

Ahmadi Women Reconciling Faith with Vulnerable Reality through Education

By Huma Ahmed-Ghosh¹

Abstract

This paper presents the perceptions, attitudes and views of a group of Ahmadi women in Southern California through the eyes of their local leader. The specific focus is on ways in which Ahmadi women engage in cultural/religious community building within a racially and ethnically hostile environment since 9/11. Of particular concern are ways in which gender norms are reflected in Ahmadi women's push toward formal and cultural education in their efforts to maintain their faith, culture and sense of community as they interface with the broader U.S. society. Given the current anti-Islamic climate in the U.S., the Ahmadis offer an interesting basis for comprehending the diversity among Muslims as well as illustrating how one Islamic group is locally constructed in the global politics of the West.

Keywords: Muslim women, education, adaptation

Introduction

Post 9/11, hostility toward Muslims is palpable in the U.S. The presence of a substantial number of Muslims² in American society raises important questions. Esposito (2002, viii) asked: "Can the majority of Muslims retain both their faith and their identities and do so in a manner that enables them to also accept and function within the secular, pluralist traditions of Europe and America?" In an attempt to answer this question, I discuss how a sect of Islam, the Ahmadis,³ through their insistence on education⁴ of women, adapts in the U.S., while trying to retain their religio-cultural identity. The reactions of Muslims, especially in terms of their expectations of Muslim women, also reflect an assertion of patriarchal norms such that Muslim women are, voluntarily or otherwise, subscribing to these norms in order to protect the authenticity, visibility, and honor of their faith.

Given the current anti-Islamic climate in the U.S., the Ahmadis offer an interesting basis for comprehending the diversity among Muslims as well as illustrating how one Islamic group is locally constructing itself in the West, specifically, in relation to how they are perceived by westerners. In this article, I present the views of a group of Ahmadi women in southern California.⁵ The specific focus is on ways in which Ahmadi women engage in cultural/religious

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² The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* estimated that there are approximately 4.1 million Muslims in the US (Broadway 2001). As has been pointed out by Leonard (2002) and Smith (1999), leading scholars of South Asian Muslim immigrants, as a percent of all the Muslims in the US, African American Muslims range from 30-42 %; South Asians from 16-29 %; Arabs from 12 to 33 %, and for Whites from 2 to 8 %.

³ The term Ahmadiyya refers to the community who follow an interpretation of the Islamic religion known as Ahmadiyyat. The followers are known as Ahmadis.

⁴ I am grateful to the blind reviewer of this article for helping me clarify this concept. This article will distinguish between both formal and cultural education.

⁵ The Ahmadiyya movement has claimed that there are 90 million Ahmadis and 150 Ahmadiyya centers globally, of which 47 are in the US (*The Ahmadiyya Gazette* 2002). In southern California, demographic estimates of Ahmadis are impossible to come by, but according to some members of the community there are approximately 200 families in the state.

community building within a racially and ethnically hostile environment. Of particular concern are ways in which gender norms are reflected in Ahmadi women's push toward "education" in their efforts to maintain their faith, culture, and sense of community as they interface with the broader U.S. society. This will be done by detailing their gender roles as prescribed by their faith, their diasporic location, and their hybridization of "acceptable" gender roles.

The Ahmadiyya Movement

In this section I briefly elaborate on the Ahmadiyya faith. An Islamic scholar, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, from Qadian in North India, founded the Movement in 1889 when he declared himself the promised Messiah or the *Mahdi* for Muslims. This declaration was denounced as blasphemous by mainstream Muslims (Sunnis and Shias) because Mohammad is considered by them to be the last prophet. Hence the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad were considered non-Islamic. As stated in the *Gazette*⁶ (2003, 7), "Finding Islam the target of foul attacks from all directions, the fortunes of Muslims at low ebb, faith yielding to doubt, and religion only skin-deep, He undertook a vindication and exposition of Islam. He announced that God had appointed him the Messiah as mentioned in the prophecies of the Bible and the Holy Quran."⁷ The Ahmadiyya movement's headquarters were in Qadian, India until 1947, but, after the partition of India into India and Pakistan, it was moved to Rabwah in Pakistan. Due to persecution in Pakistan, the headquarters was temporarily moved to London, U.K., where it has been since 1984.

Due to the persecution of the Ahmadis in Pakistan, there has been a mass exodus by them to the U.K. and U.S. The waves of migration have been the impetus for making the religion adaptable to different social systems, whilst maintaining rigidity in its core and practice within the community. In the U.S. the first headquarters of the Ahmadi were established in New York in the early 1920s, then shifted to Chicago and Detroit, and are currently well established in Washington D.C. (GhaneaBassiri 1997). The Ahmadiyya movement became quite successful in the U.S. through early conversions of African Americans in Chicago and Detroit. Presently, most Ahmadis in this country are ethnic Pakistanis (GhaneaBassiri 1997). This has further complicated their identity issues in the U.S., where the larger population, because of the long coats and headscarves worn by Ahmadi women, sees them as mainstream Muslims. The Ahmadis, however, consider themselves distinct from mainstream Muslims and as "true" believers of an Islam that has a universal appeal, one that, if followed correctly, could lead to world peace and justice.

