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SPEAKING FOR THE MUSLIM WORLD

Popular memoir and the ‘War on Terror’

*This essay analyses two prominent memoirs by authors from Muslim backgrounds who use their writing to critique Islamist extremism: *Infidel* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2006) and *The Islamist* by Ed Husain (2007). The memoirs respond to an increased demand for narratives about Islam in the post-9/11 global book market. Although they offer valuable insights, they problematically position themselves as gatekeepers to the so-called ‘Muslim world’, a sweeping term frequently used in news reportage to refer to vast and diverse swathes of the globe. By taking on this role, the texts reinforce precisely the kind of ‘us vs. them’ identity binaries that they ostensibly seek to challenge, and which have frequently underpinned dominant discourse about the ‘War on Terror’. This reinforcement of binaries is partially enabled by the memoirs’ heavy reliance on a ‘coming-of-age’ narrative style (borrowed from the Bildungsroman literary form), which sometimes creates an equivalence between the attainment of personal maturity and the adoption of what the authors describe as Western values. Through a comparative reading of the memoirs, the essay aims to challenge these authors’ claims to speak for a monolithic ‘Muslim world’ in the context of the ‘War on Terror’.*

Keywords: Memoir, *Bildungsroman*, Islam, ‘Muslim World’, terror

Introduction

In the years since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, an appetite has emerged in global reading audiences for testimonial writing about life under the influence of Islamist political ideology. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for instance, has published four autobiographical works, most prominently *Infidel: My Life* (2006, English translation 2007), which provide insight into her brutal experiences of Female Genital Mutilation and other forms of gendered oppression in Somalia, as well as the beginning of her subsequent life as a prominent apostate in Europe and the United States. From a contrasting point of view, Ed Husain’s *The Islamist* (2007) explains why, as a teenager growing up in the UK, the author decided to embrace Islamic fundamentalism, and why five years later he chose to leave it behind. Both memoirs sold well and occupied highly visible positions in bookshops and in the feature pages of newspapers, and they have also been instrumental in propelling their author’s careers. Both Hirsi Ali and

Husain have gone on to become policy advisers at the Council on Foreign Relations and other influential US-based think tanks and institutes. They continue to play a highly influential role in the shaping of public opinion on Islam and Islamism in the West. Both authors make regular appearances on news and current affairs programmes around the world, write opinion pieces for newspapers and political magazines such as *Foreign Policy*, and maintain active presences on Twitter, each with thousands of followers (in Hirsi Ali's case, hundreds of thousands). In light of the wave of ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks that have taken place across Europe since January 2015, bestselling memoirs about Islamism such as those by Hirsi Ali and Husain are some of the most accessible first points of call for anxious readers who are keen to make sense of this violence: as such, they continue to hold a position of significant influence over the shaping of attitudes towards Muslims in Western cultural discourse. For this reason, their representations of Islam require interrogation, as each author occasionally relies upon precisely the sort of identity binaries that they ostensibly seek to deconstruct.

Both *Infidel* and *The Islamist* are written with a Western, Anglophone, non-Muslim audience in mind, and thus evidence a kind of ambivalence: on the one hand, they attempt to draw attention to the effects of Islamist extremism in various parts of the world; on the other, they do so in a way that simultaneously strives to challenge stereotypes about Muslims in the global news media. To borrow a phrase from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Terror: A Speech After 9/11', they work to raise consciousness while simultaneously 'disrupt[ing] confidence in consciousness-raising' (2004: n. pg.). However, through their attempts to, in Hirsi Ali's words, 'tell people about another kind of world and what it's really like' (2007: xx), these authors necessarily position themselves as gatekeepers to the 'Muslim world', a sweeping and monolithic term frequently used in news reportage to refer to vast and diverse swathes of the globe. Shorthand terms such as these are to some extent unavoidable (not least because many Muslims themselves refer to a 'Muslim world'), but as Edward Said puts it in *Covering Islam*, they are helpful only insofar as one remembers that they are 'an integral part of cultural history rather than objective classifications' (1997: 9). It is, however, precisely when this hardening into an objective classification begins to occur that problems arise: a process that is occasionally the case in these memoirs.

