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‘Please Go Wake Up!’: Submission, Hirsi Ali, and the “War on Terror” in the Netherlands

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Measured to our western standards, [the prophet] Mohammed is a perverse man. A tyrant. He is against the freedom of speech... Mohammed is a role model for all Muslim men. Do you find it strange that so many Muslim men are violent? You are frightened when I say such things, but you make a mistake that most native Dutch make: you forget where I’m coming from. I was a Muslim, I know what I’m talking about. (Ayaan Hirsi Ali cited in Arjan Visser 2003; our translation)

It is one matter to suffer violence and quite another to use that fact to ground a framework in which one’s injury authorizes limitless aggression against targets that may or may not be related to the sources of one’s own suffering. (Judith Butler 2004, p. 94)

Introduction

The film Submission Part One, made by the politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, led to an enormous media war and explosion of public debate in and beyond the Netherlands. This 11-minute film, which was meant as an indictment towards Islam and its relation to violence against women, was screened for the first time on national television in August 2004. Two months later, on November 2, a so called “radical Islamic” young Moroccan-Dutch man, Mohammed Bouyeri, murdered Theo van Gogh, the director of the film. The content of a letter that was stabbed into the belly of the director’s body, made it clear that the murder was intended to provoke fear at the address of Hirsi Ali. The murder, which was amply mediatized in and outside the Netherlands, caused a wave of anti-Islamic resentment, polarization, and social unrest within Dutch society.

Rather than turning to the murder itself, this article turns to the film Submission and the figure of Hirsi Ali in order to explore the complexities involved in explaining the current socio-political dynamics in the Netherlands. The development of our arguments expressed in this article draws on the recent work of anthropologists or cultural theorists working on mass media (see especially Lila Abu Lughod 1997; George Marcus 1996; Debra Spitulnik 1993). Here, mass media is understood as representing and shaping cultural values of society. In contrast to a functionalist approach of mass media, this more semiotic approach attempts to

1 In the rest of the article the film Submission Part One will be referred to as simply Submission.
see mass media “not so much as definers of ‘reality’, but as dynamic sites of struggle over representation, and complex spaces in which subjectivities are constructed and identities are contested” (Spitulnik 1993, p. 296).

Important, with respect to the focus of our analysis, is the assumption that the form of the mediated message—in this case the visual representation of Submission and media frames of Hirsi Ali—produces as much meaning as the message itself. As anthropologist Spitulnik has noted, discursive forms “both presuppose and create the contexts for their interpretation, as well as the relationships of participants to the event of communication” (1993, p. 298). Thus, in this respect, although the authors underscore the fundamental message in critiquing violence against women, they find it necessary to explore the discourses in which others and Hirsi Ali herself have framed this critique.

By analyzing the visual representation of Submission and the mediated selves that are constructed around the figure of Hirsi Ali, the authors aim to untangle the ideological reassertions underpinning the two. As we will argue, rather than contributing to the debate on domestic violence against Muslim women in the Netherlands, particular appropriations of the film and the phenomenon of Hirsi Ali actually make visible how the Dutch discourse of multiculturalism and feminism is positioned towards cultural “others.” Moreover, the authors assert that Submission caters to a localization of a post 9/11 global discourse, which conflates the “liberation of women” with the “war on terror.” This conflation frames questions of morality and justice within an apocalyptic pathos in which Western civilized values—based on liberal universal claims—appear to be endangered.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1967. Her father, the linguist Dr Hirsi Magan Isse, was a well-respected religious man that opposed the Somalian regime of Mohamed Siad Barre. After a period of imprisonment, the father, together with his family, fled to Kenya via Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia. In her many biographical accounts (some of them voiced in Hirsi Ali 2002a, 2004a), Hirsi Ali described the distress of her orthodox-Islamic upbringing, her traumatic circumcision, and her arranged marriage. Her family had set up a marriage with a distant cousin in Canada. On her way to Canada, however, she escaped the marriage by going to the Netherlands via Germany instead. She was granted political asylum in the Netherlands, and in 1997, five years later, was allotted Dutch citizenship. After graduating in Political Science, she started to work as an interpreter in asylum houses, abortion clinics, and women’s crisis centers. Eventually she worked for the Wiardi Beckman Stichting, the scientific think tank of the labor party PvdA in the Netherlands.

The commotion around Hirsi Ali started in September 2002, when all major newspapers reported that Hirsi Ali had received death threats as a result of earlier appearances on public television where she made statements about Islam being “backward.” In her police report, Hirsi Ali asserted that she had received death threats via telephone calls to her father stemming from North-African men based in Rome and Stockholm (Hirsi Ali 2002b, p. 7). The news traveled fast. Newspapers and television stations reported the death threats, linking them to a transnational fundamentalist Islamic network. Although factual data on the actual
death threats was scarce, the news resulted in a complete media-hype. In a short time, public solidarity emerged throughout the country, by means of postcard actions, support advertisements in quality papers, and the Support Ayaan Hirsi Ali website.