Some of the differences between mainstream Muslims and Ahmadis are based in their interpretations of the basic text, the Quran. Briefly stated, one of the major differences is the declaration of the Ahmadiyyat founder as the "second coming," and therefore, the inheritor of Islam through his interpretations of the faith. Other differences include a worldwide leadership with one head of the whole congregation, as opposed to regional and local leaders of mainstream

⁶ *The Gazette* is an Ahmadiyya magazine that reports events and religious articles for the community. It is published 4-6 times a year by The Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, Inc. Maryland.

⁷ The Ahmadis believe that Jesus Christ did not die on the cross but fled to Kashmir, India, where he lived until old age and was revered as a saint. The negation of the resurrection, which for Christians establishes the legitimacy of Christ as the "Son of God," forms the crux of the Ahmadiyya faith because it then justifies their claim that Prophet Mohammad was the first and most important prophet of Islam and that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is the *Mahdi*.

Muslims. In terms of worship, the Ahmadis too follow the five pillars of Islam,⁸ but they also participate in monthly meetings to read Ahmadiyyat texts, to discuss their leader's religious messages, and to reinforce their faith through group cohesion. In social practice, the Ahmadis claim to be more progressive than mainstream Muslims, especially in terms of family laws and the insistence on education for all their members. Though under exceptional circumstances women can seek divorce in Islam, for most Muslims it is a unilateral practice in which men have the sole right to seek divorce. Ahmadis pride themselves on allowing women and men equal access to divorce.

With the issue of education too, Ahmadis point out that Islamic fundamentalists have limited girls' access to education even though it is contrary to Islamic tenets, but their faith insists on educating all its members through the "true" interpretation of the Quran. Thus, proving their progressive agenda in comparison to the perceived denial of education to girls in mainstream Islam. This becomes crucial in the Ahmadis investing their energies in distancing themselves from mainstream Muslims, especially after the 9/11 incident.

Given the recent trend in some Islamic nations, especially in their rural and tribal areas, like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan (not just under the Taliban) is to restrict education of girls and women, for Ahmadi women such denial of education is not encouraged. They believe education is crucial, especially in the West where an understanding of western norms and values is essential so that Ahmadi women can counter them through indoctrination of values pertinent to their faith. There was unanimous agreement among Ahmadi women interviewed that the prime purpose of education for them and their children was to enable them to learn and teach about the Ahmadiyyat. Most Ahmadi mothers also saw education as a vehicle to transmit their cultural and religious values to their children. Interestingly, the second reason for education was to understand different religions, specifically Christianity. This was required for two reasons; first, a reading and understanding of Christianity is required by all Ahmadis so that they can, in an educated manner, denounce the resurrection of Jesus Christ and thus his legitimacy as the "son of God;" and second, to facilitate in their proselytization of Christians in the West.

An issue of particular concern to the Ahmadiyya community in the U.S. is the perception of Islam and all Muslims post 9/11. The Winter 2002 volume of *The Ayesha*,⁹ the first after 9/11, was devoted to wrestling with the issue of terrorism and to asserting that *their* brand of Islam disapproved of such, or any kind of, violence. The journal was emphatic in its condemnation of the "disaster of horrendous proportions [that] struck the United States, as we all watched helplessly." (Butt 2002, 2) This assertion of non-violence as the cornerstone of the Ahmadi interpretation of the Quran is justified by their founder's elucidation of the word *jihad*¹⁰ to mean not just "striving" to better oneself but also to include the pen. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's insistence on spreading the Ahmadiyyat through the written word through "logic" and "reason" is perceived by his followers as the most effective way of dealing with world crisis. This, in turn, has led to the necessity for literacy and education of all its members. The followers of the faith believe that the ultimate vindication will come when Muslims and non-Muslims alike realize that

⁸ The five pillars of Islam are *Shahada* (belief in Oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad), *Salat* (daily prayers), *Zakat* (almsgiving to the needy), *Sawm* (self-purification through fasting), and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).

⁹ *The Ayesha* is a magazine brought out bi-annually by Ahmadi women and currently published in Orange, California.

¹⁰ Jihad connotes striving in the path of God against non-believers and oppressors.

the brand of Islam being publicized today through violence and fanaticism is the wrong kind, and this will strengthen people's belief in the Ahmadiyyat.

One could refer to the Ahmadiyya movement as a Western-based or a Western-inspired faith in an ironic or oppositional sense. The founder of the faith saw the West as a decadent and godless society that needed to be "saved." Thus, the Ahmadis cultivate a strong sense of community to shelter them from the corrupt Western and discriminatory world. The Ahmadiyya movement is geared to survive, penetrate, and convert people in the West. Toward that end, its members are told to adapt to the dominant cultural norms, to obey the laws of the land, and, most important, to acquire an education, both formal and cultural, in the language of the state. The Ahmadis pride themselves on their insistence on education for all of their members, men and women. The awarding of the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1979 to a leading Ahmadi, Dr. Abdus Salaam, vindicated and reinforced Ahmadi focus on education.

The following sections will focus on how formal and cultural education is used as an instrument for social and political control of women generally, and specifically for Ahmadi women by their patriarchal leadership, as well as how women themselves "buy" into this rhetoric to create a "comfortable" space for themselves in the diaspora. For Ahmadi immigrant women, the choice to conform to their faith was not just grounded in the personal dictates of their faith but was also rooted in the larger socio-political debate about Islam in the U.S. Ahmadi women are very aware of the perception of Islam in the West and, especially, how the status of women in Islam and of Muslim women in non-Islamic states is projected. Ahmadi women have made it their mission to dispel such stereotypical notions of women's position by countering them vigorously.