Political scientist Richard Jackson has argued that since 9/11, damaging 'us vs. them' identity binaries have often 'been discursively constructed through the official language of counter-terrorism' (2005: 59). An increasing number of literary critics have explored the ways in which fictional writing has responded to this phenomenon. Richard Gray, for instance, has distinguished between US American novels that have tended to reinforce such binaries, and

those with a more transnational outlook that work towards an ‘enactment of difference’ (2011: 30). Likewise, I have argued elsewhere that an increasing number of post-9/11 novels are working to call such binaries into question. Authors from Muslim backgrounds, in particular, have been faced with the particularly difficult task of exploring the causes of extremism while simultaneously challenging stereotypical representations of Muslims in Western media discourse about the ‘War on Terror’ (O’Gorman 2015: 112–41). Hirsi Ali and Husain face a similar task in their memoirs. Each tells a story that is global in scale, striving to evoke a sense of emotional connection in its (post-9/11) Western reader with a particular version of the so-called ‘Muslim world’, whether in Somalia (Hirsi Ali), Syria (Husain), or Saudi Arabia (both Hirsi Ali and Husain). Simultaneously, in an attempt to maximize the accessibility of their stories, both rely heavily on the ‘coming-of-age’ narrative style, borrowed from the literary form of the *Bildungsroman*. This sometimes creates a problematic equivalence between the attainment of personal maturity and the adoption of what the authors describe as Western values, and in turn reflects a critique that Joseph Slaughter makes of the form in *Human Rights, Inc.*: namely, that the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* has become ‘the institutional genre of incorporation into an international community of rights holders’ (Slaughter 2001: 40). In other words, the genre is reliant upon a rationalist conception of the individual subject – or ‘figure of the person’ (41) – that to some degree renders it hard to disentangle from Western ideological norms.

It is worth noting here that critics such as M. Neelika Jaywardane have rightly drawn attention to the potential for memoirs and personal narratives (such as Mayvish Khan’s *My Guantanamo Diary* [2008]) to offer important counter-narratives to dominant post-9/11 discourses on security and surveillance. However, in the case of the memoirs under analysis, both bestsellers by now-established public figures, I would argue that there are narrative choices present which belie their position in the global book market. They vacillate between a challenging and a reinforcing of preconceptions, reflecting what Frederic Jameson has influentially identified as the tendency for non-Western writing to become reduced, in the eyes of Western readers, to the generalised status of ‘national allegory’ (1986: 69). Indeed, as Sarah Brouillette has more recently argued,

The tendency within the globalized literary marketplace to manipulate and market the distinctions between biographical authors overlaps with the tendency within the post-colonial field of production to privilege work that can be identified with a specific geographical struggle or political history.

(2007: 70–71)

In the case of *Infidel* and *The Islamist*, the ‘specific geographical struggle or political history’ with which each text actively seeks to ‘identify’ is that of the ‘War on Terror’. Both memoirs have attained a prominent cultural platform in part due to an increased consumer demand for narratives about the ‘Muslim world’ in the post-9/11 global book market.

One potential consequence of this, as Ziauddin Sardar has suggested, is that texts such as these – by authors from Muslim backgrounds who prominently critique extremism – can put themselves in danger of co-option by the Islamophobic political right (Sardar, 2008: n. pg.). Indeed, as I will go on to show, Hirsi Ali more or less goes as far as to actively align herself with elements of such discourse, though with qualifications. Nonetheless, both texts contain material on crucial and complex human rights issues such as FGM, teenage radicalization, and freedom of speech, and this article ultimately aims to determine what Western readers might usefully learn from these narratives *despite* the limitations inherent to some of their narrative strategies. Through a comparative reading of the memoirs, patterns are revealed that can help to challenge populist assumptions about the incommensurability of Islam and democracy, and in turn work to undercut the authors’ claims to speak for a monolithic ‘Muslim world’ in the context of the ‘War on Terror’.