Subsequently, a controversial article in the respectable weekly journal *Vrij Nederland*, alleged that it was unclear whether there were real death threats (Elma Verhey 2002, pp. 12-14). This article claimed that there was no substantial evidence pointing out to death threats from an international network of so-called “radical Muslims.” The article, thus, suggested that Hirsi Ali had made up or at least “blown up” her claim of being threatened for life. At this point, a group known as the so-called “Friends of Ayaan”—consisting of well-known liberal writers, academics, journalists, and politicians—emerged to defend her. Proclaiming solidarity with Hirsi Ali’s precarious position, they called for the protection of the “new Dutch Salman Rushdie,” a protection that the labor party omitted to do.

In October, Hirsi Ali left the Netherlands to remain in the United States for a couple of months. Upon her return to the Netherlands, in January 2003, she left the labor party to join the liberal-right party, the VVD. The media exposure that the figure of Hirsi Ali evoked, led to constituting her as one of VVD’s most important members. After they triumphed at the 2003 election, she became a member of parliament and was assigned the portfolio for Emancipation issues. In 2004 she decided to direct the film Submission together with the well-known Dutch filmmaker and media personality Theo van Gogh. Media exposure on her personae continued throughout the year but culminated after the murder of van Gogh in November 2004. It was here that renewed media frenzy evolved around the person Hirsi Ali, the film Submission, and the development of so-called Dutch Islamic terrorism.

**Re/Presenting Submission**

In a fictional monologue, spoken out as testimonial, the film Submission portrays four Muslim women who, in various ways, are victims of suppression and domestic violence. The film implies that the violence is legitimated by particular Koranic verses; these verses are visualized by projecting them on the semi-naked bodies of the victims.

The fictional testimonial successively tells stories in which a (1) Muslim woman is accused of fornication, (2) forced into marriage and sexually abused by her husband, (3) a victim of domestic violence, and (4) raped by her husband’s uncle until she appears pregnant. If the women protest against the violence inflicted on them, not the men, they are punished and silenced: they need to obey in the name of Allah. The testifying narrator wears a black veil, leaving only space for the eyes. The rest of her body is covered with a transparent veil, which

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2 See Anna Windgassen (2002) for an account of the inconsistencies of the “media facts.”
3 Rather, the threats made (which were no death threats) suggested it to be related to familial matters rather than Dutch political matters.
4 This group of so-called “friends of Ayaan” was born out of a petition that was published as an advertisement on the front page in the respected daily newspaper *de Volkskrant* (2002). Initiated by the mainstream feminist magazine *Opzij*, it called for the moral support of Hirsi Ali with respect to the freedom of speech.
5 In the hope to regain the votes that were lost during the 2002 election to the populist anti-immigrant party LPF (Pim Fortuyn List), her bold stance against Islam was strategically instrumentalized within the new election-campaign of the VVD.
6 Rather than being known for his films, Theo van Gogh was more notorious as someone who made blunt statements on political issues in mass media.
reveals her naked breasts, and the Arabic calligraphy inscribed on her body. The second woman, forced into marriage, wears a white bridal dress, and is turned away from the viewer with her face to a wall. Bent over she trembles with fear, Arabic calligraphy is written all over her back. For the Dutch audience this person is recognizable as the politician Hirsi Ali herself. The third woman is only visible in short flash fragments throughout the film. In white clothes, which are ripped and torn, the woman lies helplessly in a corner. Covered in blood, her beaten-up face is visible, her bruised body again inscribed with Arabic calligraphic signs. Vaguely visible in the background of the narrator, the fourth woman is present. Again we see Arabic calligraphy, this time, on a dark burqa, covering her pregnant body.

The location of the scenery is, according to Hirsi Ali, “Islamistan.” Islamistan appears as a window-less dark inner-space in which only a carpet and a colorful “Arabic” background seems to be used to evoke an apparent “Islamic” setting. Throughout the film, accompanying the story line, sounds of whips and upbeat Arabic music take turns in building up a dramatic fearful atmosphere. The tone of the testimony follows the recitation of the Koran verses, intertwined with the stories of the narrator. Although we see the testifying witness, we do not see her mouth: this invisibility of the voice, turning the voice into a voice-over, constitutes a voice from “nowhere and everywhere.” This effect evokes the position of the super-ego or conscience, which echoes a theological (and ideological) realm.

This narrator, standing on a praying carpet, mixes prayer, confession, and testimony while lamenting to Allah. Koran verses, which, according to the scriptwriter Hirsi Ali, are used to legitimate the submission of women to men, are inscribed in Arabic on the female bodies. This testimony develops into a “crisis of faith”: How is it possible that the same God she, the narrating woman, loves and trusts, can legitimate the destruction of pure love, of submission, of abuse and rape. Thus, the purity of the girls’ innocent love, in the first story, is confronted with the pure divinity of God. By setting up a “dialogue with Allah,” the testimonial narrator explicates her fundamental imputation that is addressed at Muslim communities in general and battered Muslim women in particular.

