Portraits of Believers: Ahmadi Women Performing Faith in the Diaspora

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Abstract
This paper is a look at how South Asian Ahmadi women in Southern California express their agency through their religious performance in the diaspora. This paper also tries to dispel the notion of a homogenized Muslim people and an Islamic faith in the USA. Western feminist work reflects diverse women's lives and experiences. A study of immigrant women who organize their lives along ethnic (South Asian) and religious (Islam/Ahmadiyyat) prescriptions will contribute to western feminism by expanding its scope, while at the same time challenging its perceived static hegemonic status. Ahmadi women, while cognizant of the gender hierarchy and the “holy patriarchy” of their faith, are willing to “compromise” their own need for autonomy in an endeavor to fulfill their spiritual needs and the security their prescribed roles bring about.

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Ahmadiyya was one of the groups that some Muslim respondents named when they were asked, “Are you Shia, Sunni or another tradition?” It is a small denomination with roots in India and Pakistan. Many Muslims consider Ahmadis’ beliefs heretical, in large part because the movement teaches that its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who lived from 1835 to 1908, was a prophet, in contrast with the more mainstream Islamic belief that Muhammad (who died in 632) was the last prophet. Ahmadi, or Ahmadiyya, are a minority sect who identify themselves as Muslims and follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran. They believe that the founder of their faith, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who was born in the Punjab town of Qadian in 1835, was a messiah and prophet. There are estimated to be between 600,000 and 700,000 Ahmadis in Pakistan, with worldwide numbers of several million more. Most reside in South Asia, but there are large diaspora communities in Europe, and there are also indigenous Ahmadi communities in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Since 1974, Ahmadis have been declared "non-Muslim" under Pakistani law, after a constitutional amendment was passed under the government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.