Examining Subcontinental Women's Identities, Beliefs and Practices in The Netherlands: Cultural, Linguistic, and Religious Influences

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Abstract

Since Subcontinental women are actively trying to overcome social, cultural, and linguistic barriers to be seen, heard, and recognized in the process of building and developing their country, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the identity of Subcontinental women while they are studying outside of their home country. At its core is a discussion on how the factors such as culture, language, and religion may either help or impede Subcontinental women as they go about their lives before and during their time outside the country. This research investigates how Subcontinental women with diverse degrees of English language competence, religious dedication, and cultural background (from different regions of the Subcontinent depict themselves in their narratives of the past, present, and future about the Netherlands and Subcontinent. What function does learning English as a second language play and have in building their identities? What factors influenced these viewpoints and perspectives? A qualitative approach employing a case study methodology was utilized to collect data from a sample of subcontinental women residing in the Netherlands (N=20). The selection of participants for the final interviews was based on specific criteria, such as a residency duration of 2-6 years in the Netherlands and enrollment in undergraduate/graduate degree programs. The participants, aged between 23 and 33, represented diverse professional backgrounds in the Netherlands. The interviews yielded several thematic categories derived from the collected data, encompassing Identity, perspectives on the English language including proficiency and usage, Pre-departure preparation, Cultural adjustment, Acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge, Social networks and engagement, Personal growth and development, Importance of religious identity, and Aspirations for the future and aspirations for societal transformation within the Subcontinent context. The findings of the study revealed a significant shift in the participants' national and religious identities. Notably, the participants perceived the English language as a valuable tool that facilitated their comprehension of religious texts, thereby reinforcing their religious identities in distinct ways. Furthermore, the study elucidated the participants' evolving understanding of Islam and its differentiation from cultural and social practices. Despite some individuals retaining their traditional roles and upholding previous beliefs and values, the results indicated a transformative shift in their perspectives. They began to question these roles and acknowledge their constraints within Subcontinental society. It is noteworthy that the participants in this study actively negotiated their identities through the lens of their religion, engaging in the re-interpretation of Islamic teachings, particularly through the concept of Islamic feminism. Additionally, their acquisition of the English language enabled them to access diverse cultures and catalyze personal and societal change. Ultimately, the overall findings underscore the vital role of studying abroad for subcontinental women in fostering self-expression and empowering them to become proactive agents in shaping their future narratives encompassing faith, hope, independence, and agency. The limitations and practical implications have been discussed.

Keywords: Studying abroad; Subcontinental women; Identity Development.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A rising trend in the educational world is international student exchange. It's inspiring and challenging for learners to move across the globe for school. Leaving behind friends and family and adapting to a new culture are just two of the many difficulties that international students must overcome. Muslim students, on the other hand, confront several obstacles stemming from the profound cultural differences that arise from their faith. As a Muslim student, there were many experiences, perspectives, and transformations observed in the lives of individuals, particularly women. And at that moment, it dawned on me how important it is to record these tales.

Subcontinental women were selected as a topic because their rigid Islamic culture prevents them from embracing western values. Also, not enough research was done on Subcontinental women outside of their country of residence, and the research that had been done looked to be rehashing the same tired narratives to preserve the idealized image of Subcontinental women. Existing literature briefly discussed gender segregation and male legal guardians but omitted more delicate topics like the hijab and other religious customs, the language barrier, etc [1]. These factors shape the way Subcontinental women see themselves. Aspects of Pakistani and Indian culture, the significance of this research, and the dissemination of the thesis are discussed in this chapter.

1.1 Introduction and Background

This description of the modern Subcontinent that is now Pakistan and India, which is "looking towards the future while adhering tightly to its tradition and legacy," is exactly right. The land of subcontinent has been torn between modernity and conservatism in recent decades [2]. This tension is reflected in the structure of their developmental projects, which show a preference for a compromise between the two extremes. The ongoing balancing act between ideological purity and political and economic goals was a challenge for many of the Subcontinent rulers [3]. To elaborate, the public, political, and social expectations are the plans that should not undermine or conflict with the country's culture. However, the land has reformed the education system extensively since the 1990s, established several new universities during the last decade, and 2005 innovated many annual Scholarship programmes to send willing students abroad to continue their high education [4].

The Islamic heritage of the people who live in the subcontinent has contributed to a conservative society, particularly regarding gender roles. Outside of immediate family (parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings, nephews, nieces, and aunts), males and females are officially obliged and expected to get an education, do jobs, and socialize in gender-segregated areas [5]. Because of the prevalence of this culture, many schools and colleges have separate sections for males and girls or completely different buildings for each gender. Because of this, the Subcontinental education system is exclusively for one gender, from kindergarten to postgraduate degrees [5]. A new liberal and modernist culture, however, has been gaining favour in Subcontinent over the last several decades. This emerging social group's ideals, attitudes, and conventions are at odds with those of more conservative and traditional societies. In addition, members of this new group have grown outspoken and active in contesting the gender separation rules, practices, norms, and culture. In recent years, the Indo-Pak

government has been in a continual fight to preserve peace and balance between the two factions of the society [6].

This thesis focuses on the experiences and voices of six subcontinental women they ranged in age from 23 to early 30s and were all actively pursuing their graduate degrees. Among them, four were married and had children, while the remaining two were unmarried. Their fields of study encompassed various disciplines at different universities in the Netherlands. The data gathered from the interviews led to the identification of several prominent themes. These themes encompassed various aspects, such as Identity, Attitudes towards the English language, proficiency, and utilization, Pre-departure training, Cultural adaptation, Linguistic and cultural acquisition, Social networks and engagement, Personal growth and development, Significance of religious identity, and Aspirations for the future and societal change in the Subcontinent.

1.2 Significance of the research work

Students from Subcontinent who attend universities abroad often report experiencing cultural shock as they try to adapt to their new environments, both academically and socially [4, 7, 8, 9, 10]. Numerous scholars in the United States and other countries have examined the challenges and adaptations faced by Subcontinental students taking part in educational programmes abroad. However, the effects of teaching a mixed-gender class and differences in social and cultural aspects have received surprisingly little study [10].

However, the existing body of literature lacks explicit studies that compare the cultural worldviews of female Subcontinental students, specifically focusing on their social and cultural identities. It is important to note the variations in cultural, linguistic, and religious norms between Subcontinent and Western societies. This research aims to challenge the generalization that Subcontinental and Muslim women are universally oppressed and devoid of agency and voice. Subcontinental women were selected as a topic for this study due to the observation that their rigid Islamic culture often creates a perceived barrier that hinders their full embrace of Western values. By conducting this research, it is demonstrated that Subcontinental women are not a homogenous group and that their experiences during study abroad can differ significantly based on their backgrounds and personal values. This study delves into the evolving roles that Subcontinental women assume in society and their perspectives on Islam and their Muslim heritage. Given the scarcity of literature on the cross-cultural experiences of Subcontinental women, this study is imperative in filling this research gap.

As such, this research aims to phenomenologically examine the perspectives, experiences, and coping mechanisms of Subcontinental students in a new social and cultural environment. It is crucial to learn and record specific struggles Subcontinental women have faced regarding their identity. Forthcoming Subcontinental learners who want to study in Western countries may benefit from the findings of this study. They would better grasp cultural differences and the pros and cons of learning in a co-educational setting, as their fellow Subcontinental students stated. Information from this research was acquired via in-depth interviews with Subcontinental university students.