As narrated and depicted by the actresses, the women in the stories are portrayed as defenseless young women who “submit” themselves to Allah and are seen to have no agency in dealing with their problems. These narratives define women by their violability where women are always/already subordinated. Simultaneously, the sensual female voice, the explicit use of American English, and her nakedness under a transparent veil, evoke an association with quasi soft-porn images. In this respect, Submission not only produces the Western “Oriental” image of Muslims and Islam, but also frames this within a Western misogynist image in which women’s bodies are depersonalized as objects of desire and lust. As such, one can argue that Submission refers both, to the depersonalization of Muslim women (as oppressed and helpless objects), as to the depersonalization of Western women (as

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7 In her scenario for the film, Hirsi Ali called Islamistan “a fictitious country in which the majority of people are Muslim and where the rule of the sharia is in force” (Hirsi Ali 2004).
8 The inscription refers to the Koran verses 24.2/ 2.222/ 4.34/ 24.31. The interpretation of these verses is subject of ongoing exegesis and severe debates within the Muslim community.
9 Western media and Hollywood films, for instance the film Not Without My Daughter (1991), have fuelled this discourse by producing the popular “based-on-a-true-story” narrative where Western or Muslim women are often depicted as passive and helpless victims of Islamic oppression.
sexual and commodified objects). Veiling the narrating woman, as showing her sexualized body, exoticizes the testifying woman in the film. The apparent paradox lies in the fact that the Western form of depersonalization is used to liberate the depersonalization of Muslim women, while in fact, both stereotypes give little credit to woman as acting subjects.

The depiction of the Koranic verses on the semi-naked bodies suggest as if the “root of evil” (here five verses from the Koran) can be exactly localized, isolated, and eventually, dismissed. Besides the fact that also in the Christian and Jewish scriptures misogynist and denigrating statements about woman can be found, this reduction of a world religion with many different local variations and centuries of interpretation to five verses, renders the literary statement absolute, thus, propagating what the “fundamentalist” does. Moreover, it dismisses the work of Islamic feminists that have long been countering these masculinist discourses (for instance Riffat Hassan 2001; Fatima Mernissi 1991; Amina Wadud 1999).

After the screening of Submission in the program Zomergasten, an elaborate comment from Hirsi Ali followed where she stated:

> The calligraphy, for instance, is very beautiful, but complex at the same time. Sometimes, behind that beauty lays cruelty, not so much for the viewer, but for the Muslim woman. I want to show this in Iran and Saudi Arabia, I want to show it to women who live under the sharia and also to other women, smart women . . . That’s why I did it in English. (Zomergasten, August 29, 2004; our translation)

Although Hirsi Ali argued that the film was intended for a female (“smart”) Muslim audience, the media platform that van Gogh and Hirsi Ali had chosen to first screen their film, could not have reached the audience that she had in mind. By screening the film for mainly a Western (Dutch) audience, who is not able to read the Arabic calligraphy, and is in general unfamiliar with (or ignorant about) Islam, Submission encourages and reactivates the Orientalist gaze and affirms the Western/Dutch fear which these stereotypical images of the Muslim “other” evoke.

Verbal, textual, and visual signifiers with a particular cultural, religious, and political connotation, thus, are consciously conflated and synthesized to create a classic stereotypical representation of the exotic Muslim woman (see especially Leila Ahmed 1992; Nilüfer Göle 1996; Meyda Yeğenoglu 1998). This (visual) narrative not only reduces and essentializes “Islam” as a whole to Oriental-Arabic “origins,” but also, as if, women in the Netherlands could end up in “Islamistan.” The depiction of Submission within an Oriental-Arabic Islamic scenery in which Islam is presented as essentially “backward” and “despotic” contributes to a revival of Orientalist clichés and myths present in Europe since the nineteenth century. We are aware of the fact that the term “Orientalism” coined by Edward Said (Said 1978, pp. 220-226) covers a wide range of descriptions for the historical confrontation, imaginary, and ideology underlying the particular relationship between “the

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10 Broadcasted by the intellectual and leftist network VPRO in August 2004, the program is mainly popular among Dutch intellectuals. Over 750,000 households watched the program that evening (Annelies Moors 2005, p. 8).

11 Many thanks to Begüm Özden Firat who illuminated this point.

12 This localization of her film in, what Hirsi Ali calls, “Islamistan” produces a linguistic associative effect with “Afghanistan” (which, subsequently, symbolizes possible “Talibanization”).
West” and “the Orient.” In the framework of Submission, we particularly emphasize the fact that the film does not depict narratives of Dutch female Muslims, within a Dutch social setting, with Dutch-speaking women having particular problems with domestic violence in the Netherlands, but that the film is consciously staged within an Orientalist-Arabic setting.