Thus, the need for formal and cultural education is dictated by Ahmadi women's location at a diasporic junction that "is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendents but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous" (Brah 1996, 181). It is about "relational positioning." Identity and ethnic positioning in the diaspora are not static and are constantly changing and reemerging to reclaim authenticity, with Ahmadi women a sense of "doggedness" and persistence is palpable. Brah's (1996) definition of diasporic space is about how culture must be understood within the context of power relations among different groups. As Brah (1996, 180) points out, "The very strong association of notions of diaspora with displacement and dislocation means that the experience of location can easily dissolve out of focus." The discourse on the Ahmadis is informed by diasporic space as articulated by Brah. Her distinction of diasporic space versus diaspora is a two-way intersection that redefines two sets of identities, that of the diasporic subject and that of the native. Ahmadis root their agency in that space. This also impacts women in different ways and places on them different burdens. Ahmadi women's diasporic agency is grounded not only in a perception of them being seen as the "other" by Westerners, but also in a perception by their community that Ahmadi women act as important cultural and religious transmitters to the next generation.

Methodology

This research was designed to give voice to Ahmadi women in southern California. I observed 10 Ahmadi women who formed the core of the Ahmadi women's group in the region. Interviews were conducted during the period of January 2002-November 2004. The research was mainly qualitative with data collected through participant-observation, interviews and personal conversations. I have been attending Ahmadi women's religious monthly meetings for six years and have attended their mosque with them. I am not a follower of their faith but these women have been very welcoming and open in their discussions with me, and have invited me into their homes on social occasions too. The data will be mainly presented through the president of the

women's group, Ameena.¹¹ There was a consensus amongst the women interviewed that she was best equipped to speak most knowledgeably about the faith, and would express their views more articulately.¹² The following report of my discussions with Ameena highlights the Ahmadi women's commitment to their community and their rationalization of their educational agenda as they make accommodations to live in the U.S. Ameena is a very bright and vivacious person who is exceptionally well versed in the teachings of the Ahmadiyyat faith and well aware of the intricacies of western cultures. These skills have led to her appointment of leadership, and positioned her as a spokesperson for their belief in interfaith meetings.

I am aware of the limitations and authenticity of basing this article primarily on the responses of one person. In situations where Ameena was not able to respond to my queries, I have incorporated responses by other interviewees. I have not detailed the lives of these women because of their insistence on anonymity and hesitancy to be recognizable through this article. This article is based on collective generalizations specific to the group in southern California.

In order to draw attention to the political implications of education as a powerful social tool, I will discuss two main reasons for which education is advocated for Ahmadi women by their faith and religious leadership. These are: 1) cultural adjustment to the U.S. as a "good" wife and "enlightened" mother who transmits culture to her children, and the resultant push for formal education for women and their daughters, and 2) education for proselytization of non-Ahmadis.

Cultural Adjustment

Western culture is constructed as the enemy of Islamic culture and identity. Western culture is constructed based on what may be called the three Ps, prostitution, promiscuity, and pornography (Moghadam 1994, 6).

Western culture is viewed by Ahmadi as being ridden with crime, loose morals, dysfunctional and fragmented families, a high level of materialism, and a heightened sense of self-centeredness. Since 9/11, the Ahmadiyya community has aimed at protecting (not isolating) itself from the outside/Western world of an alien culture. This is done by appealing to women to guard their culture by acquiring an "education" to better understand and defend against western society. Loose morals for Ahmadi women basically meant early dating, pre and post marital sex, and "indecent" dress code particularly on the part of girls and women. For most women interviewed, high divorce rates among Americans were also of serious concern. Interestingly, for most women, even though they mentioned high levels of materialism as being a cause for moral degradation of Americans, for themselves they did not necessarily perceive it as a serious concern. Some of them claimed that by improving their class status they could move away from the stereotyped images of Muslims by the West of them being "poor, illiterate, and uncultured." The above issues coupled with their perceptions of high crime rates, has led to a besieged

¹¹ Ameena is in her late 30s, married with no children, and is a finance-based professional. Ameena left Pakistan for North America as an adolescent. She has lived in southern California since her marriage, for approximately a decade.

¹² One of the main reasons for consensus about Ameena's leading role in the representation of the faith and their views was that the women perceived me as an "outsider" in a formal setting of an interview and an "insider" when I socialized with them. They trusted Ameena to present their views in cohesive and consensual manner for the "public." Interestingly, except for minor differences, most women seemed to agree with Ameena's summing up of their views and beliefs.

mentality where the Ahmadi women express distrust of the American culture and hence their need to protect themselves against it.