1.3 Problem statement

Despite the growing number of subcontinental women studying and residing in the Netherlands, there is a lack of comprehensive research investigating the complex interplay between cultural, linguistic, and religious factors and their influence on the development of subcontinental women's identities, beliefs,

and practices. This research gap hinders our understanding of the transformative experiences and challenges faced by these women, as well as their agency in negotiating and shaping their own cultural integration and religious expression within a different socio-cultural context. Thus, a thorough exploration of these factors is crucial for providing valuable insights and informing policies and support systems that facilitate the holistic development and empowerment of subcontinental women in the Netherlands.

1.4 Research aims & objective and research questions

This study aims to address three research questions in response to the existing gap in the literature regarding the narratives of identity among Subcontinental women in South Asia.

I. Firstly, it seeks to explore the religious and cultural connections that participants had with the English language and English-speaking countries before their engagement in study abroad programs.
II. Secondly, it aims to investigate the transformation of their identities, beliefs, and practices during their time in the Netherlands. Specifically, it aims to understand how religious and cultural beliefs, language proficiency, and their positioning in the new cultural context influenced these changes.
III. Finally, the study aims to examine the anticipated impact of this experience on participants' aspirations, interpersonal relationships, and their home country.

By addressing these research questions, the study intends to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the experiences and journeys of Subcontinental women within the context of study abroad programs. It recognizes the limited existing research in this area and seeks to bridge the gap by providing a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between language, culture, identity, and broader societal dynamics.

1.5 Thesis layout

An introduction to the thesis and a synopsis of the context for this study are presented in **Chapter 1**. It provides an overview of the history and customs of Subcontinental culture. The role of women in Subcontinental society is also examined to grasp better the individuals involved. The significance and objectives of the study are outlined at the end.

Identity and its varieties, national history, the place of women in Subcontinental society and culture, the significance of language, and recent research on students studying abroad are all covered in **Chapter 2**. In the first part, we introduce the basic ideas guiding our research and discuss the work of other scholars who have examined the interplay between language, religion, culture, Islamic feminism, and forming a personal identity while studying abroad. The second part is a historical survey of national identity, women's place in society, and the use of language in national and religious contexts across different cultures. The last part summarizes recent research on international students from the West and Asia going overseas to complete their undergraduate or graduate degrees. Research on international Muslim students comes next, then on international Subcontinental students. Putting the scholarship program's explicitly nation-building goals into their proper perspective, the study may help readers better comprehend Pakistani closed society, the unusual connection between religion and the state of Pakistan, and the country's strict adherence to Islamic law.

In **Chapter 3**, we'll discuss our decisions regarding methodology throughout the study. This includes everything from the research design, the participants we recruited, and how we collected our data. As a reference for significant patterns, to inform the interview questions, and to locate participants for the

interviews, this chapter also contains a short explanation of quantitative data acquired during a pilot project.

Chapter 4, titled "Results" details my six case studies. Several Subcontinental regions gave these individuals diverse views on Pakistani/Indian culture and religion. The first portion covers the participant's history, her experiences learning English as a kid and young adult, her views about English and the social influences that shaped them, and her motivations for studying abroad. Knowing their past will help us comprehend their experience in Holland and its impact on their lives and identities. It also examines the psychological, social, and cultural shift each individual is experiencing in Holland, how their perceptions of the Netherlands and its people have evolved, how their life has shaped their personality and empowered them, and the impact on their religious and national identities. Then we discuss how they would transform society and their family after returning to their homeland. The final portion analyses the case studies, compares and contrasts the results, and emphasizes the most important conclusions.

We wrap up in **Chapter 5** and **Chapter 6**. These chapters reflect on the study's results and limitations and offers suggestions for further research. Next, we discuss the ideas and research discussed in this thesis that help us comprehend the impact of this cohort's experiences on their sense of self in the Subcontinent.

Chapter 2: Literature Review:

This chapter examines the idea of identity by looking at several aspects of identity, including social identity, linguistic identity, cultural identity, and religious identity. Then it ties everything together by discussing the concept of feminism in Islam.

2.1 Identity

Identity is not a straightforward concept. It wasn't until the 1950s that it was brought into the field of social sciences, and its definition is still murky today. This is because it is generally accepted that one's identity, centred on the individual, is the product of social construction and ongoing change [11, 12]. Language is also thought to have a role in forming identity and its maintenance and negotiation [13, 14].

From an inclusive perspective, identity may be considered the collection of ideas, assumptions, and meanings connected to a person's roles. Identities are neither fixed nor unchangeable but contingent upon the circumstances [15]. A person's identity is built and acted out to their social and historical context. These identities are produced and enacted at the individual and several other levels of identity [16]. Each aspect of a person's identity, whether gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, age, occupation, socioeconomic status, etc., is intertwined. In this view, identity is not a fixed, unchanging thing, as was advocated in early twentieth-century anthropological perspectives of identity. It, instead, is dynamic, multifaceted, and characterized by ever-shifting circumstances [14, 16]. The idea of identity is socially articulated and comprehended in its very essence.

The study of second language acquisition (SLA) offers researchers two theoretical perspectives to investigate social identity issues. The structural view takes for granted the permanence of established social institutions as the primary constituents of "society." [17]. These frameworks presume identity is fixed inside binary oppositions like male/female, rich/poor, and black/white. On the other hand, the post-structural perspective challenges the structural one by questioning the oppositions that constitute social structures and how people continuously negotiate and renegotiate their identities in shifting social and historical settings. This method treated identity as continually up for debate and fractured [17, 18].

In addition, poststructuralism offers a perspective for examining how power is negotiated, sustained, and challenged via the performance and creation of individual identities, particularly in connection to broader sociohistorical contexts [17]. In particular, scholars might learn how identities are constrained in various settings by examining the function of power in identity development and performance [18]. SLA identity research has used post-structural theories for this purpose. Learners of a second language must rethink their identity with both languages. When that language is English, sociohistorical power dynamics related to ethnic and national identity and colonialism and cultural colonialism must be managed [19].

Since SLA facilitates identity creation and negotiation, poststructuralist methods provide a helpful lens to examine the interplay between the two [18, 19]. As a result, poststructuralist theoretical frameworks will serve as the basis for this literature evaluation.

(a) Social Identity

It is essential to discuss social identity theory because it offers a helpful psychological model of the general importance of identity to the way individuals conduct their lives. This makes discussing social identity theory very significant. It is also beneficial in understanding the dynamic and convoluted nature of identity, belonging, and affiliation, as well as how these things influence the behaviour of individuals. The present research uses a poststructuralist viewpoint to demonstrate how social identities develop, shift, and come into contact with one another. This viewpoint views the social identity theory as essential to understanding identity.

Because of the constant effect of one's environment, a person's identity is flexible, complex, and more than just what they imagine it to be. It's the process through which a person engages with and comes to terms with other people and the greater social forces to which they are subject. Therefore, their social environments influence how people define themselves [20]. Therefore, to answer the questions "who am I?" and "what is my connection to the world?", social identity theory demonstrates that identity is a social process, something that continually evolves as one matures and interacts, and not something that one has in and of itself [21]. The many groups to which people belong (e.g., socioeconomic class, family, country, etc.) are the primary source of their pride and self-esteem, these organisations give their members a sense of societal worth and a feeling of belonging within the social realm [21].

