his ideas did not become dominant. Yet, they did break certain taboos in Dutch public space: for the first time a major political party strongly argued against the previously dominant “toleration of difference”- discourse.

After Bolkestein it was Paul Scheffer, a leftist publicist, who became the core figure in the media after the publication of article ‘the multicultural drama’ (‘Het Multiculturele Drama’, *NRC Handelsblad*, Saturday 29 January 2000). Scheffer argued that the integration of immigrants into Dutch society had failed and that multiculturalism was merely an illusion because it ignored the formation of an underclass of migrants. He emphasized, as Bolkestein did, the importance of unconditional integration of immigrants through learning the language and Dutch history. In Scheffer's view, the government had been too indifferent about the fate of immigrants, and immigrants had been too apathetic in their efforts at integration. The article caused many reactions in the media, and resulted in a response by Scheffer (*NRC Handelsblad* 25 March 2000). The similarity of Scheffer's standpoints with those of Bolkestein was such that Bolkestein referred to it as “a feeling of déjà vu” (*NRC Handelsblad* 20 May 2000). The difference was that in 2000 this assimilative discourse on migration became the dominant discourse on migration in the Netherlands, which was not the case in the 1990s. However this dominance remained at the discursive level.

This changed however with the appearance of Pim Fortuyn, the only figure who was able to personify the ideas of both Bolkestein and Scheffer. Once a scholar and publicist, his impact

became remarkable when he was chosen as the leader of the newly established party, Leefbaar Nederland (Liveable Netherlands) and gained great popularity of the party among the Dutch people. This, together with the prominence he gained in the media, shocked the old-school politicians. His success with the Dutch public was greatly enhanced by the events of September 11, 2001. In the minds of many, the potential enmity of Islamic migrants that Bolkestein discussed in the 1990s changed from speculation to fact. This made it easier for Fortuyn to say things that had been implied before, but never made explicit. In an interview in *de Volkskrant* of February the 9th 2002, Fortuyn used phrases such as “Islam is a backward culture” or “the real refugees do not reach Holland” – comments that unsettled the foundation of Dutch politics.

The shock was so severe that Fortuyn’s own party – Leefbaar Nederland – chose to distance itself from him immediately after the interview. Fortuyn however, did not stop his activities. Instead, he started his own party, Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF), which despite the initial setback, managed to gain great popularity. The first achievement was in the municipal elections of Rotterdam where it became the biggest party. The LPF was also running for seats in the national parliament. Fortuyn, however, did not have a chance to be part of those elections because he was shot and died on May the 6th 2002, only shortly before the elections. Nevertheless, his political discourse - an extension of the discourses from the 1990s - changed the Netherlands to a country where the dichotomies between the Dutch and the migrants have become greater than ever before and where any kind of fear or shortcoming is translated into hatred towards Islam and migrants from Islamic countries by the Dutch and *vice versa*.

Beneath this rightist discourse in the Netherlands lie particular definitions of ‘nation’ and ‘culture’. What the three above-mentioned figures in the Netherlands share is their emphasis on the incompatibility of cultures and on the need to protect Dutch culture and identity from cultural invasion and to promote Dutch cultural norms and values. This newly formed exclusionary rhetoric is based on a homogeneous, static, coherent, and rooted notion of culture which Stolcke calls ‘cultural fundamentalism’ (1995: 4). Now it is not the race that needs to be protected but a historically rooted, homogenous national culture: “racism without race” (idem). This new kind of exclusion in the name of culture goes beyond the borders of the Netherlands: it has become the common discourse of the Europe and the West in general. It, however, not only legitimizes an attack on the rights of the Islamic immigrants inside its borders, but also justifies military actions outside its borders in the name of democracy and humanism, what Chomsky (1999) calls: “military humanism”. In the Netherlands this liberal enlightenment

fundamentalism developed in a particular way as it adapted to the welfare state by blaming immigrants for their dependence on the state that developed due to high unemployment rates. The recent discursive assumption has been that the social and economic problems of immigrants will be solved once they distance from their culture and assimilate into Dutch society. This assumption that explains the immigrant's problems through culture is not only naïve – it is also very specific form of cultural fundamentalism, which is not just about protecting Dutch culture but it is also about converting others to it. This new kind of exclusion in the name of culture not only deepens the “us and them” dichotomies within the society but also weakens the very foundations of the nation - as I argue below.

The discourse of duality in citizenship

Within a democratic system, such as the Netherlands, it is not fear of punishment or violence that regulates society, but responsibilities internalized by its citizens. However, this seems not to be the case for migrants, who are treated as if the only way to install in them a sense of obligation to society is through state dictates and police control. There is a dual discourse of citizenship: one discourse is for the ‘real Dutch’, who are responsible citizens and for whom the police state works in the background. The other discourse is for the ‘unwanted Dutch’, citizens or migrants who are not aware of their duties and have to be forced to accept their responsibilities by an active police state.