On further enquiries about cultural adaptation, I asked, “Is it only for economic reasons that you are living here? Is there a choice for you to live somewhere else?” All the women in the sample responded that there were positive aspects to living in the U.S. Ahmadi women prioritized freedom to practice their religion as the reason for living here. Though, since 9/11 they feel intimidated by the anti-Muslim wave in the U.S., they do express a sense of relief to be in this country rather than in Pakistan. For some Ahmadi women tolerance of differences by mainstream Americans was perceived as a positive aspect even though in many instances they claimed that the West is culturally debased! Ameena, summed up the views of her group and her opinion by stating:

Well, I mean the reason why we have moved to southern California, is because of political reasons back home [Pakistan] and also economic reasons. Both because of opportunities and education for the children. All western values are not bad. Education is very good in this country. Also, our faith encourages us to live in the West, so that we can teach the Americans about our faith. I have found the society here to be more open than back home.

In their attempts to adapt to the U.S., according to Ameena, if a contradiction exists in Islamic and western laws, the Ahmadiyya movement advises its members to follow the laws of their adopted country over Islamic laws. She gave the following example:

If a country prohibits polygamy, Ahmadis will not contest it and will insist their members follow monogamy. Similar state laws pertaining to property, custody etc. are observed over Islamic laws. It is the principals of Islam that need to be followed wherever one resides. If Ahmadis have conflicting issues, the *Kazaa* Board [Ahmadi legal board] helps resolve the issues. For example in the case of divorce, the *Kazaa* Board will take up the case before it goes to the U.S. courts. An attempt will be made to resolve the issues, but if there is no resolution, the *Kazaa* Board will dissolve the wedding,¹³ after which the couple will seek out the courts to formalize it as per state requirements.

Ahmadi women mentioned many examples of harassment that Muslim men and women in general experienced post-9/11. Closest to home were examples of two shops owned by Muslims being looted and one of them being burnt. Headscarved women also felt intimidated by some teenagers who yelled expletives at them. They also mentioned some situations where young Muslim men were finding it difficult to get jobs because of their Muslim last names. The climate of fear and suspicion in the country, they claim, has come at a time when only faith and commitment to their community’s ideals can help Muslims survive the western backlash. Ameena concludes that despite the harassment they face occasionally, this is also the only country that has laws in place to protect them.

¹³ Ahmadis use their liberal views on divorce compared to mainstream Muslims to claim their progressiveness. Among mainstream Muslims, divorce is unilateral denying all rights to women to seek divorce. Among the Ahmadis, women have the right to seek divorce.

Such compliance to the state exists because of the strong sense of “homelessness” that pervades their every action. Ahmadi immigrants have different historical trajectories than other Muslims to the U.S. Ahmadis have been driven out from their home state due to religious persecution. In the U.S., lives for Ahmadi women are not only determined by their religious tenets, but are also shaped by their perception of a Judeo-Christian, western culture that is alien to them, but an essential part of their reality. The construction of the “diasporic space” by Ahmadi women is informed, thus, by their need to live in the West due to their exile from their home country. Attachment to their home countries and culture is often visible in their expression of nostalgia, insistence on wearing ethnic clothing, eating South Asian food, and speaking in their mother tongue.

I refer to Ahmadi women’s adaptation process to the West as “performing migration” because they do it in an intentional manner by engaging in formal and cultural education to equip themselves with an in-depth understanding of western culture and its dominant ideologies. Towards that attempt, Ahmadi women, especially Ameena claimed to be educated about western feminism. Ahmadi women are aware of feminist critiques of theirs and other Muslim women’s status within the West. In an attempt to dispel notions of Islamic “backwardness” of their women, Ahmadi women deliberately stress formal and cultural education and ethnic and religious expression to counter such claims about them. Ameena seemed to be very aware of these feminist critiques and countered them by insisting that if Ahmadi women “chose” a particular lifestyle, “It is because they are exercising their choice and leading a life that fulfills and satisfies their spiritual, intellectual and material well being.”

“Enlightened” Mother:

The Lajna’s [women’s group] objectives are to serve the spiritual and intellectual development of Muslim women, to enable them to raise their children in the practice of Islam and to serve humanity with beneficial programs (The Ayesha 2001, 1).

According to Ahmadis, women in Islam hold a high position of “honor and dignity.” According to the fourth successor of the Ahmadiyya movement, gender hierarchy was “derived from nature and thus ordained by Allah” (Luqman 2002, 30). In describing the prescribed roles for women, Butt (2001, 25), a frequent contributor to both *The Ayesha* and *The Gazette*, explains,

She is first a daughter, a sister, and then, when she marries, she becomes a wife and mother, and later on, a mother-in-law and a grandmother. Therefore, one of the biggest contributions a Muslim woman can make to Islam, to society, and to the new millennium is to pay special attention to the upbringing of her children.

According to the Quran, paradise lies under the feet of mothers. Butt explains:

God expects that paradise should spring from the soles of your feet and wherever your footsteps fall, they should be footsteps of blessings for your children and for those around you so that you can build heavenly societies on this earth. (Butt 2001, 25)

According to Ahmadi women, 9/11 has once again reminded them that women's primary role is to educate and protect their children. Simultaneously, mothers strategize to enable their children to cope with their adopted land. One of the biggest fears faced by Ahmadi mothers is moral corruption. This seems to be rooted in their socialization of values based in Muslim and South Asian culture. At another level, these women expressed their lack of comprehension of "the American way of bringing up their children."