According to the social identity theory, people have two primary ways of identifying themselves: one is through their membership in specific social groups and the values associated with those memberships (the "we"), and the other is through their own unique set of characteristics and quirks (the "I") [22].

The fundamental principle of the the concept of social identification posits that an individual's self-concept arises from continuous interaction and participation within society. This process begins at a very early age. It is characterised by adopting the culture, recognising the many statuses and connections within a community, and observing the various roles mandated by that society [23]. It comes about as a result of actively participating in the way of being and searching for a position in society. The notion that identity is dynamic is a widely held belief, as it is shaped by social factors and subject to the evolving social norms and values of a given community [23]. Such changes may occur gradually over time. People have the opportunity to become members of diverse groups at different stages throughout their lifespan. According to Norton, an individual's identity is how they interpret themselves over time and place. Because of this, identity is dynamic and ever-evolving, enabling people to forge new connections with the outside world [23].

(b) Language and Identity

Norton became a pioneer in applying post-structural theories of identity and linguistics to the study of SLA ([11]; [23]). Word selection, phrasing, syntax, and phonology generate and express meaning about who or what a person is, including their class, gender, race, sexuality, etc. Therefore, poststructuralist methods see language usage as a site of identity creation. Thus, the process of using a language is one of ongoing conflict, disintegration, and flux [24]. Using a second language is a constant battle for people whose first language is not English between the identities they have established in L1 and the identities others want to impose on them [24]. Learners of a second language take on a new identity as "learners" when they speak that language, which may be at odds with their prior conceptions of who they are [25].

Understanding the identities of second language learners were aided by several ideas, such as Bourdieu's power and investment method. According to Bourdieu, one's ability to talk depends on access to a particular capital or power source. Bourdieu's theory makes essential contributions to linguistics, sociology, and political science [26]. The following sections will elaborate on the ideas relevant to our investigation: field, habitus, and capital.

Bourdieu's sociology focuses on "fields," social venues where "social groups" exhibit their inclinations and pursue different types of capital [26]. A field is a network of intellectual, religious, educational, or cultural interactions [27]. In these professions, individuals frequently take various social positions and experience power differently based on the beliefs and worldviews that define the relevance of "the social group" at a particular time [28]. Thus, circumstances may affect habitus. Moncrieffe suggests that Bourdieu's theory has the potential to elucidate the conflicts and inconsistencies that arise when individuals encounter and confront diverse circumstances. His theory describes how individuals might fight authority and dominance in one environment and demonstrate involvement in another [29]. In her study of Ugandan women, she utilised his approach to illustrate how fields might explain power differentials in public and private arenas. Moncrieffe highlighted how her participant has control in public but submits to her husband at home [29]. This highlights how men and women are socialised differently in various industries and how power is distributed differently.

Bourdieu believes that agency and structure produce and legitimise power culturally, socially, and symbolically. Bourdieu redefined habitus as socialised norms, values, skills, habits, styles, preferences, beliefs, and practises shared by distinct groups, cultures, or countries. This "collection of dispositions" determines how "social groups" in "social exchanges" behave and think [30]. Thus, habitus is socially produced. This creates repeatable and adaptable social patterns. Habitus "is neither set nor permanent and may be modified under unforeseen events or over a long historical era". Habitus is social agent-structure interaction. Past events affect contemporary habits, which shape perceptions. Habitus is produced and renewed spontaneously, without conscious attention [31]. For example, Subcontinental students were socialised into particular ways of dressing, thinking, and building attitudes and beliefs (their Hindu/Pak culture), so Bourdieu says that when they change fields and come abroad, their habitus unconsciously changes as they change their lifestyle and develop new ways of thinking, i.e., their culture changes. The new area is transient, and these students will return to their previous profession with new habits that may affect their lives [30, 31].

Bourdieu established the idea of "social capital," believing that it underpins social activity and determines social status. Bourdieu believed social power increased with money. He expanded capital beyond economic capital to include social, cultural, and symbolic capital [32]. Capital may be moved across fields and is equally significant. Bourdieu defines social capital as resources based on group membership, connection, a network of influence, and support (e.g., contacts crucial for social and professional progress) [28, 31]. His idea of cultural capital relates to the symbolic aspects such as preferences, dress, manners, and intellectual credentials that a person acquires by being part of a social group. Like a university degree, sharing cultural capital creates a feeling of shared identity and group standing [23]. Bourdieu's work demonstrates the gradual internalisation of the social order within individuals' cognitive frameworks through various cultural artefacts such as education, language, assessments, principles, categorization, and daily routines. This phenomenon can result in the development of an individual's perception of their position in society and voluntary withdrawal from social interaction [32].

Language is tied to social status. Hence Bourdieu believed it might be a powerful source of power. Thus, capital may be utilised to analyse social disparities, such as in linguistic interactions where various language varieties enhance speakers' positions in different circumstances. Bourdieu used the term "legitimate language" to describe how language practises and discourse (e.g., standardised patterns of speech employed by the dominant group) are legitimatized under certain social conditions to enhance their power [33]. For instance, Subcontinental students with outstanding English proficiency (linguistic capital) gain a reputation (symbolic capital) in their countries. Still, when they go outside, they realise they are inferior to native speakers and lose their symbolic capital, i.e., the right to be heard. Thus, community citizens have cultural, linguistic, and symbolic capital, which may not be the best or most valued. Therefore, a person's social status allows them to say specific things in certain situations. Thus, symbolic capital indicates social identity in a particular environment [33].

Because of this, the use of language, whether L1 or L2, is not an objective act but rather a subjective one that demands the negotiation of identity, the negotiation of power systems, and the battles to build and interact with meanings among several discourse communities. Therefore, learning a second language involves acquiring new vocabulary and grammatical structures, engaging with power conflicts, and forming new identities [34].

According to Norton, while people are learning a new language, they are not only sharing information with native speakers of that language but also continually arranging and reconstructing a sense of who they are and how they fit into the social environment [11]. Learning a new language is an investment in one's sense of self. This implies that students' identities and self-perceptions shift due to their investment in response, which in turn makes possible more investments on their part in the future [12]. The experience of a shy female international student effectively investing in a debate with L2 speakers may lead to a renegotiation of her concept of self is just one example. The return on her investment may give her a stronger sense of self-negotiation and validity, which can help her make more investments in the future [13].

Kim shows in her qualitative case study of a Korean graduate student in the United States how the student's aspirations to join a made-up Korean elite group that may provide her high social standing and financial success has aided her in her pursuit of fluency in English [35]. Subcontinental students studying abroad also have a part in this since the acquisition of English language skills can be the glue that binds this ideal society together. In Subcontinent, a certain degree of English proficiency is required for work in many different areas; thus, learning the language allows them to communicate with the host community and improves their prospects for the future [36].

Therefore, learning the language may increase one's work opportunities. They may use the universal language of communication to broaden their horizons, learn from others, and form bonds with locals and people worldwide [37]. The ability to communicate in a foreign language may also help people find a place where they feel accepted. As a result of language, individuals might get a more nuanced comprehension of themselves and their environment. This may give them something to work for in life [37].