Would a narrative of suppression by Muslim women told in fluent Dutch have a different effect on a Dutch audience? The reference about the intended audience, of “women who live under the sharia and also of other women, smart women... who speak English” unveils in a nutshell the elitist perspective of Hirsi Ali’s statement. Here she suggests that there are women, and there are women who live under the sharia: the former speak English and are smart, while the latter don’t speak English and—supposedly—cannot be smart. In the rhetoric of Hirsi Ali’s statement, it is Muslim women, exploited by “religious fundamentalists,” who need to be “saved” (through emancipation and education, and, thus, by teaching them English and turning them into “smart” women).

In Submission, the female body as contested ground is exposed through a voyeuristic keyhole perspective. The audience as “outsider” is offered an intimate erotic-religious image, which, through the presentation of victims, serves to unveil the cruelty and injustice of Islam. In other words, the double “peep-show” effect of Submission simultaneously offers the audience a quasi-secretive insight view into the exotic world of Muslims and shows us, through the “unveiling” of the covert female Muslim body, the personal autobiographies of suffering, abuse, and rape which are hidden in this other exotic world. Thus, Submission suggests to visually “open up” the Islamic “ghetto” by unveiling and testifying to the internal violence of Muslim communities.

“The Making of Ayaan”: Unframing Mediated Selves

The way in which Hirsi Ali presented herself, and was represented by others in mass media contributed to making the phenomenon of “Ayaan.” As the Dutch sociologist Dick Pels argues, “[i]ncreasingly, positions of political power are dependent upon public trust, belief and confidence (and upon those who are able to manipulate these volatile variables), and hence upon a recognisable political style that weaves together matter and manner, principle and presentation, in an attractively coherent and credible political performance” (2003a, p. 57). The effectiveness of the phenomena of “Ayaan” in this respect depended on a complex construction of a coming together of—what we here would like to describe as—mediated selves. These selves, as we will illustrate, reflect strategic selves in a stable and static way that are instrumentalized both by the media as by Hirsi Ali herself. These include the mediated self as “other” and the mediated self as “one of us.”

The mediated self as “other” includes the framing of Hirsi Ali as representing the female exotic other, as insider expert, and as victim of Islamic violence. The first refers to ways in which she is visually represented as the quintessential authentic and exotic cultural other in mass media. In print media, for instance, her “ebonite skin” was often mentioned as a reference to her African beauty (Anna Windgassen 2002). In electronic media, this is especially illustrated by life-sized and black-and-white portraits, which are placed as
background of different media settings.\footnote{This black-and-white approach, often used to capture so-called “gritty reality” (John Berger & Jean Mohr 1982) “iconizes” her, and makes her into someone that obtains certain uniqueness and authenticity. It suggests purity, innocence, for she is “naked,” and proclaims the “naked truth.”} By aestheticizing and exoticizing her through these photographs, a practice which never took place for other politicians in the Netherlands, she becomes the female cultural other that people can embrace and iconize as innocent, pure, and brave. Second, the mediated self as “other” involves the ways in which media producers have assigned her the status of an insider with “expert-knowledge” in programs and talk shows.\footnote{Many thanks to Anouk de Koning who pointed out this “Self.”} It refers back to her being the authentic Muslim woman who was born into Islamic culture, and thus, can claim particular knowledge and truths. Finally, her status as victim of Islamic violence gives her an authoritative and powerful voice in resisting the source of that violence. Through her biographical accounts and essays, where she “speaks out” about her circumcision and arranged marriage, she becomes the legitimate accuser through her own witnessing of the violence.

The mediated self as “one of us” evolves around the framing of Hirsi Ali as the liberated convert, the committed activist, and the political “whistleblower.” As her narrative explicates, Hirsi Ali not only survived her violence, but she also liberated herself from the confines of religion that, in her opinion, was the source of the violent practices of her upbringing. Second, it is not her image as a politician per se that made her into a celebrity, rather, it is her image as a committed activist that had engaged the public. By dedicating her “mission” to being the spokeswoman for “silenced” (monddode) women, she gathers the support of many people who were disillusioned by earlier Dutch “uncommitted” and corporate “consensus” politics (poldermodel). Finally, this activist status overlaps with her status of being a former member of the labor party PvdA. By joining the liberal right party VVD, she could legitimately state her discomforts with the way in which the politics of the left have handled the issue of multiculturalism in the past (see Hirsi Ali 2002b). In being the whistleblower (klokkenluider) to the wrongs and naivety of the PvdA she could be praised for her honesty, bravery, and realist politics, but more importantly for opting for “the cause” instead of party politics.

Unframing these mediated selves, the making of this complex phenomenon and its problematic effects become more visible. Although seemingly paradoxical, the mediated selves, as “other” and as “one of us,” have made it possible for her to become the political celebrity after Pim Fortuyn.\footnote{With a political program based on migration issues, the failure of multiculturalism, and the call to end elitist politics of the labor party, Fortuyn swiftly gained enormous popularity. Many neo-liberals see Fortuyn as the first politician who actually “dared” to say that Islam caused a threat to Western civilization (see especially Pels 2003b).} It is exactly in the conflation of these two mediated selves that the problematic nature of this phenomenon lies. The apparent logic that evolves out of these mediated selves, namely, is the linearity of being the ultimate “other” to becoming “one of us.” This is reflected and projected in multiple ways; in her narrative of being the victim to survivor of Islamic violence; in her narrative of believer to a non-believer; in her narrative of leftist PvdA politician to a liberal right VVD politician; and ultimately in her narrative of asylum seeker to a successful politician.