Clothing was also a major issue. This issue is compounded by their religions' prescriptions on modest clothing and veiling. When I brought up the issue of whether Ahmadi children felt cultural alienation going to co-educational schools with their heads covered, Ameena stated, and Zoya confirmed that,

They don't have problems because if you make them understand and make them realize the values [of the Ahmadiyyat] and if they understand and believe in them, the teenagers, they don't seem to have a lot of problems with it. Basically they can see themselves as a part of American society but understand their differences too. We don't see them outside of American society when they are doing things like veiling and wearing the headscarf.

Disrespect for parents by their children was also a concern. Ahmadi women claimed that, besides their community, they would need to depend on their children in their old age, hence inculcating respect and a sense of duty toward their parents was of prime importance. Many of these fears were entrenched in their fear that their children might become independent at an early age. Here independence translated to children having their own opinion 'on everything', disobedience, and resistance to following the faith.

Ameena maintained that the values the Ahmadiyyat faith prescribed for their women were not very different from what traditional American values were. Ameena repeats the sentiments expressed by Carol Conway (1998, 187) in her work on American-born women choosing Islam, "Values these women cherish in Islam have much in common with traditional American ideals including family, dedication to God, good works, commitment to a religious community, education, religious freedom and discipline." Ameena explained how good Christian women share the same values as Ahmadi and seemed surprised that the West "boxes us into a backward ideology." Ameena explained that every time she is at work or in public she has to explain how she has had the freedom to choose her lifestyle and feels that she has to prove to others that she is an efficient worker and is highly educated.

"Good" Wife:

One of the exaggerated stereotypes that is quoted by Ahmadi women is that, "most western families in America have either experienced divorce, or have a single mother at home" (James 2000, 28). Such a perception fuels the stipulations for Ahmadi mothers to be cautious of their environment and counteract it by creating an educated and Islamic atmosphere for their children. Such a stereotype also emphasizes women's roles as wives. Ameena explains,

If girls want to continue their education they should be encouraged to do so, but when they reach a marriageable age, they should get married. Because when girls get better educated and start earning, it becomes more and more difficult to find a suitable partner. Therefore to get married at an older age poses many problems in adjusting and adapting to the other partners' environment and habits. A wife can

get education after marriage as long as she can keep a balance between her education and her family. Balance and modesty is the essence of Islam.

Ahmadi women express their commitment to their marriage and husbands by prioritizing why cultural education helps them to be “good” wives. All married women sampled saw themselves as being responsible for their husband’s health and well-being. The women, light heartedly, claimed that living in southern California seems to have influenced their thinking about what is a healthy diet. Some of them watch cooking shows on the television, many look at food labels, and all are conscious about which foods are healthy and which are not. Cultural education is also deemed necessary to be able to run the house efficiently, to go shopping on one’s own, and according to a couple of women, to be able to pay the bills.

Another area where cultural education has helped these women to be good wives is in “performing religion” on behalf of their husbands. Realizing the busy schedule of their husbands, wives take over the religious education of their children, the attending of religious meetings, and praying on behalf of their husbands. They are also instrumental in pushing their husbands towards the Ahmadiyyat path and insisting on their participation in major Ahmadi events. For some of the more outgoing women, they perceive being educated with good language skills and a high level of self-confidence, as an asset to their husbands’ career where they can socialize with their colleagues.

By conforming to these roles Ahmadi women are not only performing their religious duty but are creating for themselves an environment where they can negotiate their lives in ways that are comprehensible to them. Such expectations from women are not confined just to the Ahmadi but can be found among most religious groups world- wide. Formal and cultural education of Ahmadi women, thus, though eliciting hybridity to locate themselves in a diasporic space, follows an agenda where the Ahmadi patriarchy emphasizes its value as a means primarily to serve the interests of the community and the family, and not necessarily to empower and employ women, though instances of Ahmadi women engaged in lifelong careers do exist.

Formal Education:

In the West, in an attempt at postcolonial justice, recent emphasis on cultural relativism has legitimized the “politicization of culture.” This has occurred by underscoring the claims of cultural relativism to authenticity, pluralism and the creation of multiculturalism, thus creating the space for cultural values and religious ideology to play a role in the establishment of education. Moghadam (1994, 4) pointed out how this new focus on multiculturalism has impacted education policies in the U.K., where even the “socialists support Muslim demands for state-funded religious schools rather than insist on the secularization of the school system.” Steven Vertovec (2002, 30) in his recent work on Muslim immigrants in the U.K. also concluded that, “schools and education have provided a focus of much Muslim mobilization over the past twenty years.” According to Vertovec (2002), Muslims in the U.K. are primarily interested in protecting their daughters from the influences of co-education and Westernization by demanding single-sex schools, modesty in dress with the use of the *hijab* (headscarf), along with kosher foods in cafeterias, Islamic religious holidays and times and space assigned for prayers.

A leading authority on Muslims in North America, Haddad (2002), too reflected on similar trends in the U.S. Two kinds schooling exist among Muslims in North America: one, where the children are home-schooled and consciously socialized along Islamic lines through limited interaction with non-Muslims; and two, Muslims who access mainstream public schools,

socialize with neighbors irrespective of their religious affiliations, and are part of the American way of life. The Ahmadiis would fit somewhere in between these two groups. Though instructed by their religious leaders to abide by the laws of the land and to acquire language skills of the adopted nation as well as an understanding of the social system, Ahmadi women resist total assimilation by intense faith-based enculturation. For Ahmadi women, the community provides the sheltering and cohesive forces that they perceive as essential for survival in the U.S. This sense of community also is a deliberate tactic to separate them from the mainstream, while they simultaneously adopt “western” education to construct their identities, especially to distinguish themselves from other Muslims.

