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Multiculturalism and Citizenship in the Netherlands

HALLEH GHORASHI

Post-war economic growth and the need for unskilled labour forced the Dutch government to look beyond its borders, fostering labour contracts first with Italy and Spain, and later with Turkey and Morocco. The migrants from Muslim majority countries were seen as especially problematic for integration into the Dutch society.

Their low economic position and social isolation made them both the underclass citizens of the Dutch society and the scapegoats for the ills of society. Rightwing political movements, represented early on in the ideas of Bolkestein and the People's Party for Democracy and Freedom (VVD), cast immigrants as uneducated, uncivilized, criminal, and dangerous, and emphasized the need for the state to deal with them with "toughness." In his view the only way to preserve Western values and achievements was to leave politically correct attitudes behind and pressure immigrants to completely integrate into Dutch society. Although many distanced themselves from Bolkestein's approach, he was able, for the first time, to provide a public space from which to argue against the previously dominant "toleration of difference" discourse. By the year 2000 the assimilative discourse on migration became the dominant discourse on migration in the Netherlands, and after 11 September 2001 the climate became even more anti-Muslim.

The appearance of Pim Fortuyn onto the political landscape as the leader of the newly established *Leefbaar Nederland* party (Liveable Netherlands) would further change the debates around immigration. His party eventually disassociated itself with him and his statements such as "Islam is a backward culture." Fortuyn therefore founded his own party, *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) which won the largest number of seats in the municipal elections of Rotterdam. His party was up for elections in the National Parliament when, on 6 May 2002, Fortuyn was murdered by an animal rights activist. With Fortuyn the political discourse around migrants, particularly Muslim migrants, became more polarized than ever before.

Debates on Islam in the Netherlands

I came to the Netherlands as a refugee sixteen years ago from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although I experienced political (as a leftist) and gender (as a woman) suppression in the name of Islam, I have learned that Islam as a religion should not be blamed for the acts of a repressive regime. By practising democracy in the Netherlands I have learned to respect people for their thoughts as long as those thoughts are not forced on me. And it is here that I have come to differ from Ayaan Hirsi Ali, arguably one of the most controversial politicians today on Islam in the Netherlands.

Born in 1967 in Mogadishu (Somalia), Ayaan Hirsi Ali also came to the Netherlands as a refugee in 1992. She graduated in political science and was active within the Labour party until 2002 when she switched to the VVD and became a member of the Dutch Parliament in 2003. Hirsi Ali is famous for her radical standpoints against Islam in general and the Muslim community in the Netherlands in particular. I first saw Ayaan in 2002 as she appeared in a discussion program on Dutch television. At that time, I saw a strong woman

The discourse on multiculturalism in the Netherlands dates to the arrival of the so-called "guest workers" in the late 1950s. By the 1980s, when the Dutch government realized that migration, initially viewed as temporary, had gained a more permanent character, it started to focus on the integration of the immigrants.¹

who fought for her ideas: someone who dared to distance herself from her traditional, Islamic background and by doing so, position herself against the traditional Muslim community in the Netherlands. Her arguments on the incompatibility between Islamic belief and women's emancipation were sharp.

She stood up for the rights of Muslim women, whom she believed were suppressed by Islamic tradition and law. I initially identified with Hirsi Ali, however my identification with her did not last long.

I soon realized that Ayaan had become a welcome mouthpiece for the dominant discourse on Islam in the Netherlands that pictures Muslim migrants as problems and enemies of the nation. Who could better represent the dominant view than a person with an Islamic background? Predictably, Ayaan soon became a prominent figure both for the media and in politics. She sailed on the conservative ideas in the Netherlands that push migrants—the most marginalized group in society—even further into isolation. It was in the Netherlands that I discovered that real enlightenment does not come from exclusion, but rather inclusion. 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. 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.

Forging a democratic citizenry

Beneath this rightist discourse in the Netherlands lay particular definitions of "nation" and "culture." What the above-mentioned figures in the Netherlands share is their emphasis on the incompatibility of cultures, the need to protect Dutch culture and identity from cultural invasion, and the need 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."² Explaining the immigrants' problems through culture is not only naive, it is also a specific form of cultural fundamentalism which weakens the very foundations of the nation.

There has emerged a dual discourse of citizenship: one discourse for the "real Dutch," and another one for the "unwanted Dutch" who need to "integrate," "be saved from their husbands," or "learn the language." The latter discourse presumes that migrants are not mature enough to decide matters for themselves, and thereby promotes a passive citizenship. Migrants can only feel part of a society if they know that their voices are taken seriously as active citizens. When migrants' choices, including the choice to maintain aspects of their culture, are respected, migrants can feel included in the society. This is the only fruitful path for any multicultural state.

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Notes

1. This piece is an abridged version of an article by Halleh Ghorashi, "Ayaan Hirsi Ali: daring or dogmatic? Debates on multiculturalism and emancipation in the Netherlands," *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, no. 42 (2003): 163-73.
2. Verena Stolcke, "Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe," *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (1995): 1-24.