Infidel

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a controversial figure who is most well known for her 2004 short film *Submission*, which she co-directed with Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gough. Van Gough’s brutal killing on 2 November 2004 sparked a chain of events that saw Hirsi Ali placed under top secret, high security armed guard for many months, a long and vicious public debate about the expense incurred on this security alongside questions relating to her status as a Dutch national, and, indirectly, the eventual downfall of the Balkenende coalition government in 2006. *Infidel* is a memoir of her life leading up to these events. Its first half, titled ‘My Childhood’, serves as a powerful testament to a widespread form of misogynist violence inflicted upon many women in Somalia and other Muslim-majority countries. In excruciatingly candid detail, she describes being forced to undergo Female Genital Mutilation by her grandmother against her parents’ wishes, as well as regular beatings from her mother and from her Qur’an teacher, and growing up in a culture of sexist discrimination and intimidation. This intimidation continues in the second half of the memoir, which recounts her experiences gaining refugee status – and an eventual political career – in Holland, after running away from an

arranged marriage to a Somali man living in Germany. Titled 'My Freedom', it traces how her devout Muslim faith is gradually chiseled away until she eventually renounces it completely.

The memoir is Hirsi Ali's second book, published when she was already a prominent parliamentarian in the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), as well as a much-debated figure worldwide, in the wake of van Gough's murder. In particular, it offers a response – and harsh rejoinder – to public criticism of her attitudes towards Islam. Hirsi Ali has made no secret of her belief that Islam is, in fact, an inherently violent religion, and that liberal advocates of Western multiculturalism are guilty of turning a blind eye to the violent oppression it inflicts upon women, not only in Muslim-majority countries such as Somalia, but also increasingly in Western towns and cities, under the guise of tolerance. She first began articulating this view publically in the months following the 9/11 attacks, and reaffirms it in no uncertain terms in *Infidel*:

Holland's multiculturalism – its respect for Muslims' way of doing things – wasn't working. It was depriving many women and children of their rights. Holland was trying to be tolerant for the sake of consensus, but the consensus was empty. The immigrants' culture was being preserved at the expense of their women and children and to the detriment of the immigrants' integration into Holland.

(2007: 246)

Hirsi Ali knows that this is a deeply uncomfortable notion for Western liberals to countenance, for fear of being seen to pander to the far right. But she repeatedly makes this case in the interest, she says, of helping 'spark a debate among Muslims about reforming aspects of Islam so that people could begin to question, and criticize, their own beliefs' (295). Indeed, she even goes as far as to write:

I could no longer avoid seeing the totalitarianism, the pure moral framework that is Islam. It regulates every detail of life and subjugates free will. True Islam, as a rigid belief system and moral framework, leads to cruelty. The inhuman act of those nineteen hijackers was the logical outcome of this detailed system for regulating human behavior. Their world is divided between 'Us and Them' – if you don't accept Islam, you should perish.

(272)

What makes this challenging for Western liberals and leftists to respond to is not so much the argument itself, which – as I will show – is deeply problematic, but the fact that it is Hirsi Ali is who is making it at the end of a memoir detailing excruciating trauma and suffering in the

name of Islam. Western champions of Hirsi Ali such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have used her experience to further a grandstanding ‘New Atheist’ agenda, but coming from someone who has been at the receiving end of religiously driven misogynistic violence for much of her life, the claim carries more weight.¹

There is no doubt that the violence she describes is real, and as she correctly argues, it would be wrong to turn a blind eye to it. Nonetheless, her diagnosis that this violence is fundamentally rooted in ‘true Islam’ is a clear case of mistaking correlation for causation: she repeatedly makes broad, sweeping claims based on observations that occasionally have impact as personal testimony, but are rarely backed up by any secondary research. This is the case, for instance, when she writes that ‘Every society that is still in the rigid grip of Islam represses 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 are wealthy and peaceful’ (296). The absence of context to these claims is alarming and again belies her assertion that the problem of Islamist violence is rooted solely in Islam itself. Even when she writes that the ideology driving the 9/11 attacks is ‘not just about Islam, [but] ... the core of Islam’, she does so based on a face-value reading of Mohamed Atta’s letters to his fellow hijackers, ignoring the paranoid conspiracy theories that *The 9/11 Commission Report* and other investigations have identified as equally central to his fervour.