It is in light of these developments that phrases are heard like: “immigrants have to learn the Dutch language, otherwise...”, “immigrant women have to be saved from their husbands” or “immigrants have to integrate into the Dutch society, otherwise...”. This kind of rhetoric goes as far as including not just the public performance of migrants, but even put their private life into the discussion. In this way migrants do not only become second-class citizens, they also become passive citizens who are not mature enough to decide for themselves. It is this dualistic approach towards citizenship within Dutch society that in the long run could undermine the foundations of the Dutch democratic state – those based on active citizenship.

Secularist's arrogance

The above-mentioned framework of duality treats Islamic migrants as passive and immature citizens who should simply do what the society dictates them. Ironically, even I as an ex-marxist find it necessary to defend Islam in the face of such a homogenizing and patronizing approach to Islamic migrants. For a long time I have considered Islam to be the major reason

that I had to leave the country of my childhood memories and my loved ones. It was in the Netherlands that I learned to make a distinction between a dogmatic way of thinking and someone's belief. I have learned that Islam as a religion should not be blamed as a whole because of the acts of a repressive regime. By practicing democracy in the Netherlands, I learned to respect people for their thoughts as long as those thoughts were not forced on me. And it is here that Ayaan and I differ. I believe that the standpoints of Ayaan on the emancipation of Islamic women migrants are too simplistic, too reductionist, and too dogmatic.

I recognize these standpoints from my own experiences in Iran. I used to be a very strict atheist and was against belief in any religion. However I never admitted that my belief in Marxism was as religious as it could get. I believed strongly in the slogan that "religion is the opium of the people" and for me, and for many others, this was enough to be considered an intellectual. Distancing oneself from Islam and calling religion backward often sufficed to feel like and be considered as an enlightened person.

It was in the Netherlands that I realized how shortsighted and dogmatic this kind of thought was. I found out that real enlightenment does not come from exclusion but inclusion of thoughts. Real enlightenment means thinking and reflecting upon one's own thoughts, and being brave enough to listen to the other. The art of knowing is not in excluding other ideas by suppressing or ignoring them; the art is to confront other ideas through dialogue. The Dutch philosopher Theo de Boer (1993) makes the interesting point that real dialogue happens when one is able to suspend one's own ideas for a while in order to listen to another's arguments. This he considers as one of the basic conditions for any dialogue. I would go one step further and believe that this is the fundamental act for transcending notions that are taken for granted in one's own thinking. When one is able to suspend one's own thoughts for a short while in order to really listen, a space is created – even if it is for a short while – to challenge those notions that are taken for granted. This is the moment when one's thought is truly challenged by the other. In this way, one is able to transcend the limits of tacit knowledge. This kind of approach requires bravery, because the mind is then vulnerable towards the unknown by leaving the space open to absorb. To the contrary, the person who does not make space for this type of dialog is trapped within the comfortable borders of the taken for granted.

Let me elaborate on this point through one of my experiences some time ago. As mentioned above, I came to the Netherlands from Iran with much hatred towards Islam. In that period I

believed strongly that the emancipation of women within Islam was impossible. I believed that Islam suppressed women and that the women who believed in Islam, or any other religion for that matter, were unconscious – or victims of false consciousness – and had to become aware of their rights. This thought stayed with me for many years until I went to China.

It was in 1995 that I went to the International Women's Conference in China. I had already heard that a group of Iranian women would come to the conference from Iran to propagate the standpoints of the Islamic regime. I was strongly committed to expose the backward nature of the Islamic regime. Once in China I came across my potential comrades: other Iranian exiles who lived outside Iran. They were as determined as I in the fight against the women coming from Iran. But as soon as I saw the group of women from Iran I was amazed by the diversity of the group and the way they had prepared themselves for the conference. The women whom I thought were unaware of their rights and were merely puppets of the regime seemed to be highly educated, well informed, and many, but not all, thirsty for knowledge and ready for dialogue. On the other side, I painfully found out that the women exiles that I considered my allies had become the dogmatic counterpart. They were more in favor of attacking and insulting the others than in having a meaningful dialogue on women's rights.

On the side of the women from Iran I could distinguish several groups of women. In the first group, the women were strong believers in the Islamic framework and tried to defend the position of women within the system as it existed in Iran. These women were against the title of feminism because they considered it a Western concept. They also criticized the notion of equality propagated by modernist-feminist activists in the West. Interestingly enough they were well-informed of the postmodern emphasis on difference and its criticism of the modernist approach to equality, and they implicitly used this to defend their position. This group I called Islamic women activists. The second group consisted of women who openly called themselves feminists. Within this group there were two smaller groups to distinguish: the Islamic feminists and the secular feminists. Both of the groups were working hard to stretch the limits of the Islamic republic in order to defend and safeguard the rights of women in Iran as equals to men. The secular feminists could not state their secularism openly because within the Islamic regime there was no space for public secularism at that time. For that reason both called themselves Islamic feminists. What these women had in common was that most of them were very well read on the theories of feminism and had prepared the texts for the conference carefully (see Ghorashi 1996).