(c) Cultural Identity

This research focuses on Subcontinental international students' adjustments to life in the Netherlands, where they constitute a visible minority compared to their native country. Therefore, it is vital to investigate how modern scholars conceptualize culture, cultural identity, and their interrelations. The

function of English as a second language in the learners' intercultural growth is another aspect of their linguistic and cultural adaptation that needs to be investigated.

Defining culture is hard. Some use it to mean something permanent that explains people's behaviour. Others see culture as a living phenomenon that individuals create, adapt, and own [38]. Holliday distinguishes essentialist (positivist) and nonessentialist cultural viewpoints (interpretive). Essentialists describe culture as “a specific social phenomenon which expresses the inherent character of a given nation”. Non-essentialists see culture as “a transportable term employed by various individuals at different eras to fit objectives of identification, politics, and science” [38].

Like habitus, which changes in various settings or over time, cultural identity is established via the multiple intersections a person confronts during socialization, including family, school, friends, coworkers, technology, life events, etc [39]. These intersections inside an individual form a distinct culture that changes based on the social setting. Culture links what individuals are innately capable of becoming and what they, one by one, become. Cultural patterns, historically formed systems of meaning, shape our lives and help us become individuals [39].

Culture, therefore, evolves from various human experiences. Every community has a culture that teaches its members how to behave [40]. However, acceptable manners change throughout time, so what is good now may not be afterwards. Cultural symbols are manufactured. In social environments where social ideals, symbolic tools, and knowledge are formed and shared, individuals create them [38]. Culture comes from people. They generate, transmit, change, and reject cultural traits as social groups. Since culture is in people's thoughts, they maintain it. Individuals are crucial to culture, but their interaction is much more so [38, 40]. Since people may connect with and belong to various social groups, each group offers distinct cultural contributions they might adopt or reject. These social groupings share cultural values. These cultural values affect groups' conventions, norms, practices, and institutions [40], influencing individuals' behaviours and social activities [41].

Thus, to be accepted into a culture, one must comprehend its sociocultural milieu and learn to talk and behave accordingly. This implies that "culture" is how individuals navigate their numerous identities by engaging in daily activities and interactions as community members, making meaning of their existence [42]. Culture is how we interact, learn, and act. Relationships and learning from a collaborative environment and history are used to build, rebuild, and negotiate surrounding environments [43]. This component of cultural identity is essential in the personal trajectories of people immersed in a new culture, like the study-abroad participants.

It is now reasonable to conclude that culture and identity are tightly intertwined. Cultural ideas constitute the foundation of self-identity and are strong. Culture influences people's lives and worldviews [44]. Mazrui explains: Culture shapes people's self-perception and gender roles. Language transmits culture, which communicates (mother tongue or foreign language). Finally, culture defines "we" and "them" and restricts national cohesion [45].

An individual's cultural identity is shaped by community experiences and interactions that share their history, language, and worldview [17]. "Being American—or British, Japanese, Indian or Pakistani”—is part of cultural identity. When people say they're American, British, Indian, or Pakistani, they claim a national and cultural identity [46]. Biracial children, migrants, international students, and sojourners acquire new identities while navigating two or more cultures. However, culturally diverse individuals and settings may

be uncomfortable and cause complicated feelings and responses [47]. People respond to new environments with "culture shock." Culture shock causes worry, uncertainty, disorientation, and solitude [47]. These may cause homesickness, loneliness, social withdrawal, stereotyping, and animosity against the hosts. Culture shock isn't inevitable. Some may quickly appreciate and absorb the host culture's traits and even momentarily abandon their culture [47].

Bennett proposed a Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to describe how individuals perceive and interact with cultural differences. His approach has three ethnocentric phases where people's culture shapes their worldviews [48]. In the denial stage, individuals deny cultural diversity and see themselves as the only ones, avoiding cultural engagement. The defensive set acknowledges other civilizations but not their legitimacy. They degrade other societies because they feel threatened [48]. In the minimization stage, people see some superficial distinctions between their culture and others but strive to minimize them by persuading themselves that cultures are more alike than different and consider their own culture as universal. People in the ethnocentric phases often do one of three things to avoid cultural difference: deny its existence, reject it outright, or minimize its significance [48].

According to Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, Intercultural interaction causes stress and anxiety because they lack the host society's social abilities. Thus, "culture learning" involves learning about the host culture and mastering intercultural communication [49]. Cultural awareness educates about diverse cultures. Intercultural competence demands understanding the host and one's cultural standards governing interpersonal communication. It also encompasses how individuals communicate, show emotion, and influence one another via verbal and nonverbal communication [49]. Thus, "culture learning" requires the host society to develop cultural knowledge and social skills, generally gained via socialization in the new sociocultural setting.

L2 learners absorb the target community's cultural norms via language socialisation [50]. Language socialisation, a poststructuralist notion, recognizes that SLA incorporates acculturation via interaction and rote acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. Acculturation is a sociological process that involves learning L2 and adopting the target culture's norms, beliefs, and behaviours [51]. SLA research requires negotiating new identities in the L2. Costa's research with Saudi and Vietnamese women studying in the US directly linked this new multicultural identity to L2 learning [52]. These and other research show that L2 learners, migrants, and sojourners only become conscious of their cultural and national identity during social and cultural conflict. Language-based issues such as difficulty expressing or comprehending become increasingly apparent. Patron claimed that L2 proficiency lowered her subjects' social identity and cultural stress. However, Pavlenko warned that gender, age, race, and socioeconomic class affect language socialisation chances [51, 52, 53].

(d) Religious Identity

Religion, ethnicity, nationalism, and race have all been mentioned as components of cultural identity. Since religious identification is a fundamental means of self-definition, it is appropriate to examine cultural identity in light of religious identification here. When people declare their religious affiliation, they assert a part of their religious and cultural identity [51]. The world we live in today is heavily influenced by religion, and its religious beliefs often shape a society's cultural norms and values. Religion is hard to pin down one definition, but most agree that it involves some form of piety and reverence for a higher power [52].

According to Geertz, a particular system can create enduring and widespread emotional and motivational states in individuals by constructing ideas about a universal structure of reality and imbuing these ideas with a sense of authenticity that renders the emotions and motivations particularly genuine. The aforementioned explication originates from Geertz's literary work entitled "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," which was released in the year 1974 [53].

Because of the cultural specificity of religious ideas and behaviours, religion and culture have an inherent link. Practices unique to religion may serve as a unifying factor for its adherents and a dividing one for those who don't share their faith [53]. The zeal with which people adhere to their religions may vary widely from one to the next, leading to a cultural divide between those who actively practise their faith and those who don't. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend religiosity while studying religion since the degree to which people are religious may serve as a yardstick to compare and contrast other civilizations [54]. This suggests that religion, like culture, is a social construction and impacts both. This is especially so because of the complex relationship between Islam and Pakistani society and the resulting cultural tension.

When thinking of Pakistan, most people think of Islam. In this way, it serves as the bedrock upon which the culture is built and as its guardian. The religious committee has the final say over every facet of society, and its approval is required before anything can be considered part of the cultural norm [55]. Traditional cultural practices, such as gender segregation, were mistakenly interpreted as religious tenets as time passed, blurring the lines between the secular and the sacred. Religious practises like the hijab have been given more significance, or "exaggerated," as Carland puts it, and have become more of a tradition than religious practice and have been imposed on women, whether they are religious or not [55].