The *Commission Report* states that in the years leading up to the attacks, Atta ‘voiced virulently anti-Semitic and anti-American opinions, ranging from condemnations of what he described as a global Jewish movement centered in New York City that supposedly controlled the financial world and the media, to polemics against governments of the Arab world’ (2004: 161); opinions entirely consistent with the distinctly modern, twentieth-century Islamism propagated by Sayyid Qutb and other founding members of the Muslim Brotherhood.² Moreover, as Faisal Devji argues in *Landscapes of the Jihad*,

The jihad ... does not simply exist alongside other forms of Islamic devotion but actively subverts these latter. Not only are old methods of learning, persuasion and practice made parochial and sometimes even redundant by the jihad, but *a new kind of Muslim, too, is created in the process*, one not defined by any notion of cultic uniformity.

(2005: 20, emphasis added)

From just this cursory glance at the findings of studies into the causes of Islamist terrorism, it becomes clear that Hirsi Ali’s claims about such violence being driven by ‘true Islam’ are questionable at best. As for her critique of FGM, there is of course an inherent problem in her reasoning in that she presents a strand of Somali cultural practice (albeit a serious and wide-

spread one) as exemplary of a mentality that is predominant across the entirety of what she herself terms the ‘Islamic world’:

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.

(2007: 270)

The Islamic world that she ‘knew’ may indeed be ‘real’, but it is, of course, in reality only one of a vast multiplicity of Islamic worlds, and her experience of this global, interconnected network of Muslim experiences is partial. To her credit, she does make clear that FGM is a practice that ‘predates Islam’ (31), and that even her father, who is a strict Muslim, finds the practice ‘barbaric’ (31). Nonetheless, what links this practice, with which she begins the book, to the acts of terrorism that end it (9/11 and the murder of Theo van Gough), remains, in her view, the religion itself: ‘true Islam’. ‘It was not a lunatic fringe,’ she writes, ‘who felt this way about America and the West. I knew that a vast mass of Muslims would see the [September 11] attacks as justified retaliation against the infidel enemies of Islam’ (269).

Although the issues that Hirsi Ali describes in *Infidel* are important, the way the story is packaged is complicit in helping to propagate existing hostilities against Muslims. Specifically, the memoir’s ‘coming of age’ narrative structure helps underscore the appearance of a strong qualitative relation between violence against women in Somalia and acts of terror in the West. Its argument relies upon an emotive rhetoric of personal growth, which gives the impression that the link apparently connecting these disparate forms of violence is more substantial than it really is. What is more, the emphasis on this link is ingrained into the narrative structure itself. This is most obviously evident in the titles of the text’s two halves: ‘My Childhood’, telling the story of her life under Islam, and ‘My Freedom’ telling that of her emergence into an enlightened Western adulthood. It is also apparent towards the end of the narrative, when Hirsi Ali recounts her denunciation of Islam. This is the case, for instance, when she sweepingly asserts: ‘When people say that the values of Islam are compassion, tolerance, and freedom, I look at reality, at real cultures and governments, and I see that it simply isn’t so’ (349). However, it is also subtly present in the book’s earlier chapters, not least in the memoir’s frequent references to her unusual – and parentally frowned-upon – love of books as a child growing up in Somalia. She writes:

In school, we read good books, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, Daphne du Maurier; out of school, Halwa's sisters kept us supplied with cheap Harlequins. These were trashy soap opera-like novels, but they were exciting – sexually exciting. And buried in all of these books was a message: women had a choice.

(79)

Likewise, later on, she adds that she 'resisted' and 'secretly transgressed' the teachings of her Islamic schooling (94), and 'continued to read sensual romance novels and trashy thrillers, even though I knew that doing so was resisting Islam in the most basic way' (94). After reading out a sex scene to her school friend, the friend replies: "It's not like that for Muslims. We are pure" (112). These repeated, idealised descriptions of childhood reading collectively signpost what Carol Lazzaro-Weiss has suggested is the capacity for women's *Bildung* narratives, like Hirsi Ali's, 'to defend the right of feminist and women authors to describe their own reality' (1990: 21). However, the emphasis on their incommensurability with Islam also means that they are mobilised in a way that is ideologically loaded, perpetuating the notion that Muslims globally, rather than some Somali Muslims specifically, are fundamentally antagonistic to literature.

