

NOMAD

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Introduction

All my life I have been a nomad. I have wandered, rootless. Every place I have settled in, I have been forced to flee; every certainty I have been taught, I have cast aside.

I was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1969. When I was very small my father was jailed for his role in the political opposition to the brutal dictatorship. Then he escaped from prison and fled into exile. When I was eight my mother took my siblings and me to Saudi Arabia to live with him. A year later we were expelled from Saudi Arabia and moved to Ethiopia, where my father's opposition group was headquartered. After about eighteen months there, we moved again, to Kenya.

Every change of country threw me unprepared into whole new languages and sharply different habits of mind. Each time, I made a child's forlorn, often vain attempts to adapt. The one constant in my life was my mother's unbending attachment to Islam.

My father left Kenya, and us, when I was eleven. I didn't see him again until I was twenty-one. During his absence I had become a fervent and pious Muslim, under the influence of a schoolteacher. I also returned, for eight months, to Somalia, where I experienced the birth of the civil war and the chaos and brutality of the great exodus of 1991, when half the country was displaced and 350,000 people died.

When I was twenty-two my father ordered me to marry a relative, a stranger to me, who lived in Toronto, Canada. On my way from Kenya to Canada I was supposed to stop off in Germany, where I would pick up my visa to Canada and then continue my journey. Instead a kind of instinctive desperation prompted me to bolt. I took a train to Holland. This voyage was even more wrenching than the other journeys I had made. and my heart pounded with the

implications of what I was doing and what my father and my clan would do when they discovered that I had run away.

In Holland I discovered the kindness of strangers. I was nothing to these people, and yet they fed and housed me, taught me their language, and allowed me to learn whatever I wanted to. Holland worked in a way that was different from any other country in which I had lived. It was peaceful, stable, prosperous, tolerant, generous, deeply good. As I learned Dutch I began to formulate an almost impossibly ambitious goal: I would study political science to find out why this society, although it appeared to me to be godless, worked when every society I had lived in, no matter how Muslim it claimed to be, was rotten with corruption, violence, and self-centered guile.

For a long time I teetered between the clear ideals of the Enlightenment that I learned about at university and my submission to the equally clear dictates of Allah that I feared to disobey. Working my way through university as a Dutch-Somali translator for the Dutch social services, I met many Muslims in difficult circumstances, in homes for battered women, prisons, special education classes. I never connected the dots—in fact I sought to avoid connecting the dots—so I could not see the connection between their belief in Islam and their poverty, between their religion and the oppression of women and the lack of free, individual choice.

It was, ironically, Osama bin Laden who freed me of those blinkers. After 9/11 I found it impossible to ignore his claims that the murderous destruction of innocent (if infidel) lives is consistent with the Quran. I looked in the Quran, and I found it to be so. To me this meant that I could no longer be a Muslim. In fact I realized then that I had not been a Muslim for a long time.

Speaking out about such matters, I began to receive death threats. I was also asked to run for the Dutch Parliament as a member of the free-market Liberal Party. When I became a member of Parliament, being young and black and female—and often accompanied by a bodyguard—I was very visible. But I was protected; my friends and

colleagues were not. After the film director Theo van Gogh and I made a movie depicting how Islam crushes women, Theo was assassinated by a Muslim fanatic, a twenty-six-year-old man who had been born in Morocco and brought to Amsterdam by his parents.

I wrote a memoir, *Infidel*, about my experiences. I described how lucky I felt to have escaped places where people live in tribes and where the affairs of men are conducted according to the dictates and traditions of faith, how glad I was to live in a place where people of both sexes live equally as citizens. I related the random events that made my childhood so erratic; my mother's volatile temper; my father's absence; the caprices of dictators; how we coped with diseases, natural disasters, and wars. I described my arrival in Holland and my first impressions of life in a place where people are not the subjects of tyrants or governed by the dictates of the clan's bloodline but are citizens of governments they elect.

I touched on—but only touched on—my parallel and equally important mental journey. I described some of the questions that formed in my mind, the baby steps I took to make sense of the new world that I had entered, and the experiences that made me question my faith in Islam and the mores of my parents.

When I was writing *Infidel* I imagined that my travels were over. I thought that I was in Holland to stay, that I had taken root in its rich soil and would never have to uproot myself again. But I was wrong. I did have to leave. I came to America—like many before me—in search of an opportunity to build a life and a livelihood in freedom and in safety, a life that would be an ocean away from all the strife I had witnessed and the inner conflict I had suffered. This book, *Nomad*, explains why I chose America.

