

April 27, 2008

IDEAS & TRENDS

Muslim Rebel Sisters: At Odds With Islam and Each Other

By BARRY GEWEN

AYAAN HIRSI ALI and Irshad Manji are two of the most prominent and outspoken critics of what they and others see as “mainstream Islam.” Brilliant, dynamic women — the overused word “charismatic” is not inappropriate for either one — they have each rebelled against a Muslim upbringing to become public figures with large and devoted followings. Both are successful authors: Ms. Hirsi Ali’s autobiography, “Infidel,” was a New York Times best seller; Ms. Manji’s combination memoir-polemic, “The Trouble With Islam Today,” has been published in almost 30 countries. They are firm and unyielding in their support for the West, feminism, reason, freedom — and they have paid a price: both have been targets of death threats and have required protection; in Ms. Hirsi Ali’s case, around-the-clock protection.

Yet though they are allies on one level, their approaches to Islam are strikingly different, with one working outside the religion and one within. Neither one can be considered a spokeswoman for a significant Muslim constituency in the Middle East. (Indeed, their most sympathetic audiences are probably Western.) But their differences have implications for all the big issues the West grapples with in considering the Muslim world. How much popular support do terrorists have? Is a secular Middle East possible, and what’s the best way to promote it? Is Islam itself an enemy of the West?

Ms. Hirsi Ali is an avowed atheist whose criticisms can be seen as attacks not only on radical Islamism but on the religion of Islam over all. [George W. Bush](#) was wrong, she says, when he announced that Islam was being held hostage by a terrorist minority: “Islam is being held hostage by itself.” About the 9/11 attacks, she declared: “This is Islam,” and “not just Islam, this was the core of Islam.” The attacks forced her to decide “which side was I on?” she writes in “Infidel.” And further, “Where did I stand on Islam?” Her book is the story of how she chose the West.

For Ms. Manji, there has been no such either-or choice. She is a practicing Muslim who — though she can be as caustic about her coreligionists as Ms. Hirsi Ali — seeks to change her faith from within. As founder and director of the Moral Courage Project at [New York University](#), she assists other maverick writers and scholars who dissent within their communities. “What I want,” Ms. Manji has said, “is an Islamic Reformation,” and in contrast to Ms. Hirsi Ali, she adds, there is “no need to choose between Islam and the West.”

[Christopher Hitchens](#), who wrote the foreword to the paperback edition of “Infidel,” says the positions of the two women “can’t possibly be reconciled.”

Both Ms. Hirsi Ali and Ms. Manji come from non-Arab Muslim backgrounds. By itself, this may be one reason for their opposition to Islamic orthodoxy, which they see as inherently Arab, or Arab-dominated. Ms. Hirsi Ali was born in 1969 in Somalia, and lived in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya before fleeing to the Netherlands when she was 22 to avoid an arranged marriage. When her family was in Saudi Arabia, she remembers her father’s complaining that the Saudis had perverted the true Islam. “He hated Saudi judges and Saudi law,” she writes. “He thought it was all barbaric, all Arab desert culture.”

Ms. Manji was born in 1968 in Uganda, but her family, part Egyptian and part Indian, moved to Canada when she was 4 to escape [Idi Amin](#). She is even more insistent than Ms. Hirsi Ali in drawing a distinction between Islam and Arab tribal culture, its “dictatorship from the desert.” Who elected the Saudi monarch “to be Islam’s steward?” she asks. “We’re not in the Saudi sand dunes anymore.”

Ms. Manji has a broader and more flexible idea than Ms. Hirsi Ali of what Islam is and can be. Ms. Hirsi Ali says, “Saudi Arabia is the source of Islam and its quintessence.” Ms. Manji, on the other hand, is convinced that her religion can escape what she sees as its Arab domination. “We need a take-no-prisoners debate about Saudi Arabia, a cauldron of duplicity.”