Although problematically pitched as a window to the 'Muslim world', the memoir serves as an eye-opening and powerful conduit to a particular iteration of Islamic culture that is tied up with, and in some ways driven by, the kind of literalist interpretation of the Qur'an espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation that the memoir dwells on extensively. However, this focus on literalism sits at the crux of what Hirsi Ali gets wrong in her critique of Islam: namely, the fact that she *agrees* with the Muslim Brotherhood in its claim to having adhered accurately to a completely literal reading of the Qur'an, one that allows its followers to view themselves, as she does, as purveyors of a 'true Islam'. She herself adopts the highly contestable, literalist perspective that a reading entirely free from interpretation is indeed actually possible, and in doing so undermines the secularism to which she ostensibly lays claim: a secularism based on the belief that 'the Quran [is] relative – not absolute' (2007: 273). She pays no acknowledgement to the notion that even a literalist interpretation of the Qur'an is, itself, an interpretation. As Edward Said has argued, for the majority of Muslims, the question of Qur'anic exegesis is both 'an objective and also a subjective fact, because people create that fact in their faith, in their societies, histories, and traditions' (1997: 44–45). Even the most literal reading of the Qur'an, as with any text, is a subjective act, and places the reader into what Said, drawing on Stanley Fish, describes as merely one of many 'communities of interpretation, many of them at odds with one another, prepared in many instances literally to

go to war with one another, all of them creating and revealing themselves and their interpretations as very central features of their existence' (45). While Hirsi Ali's critique of misogynistic violence should be taken seriously, there is a problem intrinsic to her mode of argumentation: one that ostensibly embraces plurality and complexity, but in practice relies on a binary language that refuses to acknowledge or engage with the complex, diverse and deeply fraught position of Muslims not only in an Islamic world but in a globalised one. Hirsi Ali does not speak for the Muslim world, because there is no monolithic Muslim world on behalf of which it is possible for her to speak.

Towards the end of the memoir, she writes 'I would like to be judged on the validity of my arguments, not as a victim' (2007: 348), and indeed her arguments should be engaged with both seriously and critically. But this critical reading also demands an alertness to the way in which her story exists, in both content and structure, as a political object within a complex and sometimes contradictory global political discourse.

The Islamist

On the surface, *The Islamist* offers the inverse of Hirsi Ali's book: instead of a narrative from the point of view of a victim of religiously-driven violence, Ed Husain's memoir gives its readers an insight into the mindset of a person who 'became an extremist – an Islamist – and saw the error of his ways' (Husain, 2007: n. pg). Upon closer examination, however, the narratives are more similar than they initially appear. Both describe, via the familiar structure of the *Bildungsroman*, a journey from ignorance and willful indoctrination to a state of 'Freedom' (Hirsi Ali) or 'free thinking' (Husain, 2007: 175–6). Where they differ in a key way is in their attitudes to Islam. While Hirsi Ali claims that fundamentalism is 'true Islam', Husain remains a committed Muslim, and maintains a clear delineation between Islam, on the one hand, and Islamism on the other. He describes the latter as a 'Political System of Islam', borrowing the words of Islamist thinker Gulam Sarwar, a figure who was influential in shaping Husain's teenage beliefs (20). Indeed, he stresses that his choice to use the terms 'Islamist' and 'Islamism' are based on a distinction that literalists and extremists themselves draw between members of their own movements and mainstream, or "partial" Muslims (37). There is, therefore, a fundamental disagreement between his memoir and Hirsi Ali's about the definition of 'true Islam': for Hirsi Ali, extreme, literalist readings of the Qur'an represent 'true Islam'; for Husain, they are a hijacking of it.