Access to education and jobs was also highly prioritized by these women. Given the emphasis placed on formal education by the Ahmadiyya community, availability of free and low-cost education was seen by many women as a strong attraction to the U.S. When I brought up the example of Zoya’s two daughters going to school and the conflicts they might experience with the issue of headscarves, Zoya again agreed with what Aameena had to say:

Ya, I think they should cover themselves, meaning basically they should cover their head and be modestly dressed up because that [the religion] is not going to change. Because if you tell one generation that OK, you don’t have to cover, the next generation will start taking advantage. Like even here, the evolution followed the same process. Like women used to be fully dressed, and gradually, their clothes became shorter and shorter. That is why you cannot challenge the root, the commandments of the Holy Quran. So, if the people themselves gradually deviate from them, then that is their responsibility. That is between them and God. Like I myself go to my classes. I go to the university, I cover myself because to me that is important and I don’t feel that that is a problem. Like these people think that I am different, they can see right away that I am a Muslim. But when I interact with them, they are comfortable with me, you know.

What was apparent from my research was that most Ahmadi girls did not cover their heads when attending elementary and middle school, but some of them did start in high school. Throughout their school years, though, these girls did dress modestly covering their legs and arms. Once they vented their social concerns, for all the women who had children, academic performance was another issue to deal with. Mothers’ high academic expectations from their children were based on the need for their children to be seen as “hard-working, culturally assimilated, intelligent, and good citizens.”

Outside of religious and socialization reasons, Ahmadi mothers expressed a desire to be educated so that they could help their children in their homework, attend PTA meetings, and take their children to extra-curricular activities. Learning to drive was a strong desire for some women and was the reason for them to attend English and driving classes. Consequently formal and cultural education is regarded as fundamental to the creation of “enlightened” mothers. As stated in *The Ayesha*:

An important and essential requirement for Muslim women is to gain religious and secular education in the new century. A Muslim woman can no longer consider the seeking of knowledge and education as a luxury, but as a primary tool to safeguard herself and her family from the negative influences of the “modern” and “advanced” society. She needs to grow intellectually to communicate with her husband and meet the needs and demands of her children.

She must be prepared to study, observe and analyze her children in the light of their own environment, amongst their own peers, and only then will she become a more understanding and more communicative mother at home as well as a great asset to the society (Butt 2001, 25).

For Ahmadi women, formal education is not only encouraged but is mandated. Literacy for women is deemed essential for a number of reasons. Reasons for education for women can be broadly categorized according to two main concerns; one, for Ahmadi women to make “good” wives, “enlightened” mothers, and community leaders; and two, to be effective proselytizing agents through the proper understanding of their own religious texts and an understanding of “other” religions to be better equipped to counter their beliefs.

Ordained Mission: Proselytizing Women

Our treasure chest is full! Let us then, as model Muslim women, use our riches to spread the message of Islam and Ahmadiyyat and enrich the lives of those around us (The Ayesha 2001, 2).

The pervasive sense among Ahmadis is that the West is in disarray and they need to live here to educate and convince the West to convert to their faith. Their children, though attending co-educational public schools, receive thorough religious education through community leaders.¹⁴ Thus, the Ahmadis elicit a perceived hybridity (combining secular education and Islamic education) to locate themselves in a diasporic space. The deliberateness towards hybridity though, renders the process nuanced and complex when one contemplates the Ahmadis proselytizing agenda.

An important reason why education is encouraged among Ahmadi women is to facilitate them in their efforts to proselytize, and especially after 9/11 to educate the public on how they are different from Islamic fundamentalists. According to the women interviewed, it is because of “uneducated” interpretations of Islam that fundamentalism has arisen. In interfaith meetings organized by them, they are very particular to point out that they are the “true” Muslims and should not be confused with mainstream Muslims who follow a “different” interpretation of the Quran. Ahmadi women interviewed considered proselytizing as their main purpose in the community. They gave a range of reasons as their incentive to proselytize in the southern California region.

Majority of the women in the sample are driven to proselytize because of their conviction in their faith and their duty to it. They consider their faith infallible and are convinced that conversion of all to the Ahmadiyyat will “save the world.” Being religious role models to their children is also a driving force to fulfilling this obligation to their faith. They take their message to school activities, school boards, PTA meetings, sports fields, and to all social gatherings. They are not aggressive in their proselytization but are neither very shy about explaining their faith to willing listeners. Ahmadi men usually proselytize by going door-to-door, and in their workplace.

¹⁴ Monthly meetings are held for all age groups and sexes of the Ahmadiyya followers. Children’s groups are also broken up by ages and sex, and religious education is imparted on a regular basis. At larger annual meetings children recite poetry, give religious speeches and also participate in sports and other entertaining activities.