Readers of *Infidel* all over the world have offered me a great deal of support and encouragement. But they have also asked me a number of questions that I did not address in that book. They asked about the rest of my family. They asked about the experiences of other

Muslim women. Time and 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 also about the lives of many immigrants to the West, the philosophical and very real difficulties of people, especially women, who live in a tightly closed traditional Muslim culture within a broadly open culture. It is about how Islamic ideals clash with Western ideals. It is about the clash of civilizations that I and millions of others have lived and continue to live.

When I moved to the United States and began again the process of anchoring myself in a new country, I was assailed by a new and intense homesickness that followed the death of my father in London. Reconnecting with my extended family—cousins and my own half sister—who live in the United States, the UK, and elsewhere, I found them tragically unsteady on their feet. One has AIDS, another has been indicted for attempting to murder her husband, and a third sends all the money he makes back home to Somalia to feed the clan. They all claim to be loyal to the values of our tribe and of Allah. They are permanent residents and citizens of the Western countries where they live, but their hearts and minds lie elsewhere. They dream of a time in Somalia that never existed: a time of peace, love, and harmony. Will they ever take root where they are? It seems unlikely. My discovery of their troubles is one of the subjects of *Nomad*.

So what, you may be thinking. Doesn't every culture have its dysfunctional families? Indeed, for filmmakers in Hollywood, dysfunctional Jewish and Christian families make for great entertainment. But I believe that the dysfunctional Muslim family constitutes a real threat to the very fabric of Western life.

The family is the crucible of human values. It is in the family that children are groomed to practice and promote the norms of their parents' culture. It is in the family that a cycle of loyalties is established and passed on to future generations. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we understand the dynamics of the Muslim family, for they hold the key to (among other things) the

susceptibility of so many young Muslim men to Islamic radicalism. It is above all through families that conspiracy theories travel from the mosques and madrassas of Saudi Arabia and Egypt to the living rooms of homes in Holland, France, and America.

Many people in Europe and the United States dispute the thesis that we are living through a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. But a radical minority of Muslims firmly believes that Islam is under siege. This minority is committed to winning the holy war it has declared against the West. It wants ultimately to restore a theocratic caliphate in Muslim countries and impose it on the rest of the world. A larger group of Muslims, most of them in Europe and America, believes that acts of terror committed by fellow Muslims will unleash a Western backlash against all Muslims indiscriminately. (There is in fact little evidence to suggest that such a backlash is happening, but despite this lack of evidence, the perception among Muslim immigrants persists and is fanned by radicals.) With this collective feeling of being persecuted, many Muslim families living in the West insulate themselves in ghettos of their own making. Within those ghettos the agents of radical Islam cultivate their message of hatred and seek foot soldiers to fight as martyrs for their distorted worldview. Unhappy, disoriented youths in dysfunctional immigrant families make perfect recruits to such a cause. With continuing immigration from the Muslim world and a significantly higher birth rate in Muslim families, this a phenomenon we ignore at our peril.

As an insider, I can illuminate the problem simply by relating the stories of my formative years, which include stories of my siblings and other relatives. In *Nomad* I try to describe how, in the most intimate sphere of family, my father and mother related or failed to relate to one another; the expectations they had of their children; their philosophy of parenting; the identity crisis they bequeathed to their children; their conflicted views toward sexuality, money, and violence; and above all, the role of religion in misshaping our family life.

There are times when I wonder what I would have done if my father had not left us in Kenya. If he had stayed, I would have been married off at a much earlier age and would never have had the courage or opportunity to flee in search of a better life. If my family had never left Somalia or if my mother had gotten her way and kept me at home instead of sending me to school, the seeds of my rebellion might not have taken root, seeds that inspired me to imagine a life for myself that was different from the one that I was accustomed to and different from the life my parents had in store for me. So many circumstances and decisions in my life were not in my control, and only in hindsight do I see the opportunities that allowed me to take control of my life.

I found out the hard way that lingering between the two value systems, straddling the gap between the West and Islam, living a life of ambiguity—with an outward presentation of modernity and self-reliance and an inward clinging to tradition and dependence on the clan—stunts the process of becoming one's own person. I felt great mental anguish at the prospect of leaving my father to face the wrath of our clan after I escaped; I was in a state of mental torture as I contemplated the consequences of my leaving Islam, consequences that would not fall on me but on my parents and other relatives. I suffered many moments of weakness when I too entertained the idea of giving up my needs and sacrificing my personal happiness for the peace of mind of my parents, siblings, and clan.

My nomadic journey, in other words, has above all been mental—even the last stage of that journey, from Holland to the United States. It was a journey not just over thousands of miles, but a journey through time, through hundreds of years. It was a journey from Africa, a place where people are members of a tribe, to Europe and America, where people are citizens (though they think of citizenship in quite distinct ways from country to country). There were many misunderstandings, expectations, and disappointments along the way, and I learned many lessons. I learned that it is one thing to say farewell to tribal life: it is quite another to practice the

life of a citizen, which so many members of my family have failed to do. And they are by no means alone.