I was shocked to see that these women, whom I considered to be unaware of their rights, were actually more conscious of their rights than many of my so-called leftist comrades who were supposed to be the enlightened ones. For these women, the fact that they considered religion backward was enough not to prepare themselves for any discussion. They thought that they knew all there was to know about emancipation. They kept repeating themselves. Most of their time was spent insulting religious people not just from Iran but also from other Islamic countries. I also observed this arrogance in the approach of Ayaan: an arrogance that does not leave room for reflection. The danger of this kind of approach is that all women from the Islamic world are categorized into two groups. One group consists of women like Ayaan who strongly condemn Islam in order to gain emancipation. The other group is the one that accepts suppression from Islam and is not aware of its rights as women, thus not emancipated. The second group is seen as backward and unconscious of its rights. As a result, it is seen as unworthy of being an equal partner in any kind of dialogue. The question is then: how is it possible to have a dialogue with Islamic women on the issue of emancipation when they are considered backward? This brings me to another question: is there any need for discussion at all, or is the only way to emancipation the path of “the enlightened ones?”

I do not see any room for dialogue when there is no respect for the other party. The approach of Ayaan towards the emancipation of Islamic women fits perfectly within the dominant discourse on Islamic migrants in the Netherlands. The Islamic migrants are considered half-citizens who have to be told to do what is good for them. They are supposed to follow the path that is painted for them. When it comes to this group in the society, we hear much more about obligations than rights, something that is not the case for the ‘real Dutch’. For Islamic migrants, the word ‘can’ is often replaced by the word ‘must’. This dual approach towards citizens in the Netherlands undermines the democratic system.

Democratic states create a balance of power through the mediation of civil society that decreases the top-down power of the state. The creation of civil society as a midfield between the state and individuals has contributed to safeguarding the rights of citizens through lobbying. The right to organize and the right to choose have been essential ingredients of the formation of Dutch society. But this achievement is in danger when the right of active participation of the citizens is denied to a part of those citizens. If, for example, Islamic schools were to be forbidden, this would affect not only migrants but also the historical basis of Dutch society,

namely the right to organize along religious lines. Any kind of dual approach towards migrants as 'half citizens' can thus undermine the foundation of Dutch society as a whole.

It is essential for any democratic state to stimulate the sense of belonging in its citizens and to invite their active participation in the process of decision-making. When citizens feel a sense of belonging to the nation-state they are living in, they keep up with the societal duties and stay aware of their rights. One of the achievements of Dutch society has been that its population can feel a sense of belonging in spite of differences in background. This sense of belonging should also be the foundation on which a multicultural society is based. In the case of the Netherlands, this can happen by stimulating migrants' sense of belonging to Dutch society. They can, however, only feel as part of society if they know that their voices are taken seriously as active equals. An important part of this inclusion is respect for the choices the individual migrants make: a choice that can include the maintenance of their culture. When these choices are respected, migrants can feel included in the society through their difference. They can feel Dutch but differently Dutch like: Islamic-Dutch or Moroccan-Dutch (see Ghorashi 2003). In this way Dutchness includes diversity and provides a path for migrants to feel a part of Dutch society. Hyphenated Dutch can become Dutch without a loss of religious or culture identity. This is the only fruitful answer for any multicultural state; a state where the migrants are considered as full and equal citizens with rights and duties at the same time.

However the dominant discourse combined with recent developments in the Netherlands does not stimulate this sense of belonging. The opposite is the case. "Cultural fundamentalism", the new form of exclusion rhetoric, creates a wall between cultures through which any kind of combination of cultures becomes impossible. This rhetoric goes even further when the superiority of Western culture and values become the justification for the suppression of other cultures. In this way the suppressive enlighteners are allowed to force their values on others. This journey that begins with enlightenment/cultural fundamentalism leads to the end of civil society. What remains is a society with little or no space for the other. In this way the new fundamentalism, which is protective of Dutch culture and history, undermines the most significant foundation of Dutch society, namely active participation of its citizens in the decision-making process. These developments define migrants as 'unwanted citizens'. This labeling in turn contributes to their isolation and stimulates their rejection of Dutch society. This increases the conflict between the 'real Dutch' and the 'unwanted Dutch' and contributes even more to the already existing problems within the society.

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Endnotes

- ¹ See for an overview: www.emancipatie.nl and/or www.extra-media.nl/nummer 13.

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