Husain's account offers insight into a particular strand of extremist thought in Britain. Written and published in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings, it gives a calm and even-handed take on the issue of radicalisation in Britain, rooting the phenomenon in his own experience of indoctrination in the 1990s. The memoir traces his life growing up in Whitechapel, East London, and recounts the path that led to his radicalisation and his gradual rise up the ranks of the British chapter of the global Islamist organization, Hizb-ut Tahrir. Notably, Husain himself was never involved in violence, and even at the peak of his extremism its advocacy always made him uneasy. Indeed, the turning point comes when he recalls a fatal, religiously motivated stabbing committed by a friend of his at college. Having dashed out of the college library to investigate the commotion, Husain writes that:

Maajid [Nawaz, a fellow Hizb member] and I left the scene with heavy hearts. We both knew that whatever had happened at the college, as Hizb activists we were responsible. It was we who had encouraged Muslim fervour, a sense of separation from others, a belief that Muslims were worthier than other humans'

(151–2)

Although the stabbing catalyses Husain's change in direction, it takes a number of years for him to fully renounce his Islamist beliefs. Instead, this moment sets in motion a long, gradual process of self-questioning, driven also by three other factors. Firstly, the influence of his parents and grandfather, who are all staunchly opposed to Islamism throughout the entire memoir, is a constant cause of unease throughout. Secondly, his decision to attend university to study Islamic history exposes him to a wealth of ideas and approaches to his faith that help him to see things in a new, more critical light (and the influence of a number of enthusiastic lecturers also helps). Finally, when he meets his girlfriend and eventual wife, Faye, her presence contributes to a placating of his anger, enabling him to shift his views. He never offers much information about Faye, but we know that she, like him, is Muslim, from a Bangladeshi background, and that she has a constant calming effect upon him: 'Faye's companionship and love helped me to maintain my composure' (2007: 155); 'Faye reminded me of one of Islam's most basic teachings' (155); 'More than ever before, I needed Faye's love and warmth to help me reconcile my mind to the modern world' (156). In these moments, Faye represents a version of Islam completely at odds with the hard-line literalism espoused by the Islamists with which Husain has been associating.

Even though Husain is writing from a religious perspective, the kind of pluralism he advocates is in some ways closer to Enlightenment secularism than Hirsi Ali's is. Hirsi Ali praises Spinoza for being 'the first modern European to state clearly that the world is not or-

ained by a separate God' (2007: 282), and for his influence on the establishment of a civic society based on the acknowledgement that 'Humans themselves are the source of good and evil' (282). Meanwhile, Husain clearly demonstrates that such a recognition is as possible from a Muslim perspective as it is from an atheist one. For instance, the examples of Muslim diversity to which his memoir draws attention – such as that at play in his own family, or the relaxed Islam that he sees in evidence around him during an extended work placement in Damascus for the British Council – repeatedly underscore the possibility of successful co-existence between religious piety and multicultural pluralism (a co-existence that Hirsi Ali argues is impossible as a societal model). As he puts it in the 'The Road to Damascus', the chapter in which he describes his Syrian experience: 'Syrians, unlike most Muslims from Britain, did not wear their Islam on their sleeves. They did not need to. In a Muslim country they did not have to show they were Muslims' (Husain, 2007: 225). Likewise, a little later on, he writes: 'Two years in Syria, away from Islamism in Britain and in the company of amiable believers of many religions in Damascus, had, I knew, decontaminated my mind. Now, more than ever, I felt free' (232). If Husain's secularism is one that celebrates a coexistence of religious beliefs, Hirsi Ali's is one that fundamentally argues against religious belief.

In each case, however, and somewhat ironically, the two memoirs' differing opinions about Islam and Islamism belie an essentialism inherent to the trope of the 'the Muslim world', upon which both rely. Although more nuanced than Hirsi Ali's text, *The Islamist* is still pitched from the start as a window onto an obscure, alternative world: 'This is a story,' Husain writes in the book's Preface, 'of my journey from the *inside*, in the fullest sense of the word: inside today's Islam, inside Britain's Muslim communities, inside my own heart' (Husain, 2007: n. pg.). While it is important and accurate that he uses the plural 'communities' (which Hirsi Ali tends to avoid), the emphasis that he places on his narrative coming from '*inside*', and particularly 'inside today's Islam', serves to exacerbate an unhelpful discursive binary, in which Islam is rendered separate from those who are necessarily implied to be *outside* of it (an overly clear-cut division in an era characterised by global cultural intermingling). In addition, Ziauddin Sardar is right to highlight the potential for an exacerbation of such binaries by a book market hungry for the voice of ex-Islamists: 'We prove again,' he writes, 'that radical extremism is the way to get attention. We make flirtation with violent ideology the way to be heard and become acceptable' (Sardar, 2008: n. pg.). Claiming to offer a window onto the 'inside' of 'today's Islam', what the memoirs more effectively do, in practice, is to reinforce the existing position that Islam occupies in the imaginations of readers in the

West. They do little to acknowledge the fact that both Islam and the extremism that claims its name are already inextricably *part* of Western culture.