I asked Ameena questions pertaining to her and Ahmadi women's roles in proselytizing the faith. On being educated about their proselytizing agenda, I raised the following questions: "So vis-à-vis Americans for example, in this country, do you have an agenda as an Ahmadiyya group? Do you think that all Americans/Christians should convert? And what about other non-Ahmadi Muslims?" Ameena explained,

For myself, and for the group at large, what we believe is so important, that we want to promote what we believe. And the cause is spread of Islam, and the message from His Messiahs. If we meet people, we want to let them know we are Ahmadis. Ahmadiyyat is Islam, and under Islam is the promise that the Messiah is supposed to come here. It is said that *Mahdi* will come. Because non-Ahmadis and other Muslims also believe that Jesus will come again, like the Christians believe in the second coming of Jesus the Messiah, we believe that he has arrived through our founder.

I persisted with questions to get a better understanding of their commitment and motivation towards the spreading of their faith in a society foreign to them, "So in this country, do you think it is important for Ahmadi women to be more conscious of their heritage? Do you see a conflict with the American culture?" Ameena countered,

Yes, we are in conflict and yes we are trying to promote our Islamic values. Well, ideally, we believe in Islam and we believe that Islam is the religion of today, the fairest religion, the latest religion, because naturally, Mohammad (peace be upon him) is the ultimate of prophets, he is the seal of Prophets. And that is our mission. It is the responsibility of the *Lajna* to spread the word in all the places they go to.

When I asked Ameena about the value of forming groups, she responded,

So that you can follow it precisely, and keep an eye on people to see if they are following it or not. Another purpose is to ensure that we propagate our faith and convert others. It is a proselytizing religion. As I said, our purpose is to spread the message of God Almighty, to the whole of mankind. So this is the truth and that is how people have converted to Ahmadiyyat. They say, yes, this is the proof and I accept it. Today Ahmadi women have brought in more converts to the faith than men.

To my query about whether she faced resistance in her mission, Ameena said, Yes and no, it does not matter because once you really realize and believe what you are doing and why you are doing it, rejection does not bother you. We are actually including all religions into Islam. So then you say that we have it all. I mean if we are living in America then we believe in Christians' prophets and we believe in Jesus.

In an attempt to appease the West, Ahmadi women emphasize Hazrat Mariam (Prophet Mary) as a role model to emulate along with Ayesha and Khadija (the wives of the Prophet Mohammad), his daughter Fatima, and the female relatives of the founder of the faith. This is claimed from the Quran, "O Mary, Allah has chosen thee and purified thee and chosen thee above all woman of the time" (Dawood 1974, 3:43). "And remember her who preserved her chastity; so we breathed into her our word and we made her and her son a sign for peoples"

(Dawood 1974, 21:92). Khadija James, an American who converted to the Ahmadiyyat expounds,

As Muslims it is our duty to propagate Islam. To do so effectively, we must understand the culture of the people to whom we are propagating. As a result of a difficult upbringing, some American women have very low self-esteem. When they are ready to make a change, they need support, unconditional support” (2000, 28).

Sentiments expressed by James seem to sum up the views of all the Ahmadi women I met. What has become apparent from the above discussion is that migration for Ahmadis is closely tied in with a particular religious agenda. Formal and cultural education has become for them the tool that has enabled them to transmit messages of their faith. Brah (1996, 83) points out, when talking of how and why one becomes diasporic, “If the circumstances of leaving are important, so too are those of arriving and settling down.” This outlook concurs with what the Ahmadi women experience and play out in the new states they embrace. Proselytizing and being good role models is what sustains them and gives them a purpose to live for in the U.S.

Through local efforts at proselytizing and enculturation, Ahmadi women participate in the larger global politics that, as expressed earlier, though rooted in economic competition, is projected as one of “clash of civilizations” by both the West and the Muslim nations. Ahmadi women too, though cognizant of the political battle lines, are imbued with the zeal of their faith and become willing partners in their efforts to spread the “word.” For most immigrant women, their lives are further complicated by the dictates of the foreign majority community that often are not in accordance with their values and beliefs. Ahmadi women are not impervious to the larger purpose and agenda of their faith. For Ahmadi women, conformity to their faith is not done in isolation or merely for personal religious and moral enhancement. Rather, the fervor with which they organize their daily lives is also reflective of their ultimate belief that Islam is the solution for all world problems.

The aftermath of the events of 9/11 have for Ahmadi women, provided the catalyst to relive the horrors of persecution in Pakistan, to strengthen their faith and to re-ignite the fervor of their faith to overcome the sense of homelessness, and redefine themselves in global politics through local action. Through the actions of Ahmadi women as good mothers and proselytizers, the Ahmadi community can respond to the anti-Islamic sentiment in the West and the global divide of the West versus Islam by reclaiming their authenticity and professing their claim to “true” Islam.

According to Kandiyoti (1985, 5), “current feminist literature goes as far as claiming unless secularization of the political sphere and extensive democratization of society does not occur in the Middle-East, women’s status will not change. On the other hand, some feminist theologians attempt to establish Islam’s compatibility with the emancipation of women.” It is somewhere between these two polarized views that the reality of a Muslim woman’s life plays itself out. If she conforms to an Islamic lifestyle, Westerners see her as a symbol of her regressive Islamic regime with no rights and by Islamists as a symbol of their strict interpretations of the Quran. If she does not conform, she is seen as betraying the Islamic cause by her “brothers” and by Westerners as reaffirming their belief in the “oppressive” institutions of Islam. Such external constructions and expectations of her behavior thus render her own decisions, choices, and life circumstances invisible, and her reality is reduced to a simplistic and judgmental interpretation.