This caused tensions in Muslim society since most citizens could not distinguish between religious practices and religious beliefs [56]. According to an article in the local newspaper, Muslims have difficulty distinguishing between religion, with its unchanging texts and certain tenets, and religious culture, which can be interpreted and practised in various ways depending on the individual, their background, and their location. Religion binds you to scripture, law, and worship; religious tradition binds you to its understanding of these things [56].

Different generations, nations, and communities all have unique religious traditions. Religious diversity and the fact that Pakistan’s dominant culture is strikingly different from Egypt, Indonesia, and many other countries indicate this [57]. However, distinguishing between faiths and religious cultures within the same civilization is formidable. It's difficult for the average person to tell the difference between a cultural taboo and a religious one since the two have many commonalities, including values, behaviour, morality, and social taboos [56, 57].

With time, however, the religious culture drifted away from the Quranic scriptures. It began to be interpreted in light of new factors, returning as sacred rites devoid of the soul to match their old customs or newly formed interests [56]. Religion, for instance, instructs women to dress modestly and men to look the other way. Still, patriarchal societies don't care about men's behaviour and instead isolate women in every way possible, from the clothes they wear to the quality of their jobs to the fact that they must use different facilities and modes of transportation. The colour and style of the veil (rather than modesty) become society's major preoccupation when religion is reduced to a set of formal procedures [57]. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish between "abstract religion," characterized by unambiguous texts

and black-and-white reasoning, and "religious culture," which varies among civilizations, periods, and conceptual frameworks [57].

The people around them influence both religious affiliation and personal identity. This indicates that a person's religious identity is shaped by the religious community in which they participate and remains unchanged even if they doubt or reject specific religious ideas [58]. That is to say, the subliminal social, cultural, and religious signals one gets during life are immutable. Therefore, a person's religious and cultural ideas are not necessarily eradicated when they begin to hold opinions at odds with those they were brought up with or with the majority of society at large [58]. In many cases, one's perspective and sense of self will continue to be shaped by their family, community, and culture [59].

But religious identity, like every other kind, is ever-changing, never-steady, and a source of friction [11, 59]. This is abundantly evident when traversing national, cultural, and religious boundaries. People often shift their religious allegiances, becoming more liberal or conservative within their existing faith or adopting the teachings and practises of an entirely new religion [55]. Due to this, religious identification is more malleable and changing than, say, ethnic identification. Although this may happen instantly, it takes hard work, study, and social pressure to bring about a change [56]. To paraphrase what Brimhall-Vargas has to say about this, "even when the exterior characteristics of the religion are aligned with a person's new internal convictions since the old identity is still there as a nagging point of reference," it might be challenging to embrace a new faith fully [57]. It's possible that an individual's religious culture doesn't represent their views. If this is the case, a shift in that culture may validate individuals' convictions and motivate them to put them into practice [58, 59]. Some students may become more receptive to religious doubt and inquiry due to their study abroad experience since it broadens their perspectives, develops their critical thinking abilities, and gives them greater freedom of action [60].

Because religious identity is a fundamental part of Muslim culture, this research delves into how Indo-Pak women's religious identities have evolved as international students in the Netherlands [61]. While some research has examined the consequences of studying abroad on the secular aspects of Subcontinental women's identities, less attention has been paid to the religious dimensions. Some people have made cryptic references to changes in their religious practices [61]. This is to be expected, given the sensitivity of the topic of religion in the Subcontinent. In doing so, our research responds to Han's proposal for a branch of applied linguistics to explore how language shapes religious practice. She advocates for a greater focus on how religion affects how individuals learn, teach, and interact with linguistic communities [62]. She provides a crucial historical context for studying religion and its role in the evolution of applied linguistics by discussing Chinese immigrants to Canada who converted to evangelical Christianity in her work. Within her research on Muslim adolescents and education, Sarroub also addressed the intersection between faith and learning. Sarroub concurs with Han that there needs to be more writing on migration and globalization. Since people's social, religious, cultural, linguistic, and national borders are constantly being redrawn and re-imagined, this area of Applied Linguistics is in high demand [62].

(e) Islamic Feminism

To provide Subcontinental women with a stronger voice and to aid in their advancement and freedom of movement in the Subcontinent, I adopted an Islamic feminist approach for my research. The vast majority of Subcontinental women do not understand their legal rights and think that using their rights is forbidden by Islam [63]. Conservative interpretations of the Quran and Islamic cultural practices have obscured issues facing Subcontinental women. Some women, for instance, have been taught that the need for a

male guardian driving is based on Islamic law and that to think or act differently is to go against the precepts of Sharia. As a result, some Subcontinental women have turned to Islamic feminism to gain "a feeling of power, an identity, independence, and equality with males" [64]. Even among self-identified liberal modernists, Islam is a primary source of inspiration and guidance for Muslim women [65]. Feminist empowerment in Subcontinent, like any other societal reform, must be sanctioned by Islamic teachings [66]. Moreover, addressing the S Subcontinent's audience from an Islamic feminist stance can help win over males and females.

The term "Islamic feminism" is used in this thesis not as a strict or technical theoretical perspective but as a more general term to describe the process of rereading and reinterpreting Islamic texts through different lenses and voices to find solutions to the issues faced by Muslim women and to justify their actions and responses [67]. Many prominent Islamic feminists, such as Margot Badran, Amina Wadud, Lila Abu-Lughod, and others, base their arguments against patriarchy on Islamic literature. The Quran advocates for women's rights, independence, and equal rights for all people [67]. It's a proclamation of worker parity. Anyone who does good deeds, regardless of gender, and has faith will be welcomed into heaven without suffering any harm. This religious ideal of righteousness places one person above another regardless of gender or ethnicity. Subcontinental women may benefit from Islamic feminism on several levels: philosophically, culturally, and religiously [67].

While it's true that Islam does protect women's rights, such protections are often misunderstood "in part owing to the perceptions of Muslim women as being stupid and meek," according to one academic [68]. Similarly to the West, not all Muslim women were empowered or motivated to challenge sexism throughout history. This is not grounds for the claim that all Muslim women have been "passive victims or, worse, active compliances in their enslavement" [68].

Fighting sexism in the Muslim world "is an endeavour that emerged from the soil of Mecca and Medina at the time of the prophet Muhammad" [68] and has flourished and expanded ever since, even if the term Islamic feminism is new and open to multiple interpretations. It wasn't until Muslim women began publishing journals, organizing, and documenting their history in the nineteenth century that "a concrete and unified Islamic feminism evolved at a national level in countries like Egypt" [68]. This demonstrates that the Muslim world, particularly Egypt, was the birthplace of feminism, disproving the idea that the West is where feminism first emerged [68].

The term "feminist" is often disapproved of in the Muslim world because of its association with the West [68, 69]. Nonetheless, "a plant that only develops in its soil," feminism is not a cohesive movement [70, 71]. Feminism is employed in an Islamic setting to speak to the concerns of Muslim women, who have been misinterpreted by Western feminists who see Islam as an obstacle to women's liberation. Not only does this fail as a strategy to combat sexism, but it also undermines their solidarity with Muslim women [68]. According to Abdel-Raheem, it is futile for the West to keep exporting its ideals to the rest of the world. It's not just that many Muslim women don't want Western-style feminism; the West's conception of gender equality doesn't function in the Muslim world. The West should consult Subcontinental women about whether they want this; if the answer is no, it must accept the outcome [59].