The writer [Paul Berman](#) suggests that the difference between them may be due to the fact that Ms. Manji was raised in the warm, liberal, welcoming precincts of British Columbia, where religion could be a comfort rather than a burden, where pluralism was an assumption, a fact of life. (Ms. Manji was kicked out of her Islamic religious school for asking too many questions, but before that she had been cared for at a Baptist church, and at age 8 even won its Most Promising Christian of the Year award.) Ms. Hirsi Ali's early years, by contrast, consisted of dictatorship, war, patriarchy, [genital cutting](#), confinement and beatings so severe that she once ended up in a hospital with a fractured skull. Ms. Manji offers her own support for Mr. Berman's conjecture: "Had I grown up in a Muslim country, I'd probably be an atheist in my heart."

No element more thoroughly informs the work of both women than feminism; its influence on their thinking can hardly be overstated, and in this sense they might be considered crown jewels in the history of the modern women's movement. Yet because they are risking their lives for their beliefs — constantly, every day — they may have more in common with antitotalitarian dissidents like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn than with [Gloria Steinem](#) and [Betty Friedan](#). As feminists, Ms. Hirsi Ali and Ms. Manji are demanding more than equality; they are very self-consciously challenging the foundations of an entire way of life.

"The most important explanation for the mental and material backlog we Muslims find ourselves in," Ms. Hirsi Ali has said, "should probably be sought in the sexual morality that we were force-fed from birth." Her first book, a collection of essays, was entitled "The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam." In the Netherlands, she devoted herself to helping Muslim women, in her words, "develop the vocabulary of resistance," and she continues the fight from the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, where she is a resident fellow.

Ms. Manji, too, sees feminism as the linchpin for Islamic reform. "Empowering women," she says, "is the way to awaken the Muslim world." But she is not only a committed feminist (bad enough in the eyes of Muslim conservatives). She is also an open lesbian — a rebel twice over. The difference between them "really is between those outside of a faith and those still within it," says Ms. Manji's friend the writer [Andrew Sullivan](#). "Hirsi Ali has abandoned faith for atheism. Irshad has taken the harder path, I believe."

The two women have known each other for four years, since Ms. Hirsi Ali interviewed Ms. Manji for a Dutch newspaper, and they discussed their continuing relationship in e-mail interviews. They immediately bonded — understandably enough. "I could not believe she was not an atheist," Ms. Hirsi Ali says, "and she could not believe that I had become one." When Time magazine named Ms. Hirsi Ali one of its "100 most influential people" for 2005, it was Ms. Manji who wrote the comment on her. Ms. Manji admires Ms. Hirsi Ali's determination to speak truth to power, saying that "Ayaan's defiant distrust of Muslim authorities can help generate debates that move us closer to honesty."

But, inevitably, the differences between them create tensions since, in their eyes, what is at stake is nothing less than the future of Islam. Ms. Hirsi Ali says, "Irshad is the most admirable person I know who is trying to achieve change from within," but she agrees with Mr. Hitchens that "from an intellectual, logical perspective," Ms. Manji's religious faith and her own secularism can't be reconciled. Mr. Hitchens himself believes that it's a self-defeating exercise for a declared lesbian to try to bring about an Islamic Reformation.

Ms. Manji detects a certain incoherence in Ms. Hirsi Ali's views: "She wants Muslims to reform, but she also seems to believe that Islam is inherently retrograde." Ms. Manji says her own position "is that Muslims can reform while remaining faithful precisely because the Koran has the raw materials to be thoughtful and humane. It's we Muslims who must develop the courage to change."

For her part, Ms. Hirsi Ali replies, "I make a distinction between Islam and Muslims." That is, "I picture the defeat of Islam as large swaths of Muslims crossing the line and accepting the value system of secular humanism. This is not a matter of one religion defeating another, it's a matter of value systems which cannot coexist."

Clearly, this is a debate of importance not only to Muslims but to non-Muslims as well, and for a Westerner listening in, the best way to understand it may be to translate it into the language of European history. Irshad Manji sees herself as moving Islam into the 16th century; Ayaan Hirsi Ali wants to move it into the 18th. It's as if Luther and Voltaire were living at the same time.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