Today close to a quarter of all people in the world identify themselves as Muslim, and the top ten refugee-producing nations in the world are also Muslim. Most of those displaced peoples are heading toward Europe and the United States. The scale of migration from Muslim countries is almost certain to increase in the coming years because the birth rate in those countries is so much higher than in the West. The “problem family”—people like my relatives—will become more and more common unless Western democracies understand better how to integrate the newcomers into our societies: how to turn them into citizens.

I see three main barriers to this process of integration, none of them peculiar to my family. The first is Islam’s treatment of women. The will of little girls is stifled by Islam. By the time they menstruate they are rendered voiceless. They are reared to become submissive robots who serve in the house as cleaners and cooks. They are required to comply with their father’s choice of a mate, and after the wedding their lives are devoted to the sexual pleasures of their husband and to a life of childbearing. Their education is often cut short when they are still young girls, and thus as women they are wholly unable to prepare their own children to become successful citizens in modern, Western societies. Their daughters repeat the same pattern.

Some girls comply. Others lead a double life. Some run away and fall victim to prostitution and drugs. A few make their way on their own, as I did, and may even reconcile with their families. Each story is different, but the common factor is that Muslim women have to contend with much greater family control of their sexuality than women from other religious communities. This, in my view, is the biggest obstacle to the path of successful citizenship—not just for women, but also for the sons they rear and the men those sons become.

The second obstacle, which may seem trivial to some Western readers, is the difficulty many immigrants from Muslim countries

have in dealing with money. Islamic attitudes toward credit and debt and the lack of education of Muslim women about financial matters means that most new immigrants arrive in the West wholly unprepared for the bewildering range of opportunities and obligations presented by a modern consumer society.

The third obstacle is the socialization of the Muslim mind. All Muslims are reared to believe that Muhammad, the founder of their religion, was perfectly virtuous and that the moral strictures he left behind should never be questioned. The Quran, as “revealed” to Muhammad, is considered infallible: it is the true word of Allah, and all its commands must be obeyed without question. This makes Muslims vulnerable to indoctrination in a way that followers of other faiths are not. Moreover, the violence that is endemic in so many Muslim societies, ranging from domestic violence to the incessant celebration of holy war, adds to the difficulty of turning people from that world into Western citizens.

I can sum up the three obstacles to the integration of people like my own family in three words: sex, money, and violence.

* * *

In the last part of *Nomad* I suggest some remedies. The West tends to respond to the social failures of Muslim immigrants with what can be called the racism of low expectations. This Western attitude is based on the idea that people of color must be exempted from “normal” standards of behavior. A well-meaning class of people holds that minorities should not share all of the obligations that the majority must meet. In liberal, democratic countries the majorities are white and most minorities are people of color. But most Muslims, like all other immigrants, migrate to the West not to be locked up in a minority, but to search for a better life, one that is safe and predictable and that holds the prospect of a better income and the opportunity of a good quality education for their children. To achieve this, I believe, they must learn to give up some of their habits, dogmas, and practices and acquire new ones.

There are many good men and women in the West who try to resettle refugees, scold their fellow citizens for not doing more, donate money to philanthropic organizations, and strive to eliminate discrimination. They lobby governments to exempt minorities from the standards of behavior of Western societies; they fight to help minorities preserve their cultures, and they excuse their religion from critical scrutiny. These people mean well, I have no doubt. But I believe that their well-intentioned activism is now a part of the very problem they seek to solve. To be blunt, their efforts to assist Muslims and other minorities are futile because, by postponing or at best prolonging the process of their transition to modernity—by creating the illusion that one can hold on to tribal norms and at the same time become a successful citizen—the proponents of multiculturalism lock subsequent generations born in the West into a no-man's-land of moral values. What comes packaged in a compassionate language of acceptance is really a cruel form of racism. And it is all the more cruel because it is expressed in sugary words of virtue.

I believe there are three institutions in Western society that could ease the transition into Western citizenship of these millions of nomads from the tribal cultures they are leaving. They are institutions that can compete with the agents of jihad for the hearts and minds of Muslims.

The first is public education. The European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century gave birth to schools and universities run on the principles of critical thinking. Education was aimed at helping the masses emancipate themselves from poverty, superstition, and tyranny through the development of their cognitive abilities. With the spread of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, access to such reason-based institutions steadily expanded. Children from all social backgrounds were taught not only math, geography, science, and the arts, but also the social skills and the discipline required to achieve success in the world beyond the classroom. Literature expanded and challenged their imaginations so that they could empathize with characters from other times and places. This

public education was geared toward grooming citizens, not preserving the separateness of tribe, the sanctity of the faith, or whatever happened to be the prejudice of the day.