There is a consensus between Islamic and Western feminism on the importance of women's freedom and agency. The Western ideal of gender equality is based on the concept of perfect equality, where the two perspectives diverge [70]. Feminists within the Muslim faith advocate for equal rights for women and men, a fundamental principle of Islam that recognizes men's and women's distinct but complementary

responsibilities in society. Furthermore, there is more than one way to view Islamic feminism, much like the discussions surrounding Western feminism. Some Muslim women may not care about things considered appropriate for women in one Islamic nation or even one area within a country [70].

Muslim women now have to be confident and guaranteed a way to progress toward liberation and parity, thanks to Islamic feminism. It is "less threatening to basic Islamic principles" and "culturally relevant" [71]. Instead of trying to overthrow or subvert the system, as many Western feminists do, Islamic feminism encourages Muslim women to work within the (Islamic) system to bring about change [71]. Therefore, unlike its Western counterpart, Islamic feminism tends to be more conservative and incremental in its approach. Islamic feminism does not seek to topple the current order but rather to restore the teachings of the Prophet to contemporary Islam [71].

Consequently, my argument posits that the most effective approach to elucidate the development of women's identities in the Subcontinent is through the framework of Islamic feminism. Additionally, it will be utilized to gauge how much they've been affected by their exposure to and mastery of English. Islamic feminism will not be used as a theoretical framework in this study's data analysis; instead, it will serve as a lens through which to examine the religious identity of Subcontinental women and how these women explain and justify the changes they experience due to studying abroad. It's also important to remember that the Indo/Pak environment in which the Islamic feminist viewpoint is applied may have different views on the topic than other Islamic nations.

2.2 Background

What follows is a brief historical summary of the Subcontinent’s origins. To better understand the context of the study, it is important to present an overview of the Subcontinent's past. It's important to note that anything I've mentioned regarding Subcontinent history is neither the gospel nor fact. Contrarily, history is continuously rethought and reinterpreted depending on the divergent perspectives of historians. History may be recounted in various ways, each of which might inspire new ideas and narratives. Therefore, the reader may interpret my discussion and explanation of Subcontinental history differently. However, I must emphasize that the events I've described are, in my view, just one possible interpretation of Subcontinental history; there are other equally valid perspectives.

This section contextualizes this study by defining country, nationalism, and nationhood. To comprehend Subcontinental women's history, present, and future, it analyses nationalism and religion in general and Subcontinent. It highlights Muslim's existing position, developments, and future intentions. Finally, the English redefining Subcontinent is discussed. This study's backdrop should help readers comprehend Subcontinent's insular culture, religion's unusual connection with the state, and how improvisation in different factors helps nation-building.

(a) History of the nation

A nation-state is "a daily plebiscite". This is "the outcome of the subjective collective memory of communities rather than the effects of objective "facts" like family, geography, history, language, or economic interests". Renan argues that "large-scale solidarity" or a typical "moral awareness" is essential to the life of a country [72].

Nearly a century and a half later, in 1985, Anderson created the idea of "imagined communities" to express the understanding of nationhood as being imagined. He did so to differentiate it from other

approaches to the topic [73]. According to popular belief, individuals belonging to even the smallest of nations are unlikely to be acquainted with the majority of their fellow nationals, and may not have even seen or heard them. However, the concept of shared community is deeply ingrained in the collective imagination of the populace, and it is this shared imagination that gives rise to the notion of a nation [73].

Anderson addressed sociological issues pertaining to ethnic and racial identity. According to his statement, a country is a collective of individuals cohabiting due to the perception of a deep, egalitarian camaraderie, despite any actual instances of inequality or exploitation that may exist within each member [74]. Accordingly, "imagined community" implies that a country, national identity, and nationalism are all social constructions. The phrase "imagined" does not mean fictitious but rather the socio-cognitive process by which a government is formed [75].

Yet, in certain societies, it is not feasible to forge a unified identity for everyone. Humans share many characteristics, yet we can never expect their identities to be consistent because of the wide range of individual characteristics. Incorporating cultural aspects into this mix further complicates the quest for a unified national identity [76]. However, "a sense and identification of we and they" are formed when people or groups identify with their community based on shared values, conventions, roles, etc. National identity includes the stories and traditions handed down through the ages since an "imagined community" is the foundation of cultural identity [76].

The extent to which cultural factors play a role in the emergence of a country is a contentious topic in the study of nationalism. Culture may be used as a state definition; for two people to be regarded as members of the same nation, Gellner believes, they must have the same cultural system, which includes shared ideas, signals, connections, and ways of acting and living. They must first and foremost acknowledge one another as fellow citizens of the same country [77]. According to Rieffer and Dieckhoff, the two most crucial elements of national cultural identity are a common language and a common educational system. Language becomes more significant in this context since it is the primary medium through which individuals may exchange information and ideas and the most effective method to form bonds with one another and convene [77]. The more advanced a country's educational system is, the more literate its people are, which helps its economic development. A shared language is one of the first signs of a thriving community with shared cultural values. Some European nations saw the rise of nationalism due to industrialization since their citizens spoke the same language and had a similar culture. Their country flourished due to the unprecedented integration of its economy, culture, and politics [78, 79].

Religion, language, and education are ignored but are crucial cultural components. It provides real believers' identity, direction, and options to shape and change their life plans. That's why religious nationalism can bring people together like the kind practised in Subcontinent [79]. Religion may also produce conflict since it's not tied to one place and develops a different allegiance. Religious interpretations and practices may occasionally contradict [79]. Religious nationalism's success depends on religious beliefs, concepts, symbols, and leaders. Religious nationalism is characterised by the utilisation of religious terminology and methods of religious discourse, as well as the leveraging of the religious identity of a particular community [78, 79]. This phenomenon is often shrouded in religious symbolism and relies heavily on the backing of religious authorities and institutions in order to promote its objectives, given the significant role that religion plays in society. Religious nationalism typically gains political power because religious convictions are incorporated into legislation or regional governance [78, 79].

The history of religious nationalism, as described above, is most applicable to the nation-building process in Subcontinent because religion has always been the cornerstone of Indo/Pak national identity. This may result in a contradiction, in which even though religion fosters nationalism, it can also be a source of disagreement [80]. This is particularly true when individuals believe that the state deviates from their perspective of how Islam should be practised. As a result of the close relationship between religion and tradition in the subcontinent, observance of both is required by ordinary people, and straying from any of them might result in strife [81].

Maintaining the influence of religion in Indo/Pak culture has been more complicated in recent decades due to the expanding variety of religious and secular perspectives present there. Conservative and liberal groups, which have long advocated for various social changes, needed to find common ground.

(b) Subcontinent and Muslim women's status

Within the subcontinent's culture and in the rest of the world, Muslim women's voices are often ignored, disregarded, or misunderstood. This, along with several other factors, is one of the main reasons their tales are generally missing from the literature on studying abroad. In this chapter, I will attempt to emphasize a few of the most important features of the Subcontinent as a nation and a society. It is necessary to explain the history of the Subcontinent to get a deeper comprehension of the setting of the investigation.