As Metcalf explained (1996, 12), “everywhere religious life is shaped by the nature of the majority society, above all by its assumptions about the relationship of state and religion. In each national context, minorities are encouraged to produce institutional and symbolic equivalence to retain and perpetuate their heritage and identity.” Further, given the current political environment, as Muslims assert themselves in the US, they face increasing resistance from the majority community. It is also important to note that both the majority and minority communities create “politicized ethnicities,” based on certain cultural characteristics specific to populations (Bloul 1996, 234).

In the present study, I focused on how the interrelationships of the majority and minority community in the U.S. intersect to sustain a faith where their leaders call upon Ahmadi women to propagate the religious agenda. Ahmadis are particularly resistant to the notion of Islam being equated with “terrorism,” and they have specifically distanced themselves from mainstream Muslims to avoid any confusion about this. For Ahmadis, their faith is about peace, and this is the message that they want to convey to the world. Toward this end, Ahmadi women are instructed to spread the message of their faith by proselytizing and being exemplary role models to their children. Thus formal and cultural education for women is deemed necessary and essential for both of these purposes

Historically and globally, access to or denial of education to women and minorities has been associated with political power and control by the elite in any society. Education is the most effective state apparatus to propagate its ideology. A range of governments to either empower or disempower its population thus has used education. Examples abound from the poor education standards for minorities in the U.S. (despite professed public education) to lower castes and women in India, and denial of education to girls and women in Islamic states. As with the example of Afghanistan, Moghadam (1994, 14) pointed out that “secular education received by youth sent to the Soviet Union was deemed ‘propaganda’ and ‘Sovietization,’ but strictly religious education provided in refugee camps somehow is ‘cultural’ and ‘appropriate.’” As has been played out in Afghanistan, once again, we see that the denial of education for girls and women was/is a political tactic by recent regimes to deny them rights and the means to challenge the patriarchal system.

Conclusion

What has become apparent through this research is that a dissonance exists between the perceived notions of hybridity and assimilation. The resistance to assimilation by Ahmadi women is played out through a conscious adoption of the “tools” of the West, formal and cultural education, in an attempt to redefine, or to put it more appropriately, reengage with hybridity to render it multidimensional and fluid.

The ongoing research on Ahmadi women brings up issues, questions and challenges to and about what does “education” for women really denote and entail. The Ahmadi case study serves to interrogate and reflect on the various functions of education. Is education for women geared at literacy enhancement, political and economic empowerment, and social enlightenment; or are all these functions connected, interrelated and overlapping in its essence? Such political intricacy of women’s education as has been perceived from the above research, though seemingly ambiguous, does not undermine the importance and relevance of women’s education. What it does is open for discussion the manipulation of women’s involvement in local and global discourses proscribed by elite patriarchies. That does not mean that women have no agency in such discourses; Ameena definitely portrayed a woman who, in this quagmire of political

uncertainty and vulnerable reality, chose for herself a location that provides a sanctuary, a community and a sense of empowerment.

For Western enthusiasts of reform, the issue of formal education of Muslim women has attained the same contentious stature as the issue of veiling. Debates on veiling are reflective of global politics and the dual hegemonies of Western ideals of freedom and Muslim fundamentalists' claim of Islamic orthodoxy. The current focus on girls and women's formal education in Muslim states has become the flashpoint for human rights discourse, for international development concerns, and for the establishment of political (military and non-military) domination agendas by the West. Women's education is seen, as an inevitable requirement not just for her own but her nation's modernization, but little attention is placed on the kind of education, models of education. A general simplistic assumption exists among most policy makers that once a girl/woman attains education, especially formal education, she is liberated.

Women's role in the diaspora, at some level, becomes more important than men's in maintaining the community and faith. Whilst wrestling with a western value system that is perceived to be hegemonic in its cultural and religious institutions, the Ahmadi woman also engages in contesting the stereotype of the homogenizing Muslim woman. Consequently, she is located at the crossroads of a four-way intersection where her location depends on her, 1) complete faith to her mission and belief system, 2) her trying to counter the homogenized Muslim woman image, 3) her efforts to counter the Western "corrupting" value system and, 4) to juggle the inherent patriarchy of her own faith. It is at this intersection that she consciously "performs migration," by taking on the responsibilities of representing Ahmadi women locally which, in the final analysis represents the entire faith globally. Since 9/11, for Ahmadi women, this "flux" has brought to the surface their relationship with Western and mainstream Islamic communities, from both of which they want to distinguish themselves, and yet at the same time claim an affinity with the West based on the recognition of their valid and essential contributions to the U.S.

As the Ahmadiyya movement has become increasingly transnational, its survival and perpetuation owes much to the diaspora population in England and North America. For Ahmadis, transnational mobility has been a way of life, but a way of life that has brought about a sense of displacement both physically and culturally. This instability has led to a need to create a community and a space for themselves and to the development of networks and identities that serve as a basis for negotiating the wider society. A sense of persecution has captured their imagination and is the driving force behind their faith and their lifestyle --- which is negotiated through the acquiring of formal and cultural education in whichever culture they reside.

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