Both texts reinforce this separation of Islam from the West by warning against the unseen dangers posed by a spreading and toleration of extremist elements in Europe. As I have shown, Hirsi Ali points towards a perceived exacerbation of community fragmentation in western cities due to multicultural policies, and a resulting failure to uphold Muslim women's rights. Husain's memoir, meanwhile, renders its depiction of East London, through the eyes of its Muslim communities, both familiar and strange. The names of local areas, streets, parks and buildings are scrupulously cited, and insight is offered about local situations that readers may not know much about. An example of this can be seen in Husain's recollection of the long-standing conflict over radicalisation between the prominent Brick Lane and East London Mosques, both in Whitechapel. In Husain's relation of events, the former tended to resist extremist organisations like the Hizb, and the latter was known for giving a platform to them. His emphasis on locational detail is also evident in the way he describes the growth of the local Young Muslim Organisation, or 'YMO', into a street gang 'tougher than the toughest gangsters' (32), in comparison to whom '[the] Brick Lane Mafia, Cannon Street Posse, and Bethnal Green Massive shrank to the stature of playground bullies' (32). What this focus on locational detail ultimately helps Husain to emphasise is just how close to home the inner workings of organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir are to his non-Muslim British readers. On the one hand, he sketches a detailed map of Whitechapel, an East London site familiar to many for its nineteenth- and twentieth-century history: the area is known in particular for its Victorian-era slums, the Jack the Ripper murders, its bombing during the Blitz, and cockneys. On the other he depicts a place where, he says, 'I had *no* white friends. My world was entirely Asian, fully Muslim. This was my Britain' (35).

This mix of familiarity and strangeness is reinforced, like in *Infidel*, by the structure that the narrative takes: that of a *Bildungsroman*, or, novel of formation. By telling his story in the form of a coming-of-age narrative, he inserts himself into a discursive framework shaped by the popular book market. The advantage of this is not just that it translates the experience of radicalisation into terms that they can understand and thus empathise with (to the degree that they can conceptualise why someone might be persuaded to join a group like the Hizb). More than this, it also works to underline the idea that Islamist extremism is not necessarily as 'other' to Western identity as it might sometimes seem, especially as expressed in the 'us vs. them' rhetoric of much media and political discourse (as well as in Hirsi Ali's memoir). As Husain puts it, the attraction to extremist thought for someone in his position, one of a 'generation of

young British Muslims ... torn between two cultures' (69), is a phenomenon that is closely tied with questions surrounding British identity in a time of multiculturalism and globalisation.

Indeed, it helps to underscore what Sami Zubaida suggests is the fact that 'manifestations of militant Islam are not alien, but echo many of the features and episodes of assertions of religious authority in the history of the West' (Zubaida, 2010: 11). To substantiate this claim, Zubaida points to the example of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie: 'What worries liberal Westerners at the 1989 scenes of the burning of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in British cities and elsewhere is precisely that it was reminiscent of similar events in their own histories' [11]. *The Islamist*, with its narrative of formation (*Bildung*) and meticulous depiction of London's streets, helps underscore the idea that Islamism is not just a reaction to, but also a product of globalised modernity; in other words, that it is what Jacques Derrida has influentially described (referring to its manifestation in the form of terror) as a problem of global 'autoimmunity' (Derrida). That is, 'that strange behaviour where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, "itself" works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its own immunity' (Derrida, 2003: 94).