The Subcontinent's 'traditional' identity is bound closely to the Urdu/Arabic language and Islam, which are irrevocably tied to one another. Subcontinent is governed by mixed Islam teachings (Sunni/Shia/Wahabbi), which firmly advocate gender segregation, modesty and chastity [82, 83]. Pakistani Muslims are conservative, Islamic, and family-oriented. Society discourages individuality. Family loyalty and responsibility are valued" [84]. The concept of a nuclear family extends beyond the traditional notion of a household unit consisting of a father, mother, and offspring. As per traditional beliefs, the family unit comprising of all the siblings of a particular generation, their respective spouses and offspring, grandparents, and potentially some elderly relatives such as aunts and uncles, and on occasion, some cousins, serves as the fundamental source of belonging for each member within the family [85, 86]. Pre-Islamic culture inspired the traditions and dress. Males are legal guardians and decision-makers in Muslim society, whereas women are considered legal children and must conduct domestic chores. Traditional, legal, and family frameworks impose these cultural standards rather than Islamic precepts [87, 88].

Understanding the country's sociocultural background and history is vital to understand Subcontinental women's situation properly. The reader will have the opportunity to learn the discourses that continue to exist in the tales of Subcontinental women as a result of reading this.

Subcontinental women have been held up as a particular representation of the traditional and religious continuity of Muslim culture; changes to the position of women within the country—such as their increased access to higher education and employment—have also been highlighted by the government and media [89]. Previously, women's responsibilities in society and their rights to independence from their male counterparts are restricted. Behaviour and clothes are strongly gendered, and gender segregation as a religious mandate and cultural identifier is essential to Indo/Pak identity. While men make up 77.8% of the labour force in the Subcontinent, just 20.2% of the female labour force participated in the economy in 2015. This is even though 9.1 million women (out of 13.5 million) are of working age. This stark gender gap highlights the societal constraints placed on women [90].

Pakistani society has changed recently. Indo/Pak youth and those who studied abroad are pressing for greater independence, "the new generation is conscious of its potential, and this unavoidably leads to the questioning of certain conventions and societal rules," which is credited with this transformation [91]. Subcontinental women now work in most fields. They are architects, engineers, and attorneys. Indo/Pak attitude toward women has changed, and women are steadily gaining prominence in society [92, 93]. Since most Subcontinental women in top positions were scholarship students in Western nations, this research shows that living briefly in a Western country, i.e., a different social, cultural and linguistic environment, significantly influences Subcontinental women's identities and is leading societal transformation [94].

With the increasing socioeconomic changes happening in the Subcontinent and the rising participation of Indo/Pak women in more public roles, it is appropriate to investigate the narratives of Subcontinental women abroad to understand how their experience might have facilitated such increased participation.

Despite the preceding improvements, Subcontinental women's rights and representation in public life remain sluggish compared to other nations. Thus, many of these women's rights campaigns—education and paid work—are fundamental human rights and not revolutionary [95]. The Indo/Pak government and society appear split between modernizing and conserving Muslim customs. The current measures seem to advance women's rights without really changing them. Women should know their rights and demand them without mingling with religion and culture [96].

We may conclude from our examination of the Subcontinent’s culture and the status of women there that the Subcontinental female identity is inextricably bound up with the intersecting issues of nationality, religion, language, and race. Most Subcontinental women believe their rights clash with their faith and acquiesce to cultural expectations. This study looks at how studying abroad can help such women develop personally and professionally by teaching them to respect and appreciate other cultures, adapt to new situations, and balance their social, cultural, religious, and national identities while living in a foreign country. Living in a Western country, experiencing a new culture, and interacting with the locals may give students a novel perspective and spark change. Learning English (explained in the next section) can be a gateway to new ways of thinking and a better education.

(c) Role of the English Language

Numerous studies have addressed the significance of the English language to the newly envisioned future of the Subcontinent. This is because language, in addition to other characteristics, has enabled other countries to take the lead in the global economy [97, 98, 99]. The shift of the Subcontinent's economy from an agricultural-based model to a knowledge-based one underscores the importance of equipping its populace with adequate linguistic skills to effectively engage in the global economic landscape [100]. Because language plays a role in such an economy, this necessitates that the Indo/Pak people have sufficient language abilities.

A shared language is essential for these brains to connect and for international investors to enter the country. Effective communication is the cornerstone of cultural interchange, understanding, and well-being among people from various countries [100]. English is now the de facto language of numerous areas, including technology, commerce, health, academia, and the media, making it the world's most widely used lingua franca [100]. Communicating effectively in English is a prerequisite for participating in the cutting-edge technological community; it opens doors to globalisation, foreign innovation resources,

technology information, top-notch education, more straightforward internet navigation, and access to international markets [101]. A well-educated and talented labour force is essential for Subcontinent's competitiveness in the global economy. The economy's growth is linked to the improvement and development of the educational system, which in turn is connected to the growth of English language learning [101]. Therefore, a new educational system that can better equip the next generation to meet the market's demands is the essential subject of the Indo/Pak vision. [101].

Intending to foster early acceptance of Western culture among the Subcontinent's youth [102], the nation has decided to invest more resources into English language learning and instruction as one of its primary initiatives toward this purpose [103]. The English Language Curriculum for Primary, Middle, and High Schools was also the step taken to make our youth capable of claiming themselves in the western culture [104]. Furthermore, English is becoming increasingly important for students since more courses are offered in an English-only format [105]. English is the primary language of instruction and communication at many specialized academic institutions, including medical, engineering, and computer science colleges.

Since its start, Indo/Pak Islamists have criticized English education as intrinsically tied to Western beliefs and habits like drinking and adultery, which are against Islam's basic precepts and would harm young Muslim people [105]. Curriculum materials for years enforced Islamic ideology and isolated English from its original Western cultures because of concern that "more English" would lead to "less Islam". Since English was traditionally seen as the language of unbelievers, it also impacts pupils' desire to study and adopt the culture [104]. Despite numerous ambitious programmes and adjustments, English learning has not improved despite recent emphasis on its relevance in the school system [105]. Aldabas called English-as-a-foreign-language accomplishment "still far below the acceptable one". Teachers say kids leave secondary school unable to have a brief conversation [96] and with low English grades [106]. This suggests that the country's teaching and studying English methods may fall short of what's needed to achieve the goals [107].

The government introduced many scholarships to improve the economy of the country. These scholarship initiatives are "among the numerous strategies to strengthen the educational system" [108]. Scholarships provide Subcontinental students with a global perspective. This initiative allows youth "to know the world and for the world to know them," as the monarch said [109]. They must comprehend, accept, and connect to diverse cultures and faiths to know the world. Subcontinental students' achievements as thinkers, inventors, and researchers will be recognised worldwide. Students are expected to be ambassadors for their nation, changing unfavourable Western preconceptions of Muslims and the Subcontinent and attracting more investors to support their economy [109].

The scholarship programme allows kids and their families to learn the language and embrace various cultures [90, 109]. Over 200,000 Subcontinental students have received scholarships. However, not everyone can study abroad and experience different cultures. Thus increased emphasis has been put on opening Indo/Pak society to the outside world [110]. The idea is that Subcontinental students who adopt Western culture would learn English better, leading to better jobs and more opportunities to build their nation. As another measure, the country has relaxed its visa requirements for visitors from different countries [110]. This will open up opportunities for Subcontinent, especially in tourist-friendly areas, to interact with people from all walks of life. These measures are effective as the country evolves. Many Indo/Pak students who study abroad return with a more global perspective, a greater tolerance for

diversity and Western cultural norms, a more robust command of the English language, and a greater interest in learning other languages ([87]; [89]; [91]; [93]).