\footnote{13 This black-and-white approach, often used to capture so-called “gritty reality” (John Berger & Jean Mohr 1982) “iconizes” her, and makes her into someone that obtains certain uniqueness and authenticity. It suggests purity, innocence, for she is “naked,” and proclaims the “naked truth.”}
In the news program *Nova* (October 13, 2004) we could see how Hirsi Ali discussed the film *Submission* with four Muslim women in a shelter home. Hirsi Ali was now suddenly confronted with the presence of the actual women for whom she was supposedly the spokeswoman. Here the fictitious abused characters of Submission were juxtaposed with real abused persons. During the conversation, Hirsi Ali found herself confronted with anger, outrage, and disgust of the Muslim women who reacted to her film. This culminated in a woman running out on the discussion for “since Hirsi Ali did not want a genuine dialogue there was no reason for her to stay.” At this moment Hirsi Ali made a dismissive gesture waving her hand to the woman and saying, “okay, goodbye then.” More than just uncovering an elitist or a defensive attitude, this gesture shows to what extent Hirsi Ali cannot account, or be accountable, for the stories of these women. As explicated in the televised discussion, in the eyes of these real abused women, Hirsi Ali is clearly not “one of them.”

Problematic, thus, is the manner in which this linearity seems to be fixed, static, and uncompromisable. The mediated selves as “other” and as “one of us” presents a Hirsi Ali who has solved all her ambivalent, conflicting, and diffused identity questions: she was a victim but has chosen to be liberated. Strategically she and others can use these selves to legitimate certain positions or to ward off criticism. In this respect the authoritative voice of the mediated self as “other” tends to close off dialogue and turn the viewer into a passive spectator. In speaking on behalf of Muslim women through her self as “other” (especially as victim “other”) she creates a moral closure for critical opponents.

Although every one of us possesses intimate and strategic selves, the mediated selves that are constructed around Hirsi Ali, combined with her authoritative status as political celebrity, dismisses the voices of the women that she is actually representing. One of the reasons why especially young Muslim women feel provoked by Hirsi Ali is because she not only presents herself as expert on religious matters but also because she deprives them of their own identities. These women—who often have the difficult task of combining tradition with modernity, education and loyalty to the family and community—feel they are doing all they can to become successful Dutch citizens. With Hirsi Ali as spokeswoman these women are (again) seen as “backward” for in the framework of becoming “one of us” these women are not-yet-liberated and suffer from “false consciousness.” The apparent linear story of one’s self-liberation from Islam, thus, becomes part of a political program in which there is no place for hybrid identities, double cultural loyalties, or “blurry/messy” life-stories.

The ultimate audience that actually accepts Submission and Hirsi Ali’s message, therefore, is not so much the (conservative) Muslim community. Rather, it is the audience that is drawn and fascinated by the “other” but that simultaneously sees in Hirsi Ali the tolerable other, the “other” who is “one of us.” This perspective excludes “diversity” (Baukje Prins 2004, p. 163) in which for instance well-educated modern Dutch career girls who wear a veil and live according to Islamic customs do not fit into these categorizations. “Diversity” then is dismissed as a symbol of “old” leftist and naive politics and formulated through a rhetorical discourse of reifications and civilization. This wish to liberate and save Muslims (“to open their eyes”), moreover, is not informed by the classical liberal plea for individual freedom and rights, rather, it propagates forms of state-intervention and the control of particular groups.

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17 Many thanks to Amade M’charek for suggesting this point.
Ideological Re-assertions

Civilization Discourse

By deploying her own life narrative, Hirsi Ali actively enacts the appropriation of her mediated self as “other” in her plea for a universal neo-liberalism. In this plea, she feels inspired by the American political scientist Susan Moller Okin, who claims that multiculturalism is not compatible with feminism. Okin’s essay “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” (1999) answers affirmatively to the question posed. She asserts that the West is complicit to misogynist practices of “barbaric” cultures if it prioritizes the rights of minority cultures over that of liberal women’s rights in Western society. Cultural difference, she argues, will ultimately lead to relativism, and relativism is bad for women because it weakens “our” claims to gender justice.

Various theorists amply problematize her claims in Dutch feminist academia (Mieke Aerts & Sawitri Saharso 1994; Rosi Braidotti & Gloria Wekker 1996; Baukje Prins 2000; Sawitri Saharso 2000; Gloria Wekker & Helma Lutz 2001). Critique, however, did not strongly emerge within the realm of feminist journalism, policy-makers, or politicians. As feminist theorist Helma Lutz argues, Dutch feminist discourse was dominated by a “normalized” feminism that adhered to dominant discourses of modernity (2002, p. 16). From this normalized rhetoric, Lutz contends that “By denormalizing minorities and turning multiculturalism into a scandal, neither monoculturalists, nor feminists, have to engage with social inequality, contempt, discrimination, or racism, instead, they can turn the ‘bizar habits’ of ‘others’ into the goal of their civilization mission” (2002, p. 16; emphasis in original; our translation).