Today, however, many schools and campuses in the West have opted to be more “considerate” of the faith, customs, and habits of the immigrant students they find in their classrooms. Out of a misguided politeness they refrain from openly challenging the beliefs of Muslim children and their parents. Textbooks gloss over the fundamentally unjust rules of Islam and present it as a peaceful religion. Institutions of reason must cast off these self-imposed blinkers and reinvest in developing the ability to think critically, no matter how impolite some people may find the results.

The second institution that can and must do more is the feminist movement. Western feminists should take on the plight of the Muslim woman and make it their own cause. Their aim should be to help the Muslim woman find her voice. Western feminists have a wealth of experience and resources at their disposal. There are three goals they must aspire to in helping their Muslim sisters. The first is to ensure that Muslim girls are free to complete their education; the second is to help them gain ownership of their own bodies and therefore their sexuality; and the third is to make sure that Muslim women have the opportunity not only to enter the workforce but also to stay in it. Unlike Muslim women in Muslim countries and Western women in the past, Muslim women in the West face specific constraints imposed on them by their families and communities. It is not enough to classify their problems as “domestic violence;” they are domestic in practice but legal and cultural in nature. There should be campaigns dedicated to exposing the special circumstances and restrictions of Muslim women and the dangers they face in the West; to educate Muslim men on the importance of women’s emancipation and education and to punish them when they use violence; to protect Muslim women from physical harm.

The third and final institution I call on to rise to this challenge is the community of Christian churches. I myself have become an

atheist, but I have encountered many Muslims who say they need a spiritual anchor in their lives. I have had the pleasure of meeting Christians whose concept of God is a far cry from Allah. Theirs is a reformed and partly secularized Christianity that could be a very useful ally in the battle against Islamic fanaticism. This modern Christian God is synonymous with love. His agents do not preach hatred, intolerance, and discord; this God is merciful, does not seek state power, and sees no competition with science. His followers view the Bible as a book full of parables, not direct commands to be obeyed. Right now, there are two extremes in Christianity, both of which are a liability to Western civilization. The first consists of those who damn the existence of other groups, They take the Bible literally and reject scientific explanations for the existence of man and nature in the name of “intelligent design.” Such fundamentalist Christian groups invest a lot of time and energy in converting people. But much of what they preach is at odds with the core principles of the Enlightenment. At the other extreme are those who would appease Islam—like the spiritual head of the Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who holds that the implementation of Shari’a in the UK is inevitable. Those who adhere to a moderate, peaceful, reformed Christianity are not as active as the first group nor as vocal as the second. They should be. The Christianity of love and tolerance remains one of the West’s most powerful antidotes to the Islam of hate and intolerance. Ex-Muslims find Jesus Christ to be a more attractive and humane figure than Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

My time as a nomad is coming to an end. My final destination has turned out to be the United States, as it has been for so many millions of wanderers for over two hundred years. America is now my home. For better or worse, I share in the destiny of other Americans, and I would like to repay their generosity in welcoming me to their unique free society by sharing with them the insights I have gained through my years as a tribal Muslim nomad.

The message of Nomad is clear and can be stated at the outset:

The West urgently needs to compete with the jihadis, the proponents of a holy war, for the hearts and minds of its own Muslim immigrant populations. It needs to provide education directed at breaking the spell of the infallible Prophet, to protect women from the oppressive dictates of the Quran, and to promote alternative sources of spirituality.

The contents of *Nomad*, like those of *Infidel*, are largely subjective. I make no claims to an exclusive possession of the one and only solution to becoming a successful citizen. Human nature, being what it is, does not lend itself to neat categories of “assimilable” and “unassimilable.” There is no ready-made manual containing a recipe for an easy and hurdle-free reconciliation with modernity. Each individual is different and must contend with his or her unique set of opportunities and constraints. The same applies to families and communities faced with the twin challenges of adopting a new way of life while at the same time remaining true to the traditions of their forefathers and faiths.

In the end, then, this remains a very personal book, a kind of reckoning with my own roots. You might say the book is addressed to Sahra, the little sister I left behind in the world that I escaped. But it is also the conversation I would like to have had with my family, especially my father, who once understood and even propagated the modern life I now lead, before he fell back into a trance of submission to Allah. It is the conversation I would like to have had with my grandmother, who taught me to honor our bloodline, come what may.

While writing this book I constantly had in mind my brother’s son, Jacob, growing up in Nairobi, and Sahra’s baby daughter, Sagal, who was born in a bubble of Somalia in England. I hope that they will grow straight and strong and healthy—but also, above all, free.