However, there is also a significant limitation that comes along with Husain's non-fictional appropriation of the *Bildungsroman* form. As in Hirsi Ali's text, the narrative traces each figure's journey from a state of ignorance to an eventual epiphany and subsequent maturation. To borrow Husain's slightly overwrought metaphor: 'Faye and I decided to shed our spectacles. We underwent laser surgery on our eyes and saw the world anew' (233). In each case, this awakening is sometimes rather too uncritically tied up with an embracing of Western Enlightenment 'values' (Hirsi Ali, 2007: 348–9; Husain, 2007: 227). In Hirsi Ali's case, she straightforwardly says that 'Life is better in Europe than it is in the Muslim world' (2007: 348). In Husain's case, it is less straightforward: though he shows enthusiasm for the compatibility of secularism and Islam, he does so with recourse to an overly heavy emphasis on nationality, and '[the] British values of tolerance, freedom, and the English language' (Husain, 2007: 227). While these are clearly, on a superficial level, values that few are likely to see as anything but desirable, they are also deeply subjective. Moreover, the extent to which his association of them with British identity might actually stand up to scrutiny is open to question, not least because the memoir contains only passing reference to a number of contextual factors that played a role in his radicalisation during the early 1990s. These include National Front racism, as well as the continued effect of Thatcherite government policies on immigration and national identity, such as the British Nationality Act of 1981, which stipulated that 'Ties of blood, not allegiance, desire, history or even character, made Britons'.³ The integrity

of Husain's claim about British values is also somewhat undermined by the fact that the memoir's final chapter is begun with an earnest – and arguably ill-judged, given the book's racially charged subject matter – epigraph from Rudyard Kipling: 'I am slowly discovering England, which is the most wonderful foreign land I have ever been in' (2007: 269).

By claiming 'tolerance' and 'freedom' as British values but not taking into account deep-seated problems with racism and poverty in areas of the UK with high-density Muslim populations, *The Islamist* falls short of delivering to its reader quite as full an insight into the causes of radicalisation as it otherwise might. It gestures towards the problem as one that blurs the boundary between the global and national, but then falls back upon an unquestioned sense of national pride as an alternative. What is more, questions might be raised about just how effective, in practice, a memoir such as this can be in its stated aim of offering a 'protest against political Islam' (2007: n. pg.), as its primary audience is clearly middle class, largely non-Muslim broadsheet-readers. There is little chance that a potentially violent young extremist would actually be exposed to this text, let alone persuaded by it, not least because Husain was never actually drawn into violence himself. Nonetheless, the book has given Husain a public platform from which more meaningful connections with such young men has, to a degree, been made possible.

What is thrown into sharp relief through comparative analysis is that both Husain's and Hirsi Ali's memoirs provide contrasting, subjective stories about a complex and globalised form of ideological violence that is far from representative of Islam as a religion, let alone the millions of people around the world who practice or identify with it. To acknowledge this is not, as Hirsi Ali suggests, to embrace moral relativism (although moral relativism should, indeed, be avoided), but rather to take a responsible step towards actively challenging perceptions about Islam and Muslims in the context of contemporary debates about global terror.

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¹ For a recent discussion of the 'New Atheist' movement, see Bruenig, 2015. For a critique of its influence on the literary book market, see Bradley and Tate, 2010.

² One need look no further than Qutb's highly influential Islamist manifesto, *Milestones* (1964), to see that Atta's beliefs are less rooted in traditional Islam than they are in the religion's contextually specific twentieth-century politicisation. Drawing on the idea of 'Jahiliyyah', which traditionally refers to the 'time of ignorance' preceding Islam, Qutb reinterprets the term in a highly subjective manner to apply non-Muslim societies in the contemporary world, including those that he perceives to be run by 'Jewish financial institutions' (Qutb, 2008: 111). The Islamism on display in his thinking, as in Atta's, is a modern political ideology – one that is, for sure, deeply bigoted and perverse, but is, nonetheless, a phenomenon that emerges from contemporary geopolitics more than it does from an objectively 'true' Islam.

³ For further discussion of the British Nationality Act and other issues surrounding British Government immigration policy in the 1980s, see Natarajan, 2013. Husain's friend, Maajid Nawaz, another prominent ex-Islamist and co-founder (with Husain himself) of the anti-extremist Quilliam Foundation, has since written his own memoir, *Radical: My Journey from Extremism to a Democratic Awakening*, another coming-of-age narra-

tive, which engages much more closely with the issue of British racism, looking in particular at the influence of the neo-Nazi group, Combat 18.