When asked about the reason for displaying women naked in the film, both the director Theo van Gogh and Hirsi Ali stated that they wanted to unveil the covered Muslim woman and show her body because “we are talking about women that are made of flesh and blood and not things that can be thrown away” (Reporter, December 8, 2004; Zomergasten 2004). By saying this, they assigned female nakedness to signify the right for a woman’s autonomous body. This rhetoric refers back to the discourse of Dutch sexual revolution and second wave feminism where sexuality is something that should be overt rather than covered. At that time, showing nakedness was a provocative reference to a woman’s right over her own body and sexuality.

The overt nakedness of the images in Submission, and the message of sexual liberty that the nakedness contained, explained to a certain extent as to why Hirsi Ali was referred to as the new Dolle Mina, a term used to refer to a strand of Dutch second wave feminists that upheld

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18 As Lutz describes, the dominant feminist discourse is especially represented by the so-called feminism à la Opzij, which refers to the magazine led by Ciska Dresselhuis, a good friend of Hirsi Ali, who received extensive media coverage for stating that she would not employ people that were veiled. Opzij awarded Hirsi Ali an emancipation award for her courage in making Submission.

19 The pro-choice struggle on the issue of abortion in the Netherlands is a good example in where nakedness played a crucial role in demanding visibility for the women’s cause. Women publicly wrote on their bellies “Boss in own belly” (Baas in eigen buik). This slogan inscribed on their bodies contributed to shaping the representation and collective memory of second wave feminism.
In this respect, the figure of the *Dolle Mina*, long outdated in the post-feminist imaginary, received a new impulse. Correspondingly, rather than rejuvenate Dutch feminism by including influences of black feminist theory or theories of difference, a long overdue plea by Dutch women’s studies and difference feminists since the mid-eighties, mainstream feminism (represented mostly by journalists and politicians) chose to dust off their old slogans and ideologies. By appropriating the “revival” of Dutch second wave feminist rhetoric onto the figure of Hirsi Ali as embodying the cultural “other,” they re-assert the feminist cause, which was supposedly undermined by multiculturalism, without running the risk of being accused of speaking from a white Eurocentric position.

At one point, in the talk show *Meetingpoint* (January 8, 2005), which is a monthly discussion program of the Dutch Muslim Network (NMO), Ayaan Hirsi Ali told a woman to “Please go wake up.” Here, Hirsi Ali, as the enlightened convert, warded off the critique of a young Muslim woman who did not agree with the ways in which she had made claims or statements about Islam. Through the celebrity status that Hirsi Ali had achieved, she could authoritatively “tell off” people: warn them that they are not conscious yet of their “real” situation. This seemingly small “act” of telling someone to “wake up” is illustrated more violently in *Submission* and in the confrontation with the Muslim women in the shelter home. Here the film as a whole seems to suggest a “wake-up call.” However, rather than being the “new Voltaire”—as some have opted to call her—who scrutinizes dogmatic belief and tries to convince others of the myths of absolute truths, Hirsi Ali imposes a secularist view that draws upon a developmentalist understanding of the Enlightenment tradition in Western countries. The normalized superiority of an oversimplified Enlightenment philosophy that such a position suggests, which is often conveniently conflated with concepts of “freedom” and “modernity,” dismisses the idea of an “alternative modernity” (Abu-Lughod 1998, p. 4) in Muslim societies.

As Leila Ahmed suggests, the political vocabulary and formality of Enlightenment should be differentiated from the cultural and psychological messages that it generates (1992, p. 245). Hirsi Ali’s claim that Islam is in need of its own Voltaire conflates the two spheres, resulting in a formation of two monolithic blocks of an enlightened Western culture versus a backward Muslim culture. This monolithic representation does not do justice to either a historical context, or to a cultural context (see also Troetje Loewenthal 2003). Moreover, as feminist theorists Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue in relation to the global discourse, the emphasis on “Muslim fundamentalism” in pointing out misogynist practices, dismisses, and deviates the attention from misogynist practices in other forms of extreme fundamentalisms, existing, for instance, in Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or Confucian societies (1994, p. 19).

By critiquing Islam naively, namely by ignoring its complexities, or by dismissing its regional and cultural contextualization, the mediation of Submission and Hirsi Ali contribute to conflating gender-based violence with a critique of Islam in general. Rather than aiming to eradicate violence against Muslim women, the combination of film and phenomenon seems to facilitate an appeal for a simplistically defined Enlightenment ideology, disguised in or conformed to a feminist appeal. This feminist appeal, however, is informed by Western ideas of women’s emancipation or sexual liberation and used as if it were the standard proof for liberated and democratic societies. The discourse surrounding Submission and Hirsi Ali, therefore, caters to the assumption that Western liberal regimes are more gender-sensitive than non-Western regimes.
As cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak notes, in respect to the British abolition of *suttee* in nineteenth-century India, Orientalist discourse depends on the notion that “White men [need to save] brown women from brown men” (as cited in Miriam Cooke 2002, p. 469). In her article “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving,” the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod rightly observes that in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in New York, “the question as to why knowing about the ‘culture’ of the region, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the US role in this history” (2002, p. 784). Here, she describes, how, all of a sudden, American men and women became interested in the dubious plight of Afghan women. By analyzing Barbara Bush’ speech on the responsibility of America to save Afghan women, Abu-Lughod explicates, how neocolonial feminism played an important role in appropriating the women’s cause to the “war on terrorism”.

What makes the Dutch plight, within this symbolic construction, even more complicated, is that rather than “white men saving brown women from brown men” (colonialism), or “white women saving brown women from brown men” (Barbara Bush), a “brown” woman (Hirsi Ali) wants to save other “brown women” from “brown” men. The embodiment of Hirsi Ali as the cultural and former-Muslim female “other,” and not the masculinist white European men, makes the politics of saving even more effective by dismissing denunciations of speaking from a white masculinist position. By representing the “other,” and telling “us” that “brown women” need saving, she re-asserts the superiority of the Enlighted Self in European or Dutch society. The fact that Hirsi Ali has become the embodiment of this tolerable and multicultural “other” reconfirm the idea that “integration” (or *inburgering*) in the current realm of “political correctness” is an ideological project that facilitates a notion of civilization. In addition, the confusion with supporters and opponents of Hirsi Ali, when they learned that she had switched to the liberal-right party VVD, and the remaining support she received from the left after this changeover, illustrates to what extend this civilization discourse is normalized in public discourse and, thus, concerns the left as much as the right.

**Apocalyptic Pathos**

Submission and the phenomenon of Hirsi Ali should be placed within a Dutch socio-political context, which aimed to re-assert neo-liberal politics and strong “moral” positions.20 The Dutch political commentator Bas Heijne (2004) coined the term “commitment kitsch” (*engagementskitsch*) to refer to the sudden inflation of angry neoliberals writing wake-up calls, in the form of furious “open letters” published in national newspapers, to warn of the “dangers of Islam.”21 The combination of “Enlightenment fundamentalism” (Pels 2004) with this “commitment kitsch,” in the conservative appeal to decency and moral values by the liberal-right, has established a new realm of political correctness. In contrast to the political

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20 As raised by Halleh Ghorashi (2004) and Bracke (2004, p. 349), the discourse of Hirsi Ali would have been different if her critique were raised within the context of Muslim societies.

21 In this article, Bas Heijne (2004, p. 17) reflects on Hirsi Ali’s (2004c, p. 37) “open letter to the mayor of Amsterdam Job Cohen” where she launched a personal attack against Cohen for being too “soft” on issues of multiculturalism. Heijne described these “open letters” of neoliberal celebrities, as their attempts to say “I am also [like] Zola!” writing an *J’accuse*. 
correctness of the former left, which was inspired by multiculturalism, identity-politics, and anti-racist politics, this redefinition claims its legitimating force by “openly saying what’s on one’s mind” without having to be fearful of being politically incorrect.

This climate of new political correctness, defined and defended by “new-realists” (Prins 2004), made it possible for “ordinary” citizens to express what they “really feel.” It also created a space for people to vent their fear and anxiety of the cultural “other” in a public domain that would now, not accuse them of racism or xenophobia. At last they were given the space to openly express the view that integration had failed and that “our” tolerance towards immigrants had reached an irreparable damage to Dutch economic and social life. Submission should be placed within this Dutch political context of constituting a new political correctness that is based on a restrictive form of multiculturalism, which includes an “integrated,” “emancipated” and thus “tolerable” outsider-subject. As a result, to express affinity with a more inclusive multiculturalism that amounts to the adaptation and conformation of the “native” Dutch themselves, or to problematize Hirsi Ali’s position, was suddenly an act of political incorrectness. More disturbingly, in the post-murder period, every opinion that was wary of this new political correctness was furtively sided with relativists, postmodernists, or even terrorists.

A few days after the killing of van Gogh, the well-known Dutch political scientist and commentator Paul Scheffer (2004) opened his article in the NRC Handelsblad with: “We should not hand over our country.” The opening line suggests that if we do not start fighting against the radical Muslims in the Netherlands, we will soon lose control over our country. This re-asserts the iconized discourse of immediately linking the murder of van Gogh with the attack on the twin towers in New York and the train station bombing in Madrid. After 9/11 and 11/3, “we” (the Dutch) now had “our” 11/2. Although there seems to be a difference between three thousand, two hundred, or one casualty, the symbolism of the act was immediately cast in the framework of the “war on terror.” Scheffer’s apocalyptic opening line was immediately followed by:

Not so long ago, Amsterdam was the embodiment of Dutch tolerance: a proud capital of a country that saw itself as a symbol of openness. Until now, Amsterdam stood as a positive exception: here, things were different from the rest of the country, here the suspicious people had not yet proclaimed a revolt. And now we have a body lying there with a butcher knife under a white sheet and everybody knows that we have fooled ourselves. (Scheffer 2004; our translation)

The remarks of Scheffer suggest that, before the killing of van Gogh, the Netherlands, and in particular Amsterdam, was a kind of phantasm, a utopian city of tolerance and openness. But this killing showed that “we” are actually part of the real world . . . a real world, in which radical Muslims kill Dutch filmmakers! Although Scheffer, in the rest of his article, develops
a more subtle argument, the framing of arguments within an apocalyptic pathos is typical for the rhetoric of a new realism of facing the real threat of Islamic fundamentalism. Scheffer calls for a new “we,” the “we against violence” and for “critical loyalty” to the Dutch constitution. But he, as most of the new realists, neglects the power relations underlying the current “politics of recognition.”

Ayaan Hirsi Ali positions her film simultaneously within this apocalyptic pathos and the discourse of civilization. In reacting to van Gogh’s murder she stated that she was “prepared to go very far in waking people up” (Hirsi Ali 2004). Her “cause” therefore, made explicit through Submission, is made to work as a form of “shock-therapy” where the shock denotes a confession of the “naked truth” which should open our eyes, thereby presenting Submission as a therapeutic and consciousness-raising film. Apparently also, this consciousness raising could not start early enough for during a televised visit to a Dutch Muslim school (Nova, December 11, 2003), Hirsi Ali asked a schoolgirl during the break on the schoolyard, whether she chose the constitution or Allah? Besides the fact that asking a nine- or ten-year-old schoolgirl to make a choice between Allah and the Dutch constitution (the actual meaning of both signifiers will probably not be entirely clear to her) seems a rather blunt form of political rhetoric, especially in front of the camera, the attempt to test the loyalty of a Dutch schoolgirl to the constitution suddenly localizes the pathos of the good guys and the bad guys—“you are with us (the constitution) or with the terrorists (Allah)—and thus, the “war on terror,” among playing girls in a Dutch schoolyard. What this attitude shows, more then just being anecdotal, is how a politics of recognition and symbolic politics coincide, when liberalism and liberation merge together in an ideology of “saving.”

Conclusion

The visual narrative of Submission also partakes in masculine power-games in which female bodies become contested ground: here the “battle” of Hirsi Ali against “conservative Islam” is fought out via female bodies. As the veil became the contested symbol (and, for example, not the “Muslim beard”) for the level of integration/loyalty of Muslims in our society, now, the violence against Muslim women was chosen as battleground for the confrontation between “backward Islam” and “modern/normal” Western democracy. Through (and not with) the female Muslim body, the question whether Islam is loyal to our Western state is symbolized in public space. In choosing female bodies as contested ground Hirsi Ali reaffirms masculine politics.

The local and global discourses that echo in the film Submission, and in the phenomenon of Hirsi Ali, thus, refer back to an extremely complex process of long-term socio-political, cultural, economic, and demographic transformations, in combination with short-term effects of signifying “events” such as 9/11 or the bombing in Madrid. Notions of insecurity and fear have radically changed the perspective on multiculturalism in the Netherlands and have transformed the debate into a debate on “radical” Islam and the “war on terror.” Within the public domain, these conflations have resulted in gross generalizations and a “for-or-against”

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25 In his letter to Hirsi Ali, Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of van Gogh, refers to exactly this particular moment (NRC Handelsblad 2004). He writes, that, by asking the “young pure souls” to choose between either their Creator or the constitution, Hirsi Ali abuses the girls’ answer for her own “crusade.”

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rhetoric of woman/security/integration/“Dutch culture”/ universalism/modernity/liberalism versus Islam/terror/culturalism/backwardness/ theocracy. The political camp is divided into “naive leftists supporting multiculturalism” versus “the ones who see the real threat from Islam and defend Western liberal freedom.”

The apparent crucial “trouble” is when a critique of Islam within the public discourse creates a realm and space for Islamophobia, in particular, when a critique of Islam is conflated with an essentialized critique of “Arabs” or, more specifically for the Dutch case, of “Moroccans” and “Turks.” Within an authoritative political and mediatized discourse, the conflation of “backward” religion (Islam) with “backward” culture of ethnic minorities can evoke aggression against these minorities, culminating in further social unrest and racial discrimination.

The mediated selves functions as a strategic tool in turning a “blurry/messy” life narrative into an “attractive and credible political performance.” Moreover, through the successful deployment of Hirsi Ali’s media status, authority and authentic credibility of herself as other, this renewed Orientalism, against the background of global anti-Islamic sentiments, remains relatively uncontested. Quite the reverse, in the moment of submitting this article, Hirsi Ali’s political performance culminated in her nomination for the US Time magazine’s top one hundred most influential people in the world (see Irshad Manji 2005). She has also informed us that she is working on a Submission Part Two, entitled, Shortcut to Enlightenment.

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