By looking at the intersection of identity, religion, and nationalism throughout history, I could better contextualize my participants' backgrounds and learn how the English language influenced their conceptions of an Indo/Pak culture.

2.3 Current work on Study Abroad

Many students are studying abroad to better themselves professionally and contribute to developing their home nations' educational institutions. There was a worldwide rise in students from other countries between 1950 and 2009, from 107,000 to 3.4 million [111]. Many studies on identity and SLA have focused on students in SA programmes. However, previous studies have primarily focused on the perspectives of North America, Asia, and Europe, whereas students from the Subcontinent, particularly Pakistan, have been largely ignored [112].

Several studies have shown that SA changes students' identities, as well as the worldviews and receptiveness of its participants, to other cultures [112, 113, 114]. For instance, Murphy-Lejeune's work delves into the stories of ERASMUS participants from Europe. All her participants reported improved intercultural awareness due to their ERASMUS experiences, and many said they had formed new cultural identities due to their participation. So, they "changed," she claimed [114].

However, Takahashi discovered a catch to this kind of empowerment. She delved into the mindset and experiences of female Japanese English language students in Australia. Many Japanese women opt to study abroad while experiencing personal challenges at home because they have heard that studying in South Africa is a "glamorous method of recreating and empowering femininity and kickstarting a new lifestyle" [115]. Many of Takahashi's subjects desired to reinvent themselves in a foreign culture and language. They thought "interacting with Australian/native speakers of English was crucial to acquiring English in a ryūgaku setting." [115].

Studying in Australia offered a middle ground for the French students in Patron's research. Her subjects felt a more profound connection to the French national identity due to her teachings. Nonetheless, they felt their cultural identity as French people in Australia had become more prosperous and nuanced [116]. Whether or whether students have a greater sense of national identity may depend on the length of time between their home culture and the target culture. The distance between the cultures of France and, say, Italy is less than that between France and Australia or the United States [116].

South African works centre on racial issues to a greater extent than in other countries' literature. For example, African-American students have historically studied foreign languages in ghettos and other marginalised groups [117, 118]. Anya looked at four black Brazilian SA students. She emphasised how they visited a city in Brazil where most of the population was black, allowing them to meet and bond with people who understood their experiences [119]. Therefore, a revised "linguacultural framework" for blackness was necessary to understand Portuguese. Although the participants' conceptions of blackness were at odds with dominant Brazilian ideas about race, nationalism, gender roles and performance, and socioeconomic status, the analysis revealed that participants' investment in learning Portuguese was fueled by identification with African Americans and Afro-Brazilians due to their shared historical, social, and cultural backgrounds [119]. Students of African descent who participated in language groups where

they felt a sense of belonging, safety, and respect significantly improved their linguistic and communication abilities [119].

Insights from these researches show that the identities of L2 students are affected differently by SA programmes. Each student's encounter with, negotiation of, resistance to, and transformation of their identity is unique and intricate, and it is rooted in the values of both the student's home and host cultures.

(a) Muslim students abroad

Very little writing from study abroad addresses the topic of Muslim students studying abroad, their difficulties adjusting to life in the West, or the impact this has on their cultural and religious identities. Most studies involving Muslims among overseas students have scratched the surface of available data. Muslim overseas students who grew up in their home countries and then relocated to the host countries may have a different perspective on life abroad than their non-Muslim counterparts, especially in light of the religious and cultural differences between Islam/home and the West/host. Muslims studying abroad represent many nations and cultures, yet all adhere to the same faith (Islam). They are often seen as ethnically diverse, particularly in Western countries like the United States [120]. And although Western culture tends to be less hierarchical and more individualistic, Islamic culture is characterised by hierarchical and collectivistic interrelations [121].

Eighty-eight percent of young Muslim participants in the United States reported experiencing harassment and discrimination at least once while living abroad because of their faith [120]. In response to this animosity, some Muslim students seek to conceal or alter outward manifestations of their faith [122]. Many attempts to hide their religious and cultural practices for fear of prejudice. To a greater extent than any other group, Muslim women may stand out on campus because their hijab symbolises their faith. Some Muslim women remove their headscarves to lessen the potential for harassment and misunderstandings [122].

Research conducted by Shaheem on the lives of Emirati students studying abroad in the United States found similar problems. His subjects said they underwent changes in who they were that were "directed and circumscribed by their original cultural identity, sense of heritage, religious beliefs, and persistent reinforcement of such ideas via frequent contact with family." [123]. Two of his subjects openly rejected parts of their cultural identity in favour of the host system of social interaction; for example, they stopped carrying the family honour and started acting more like individuals, as is customary in the host culture. They feared " being themselves" in public for fear of ridicule [123].

Kim's research group students discussed how they learned to alter identities while navigating Malaysia's heterogeneous environment. They felt isolated after learning English since it is seen as a non-Islamic practice in their community [124]. According to one of her subjects, she faces animosity from specific individuals because they believe that speaking English indicates that one is not a good Muslim since "from their point of view, English equates to "Other" than Islam" [124].

McDermott-Levy's research with Omani students revealed that many experienced racism and xenophobia while studying in the United States. They discussed how the host country's prejudice towards Muslims prompted them to keep their Islamic identities intact. Doing so enabled them "to handle stress and discrimination" and made adjusting to life there more accessible [125]. However, like other international students, these ladies could experience the freedom and independence they had never had while living

under the watchful eye of their families and society in Oman by studying and living abroad. Women said they consulted and relied on their male family members, such as dads and spouses, often for advice and encouragement. Students benefited spiritually and professionally from these growth opportunities. They felt empowered and more aware of their potential after the event [125].

Noor Ahmed, a Saudi student in Canada, wrote her master's thesis on the graduate school experience of her friends in 2016. Her research shows that her five participants were profoundly affected by their SA experience, emerging as confident, strong women who had achieved their higher education and independence goals. One participant summed up their feelings about their newfound self-assurance and competence, thus: "I adore who I've become" [85].

Research with male Saudi students abroad tends to stress their heightened sense of duty as representatives of Middle East and Islam, which limits their freedom to fully immerse themselves in the host culture [111, 112, 113, 114, 115]. Consequently, male students seldom have an identity crisis or have difficulty readjusting to life in home country after studying abroad. It is interesting to note that female students do not appear to experience these heightened feelings of responsibility connected to their national or cultural identity; this may be because women are not considered leaders in society or religion in Saudi, which may explain why women do not seem to experience these feelings [113].

Reviewing this research on identity and study abroad revealed how individuals grow and flourish when studying in a new environment and how acquiring a second language expands horizons. The question of how going abroad affects a person's religious identity and faith is seldom examined [114]. Faith is essential. A person's religious convictions can affect every aspect of their existence. In this way, one's worldview may be stabilised. How individuals conduct their lives and, by extension, who they are, are affected by changes in their beliefs, whether positive or negative. This leads one to ponder why religion has been overlooked in the study abroad literature up to this point [115].

Few studies have focused on the lives of Muslim women studying abroad in the Netherlands. To my knowledge, no such qualitative research exists. For this research, I was interested in the views of Subcontinental female Muslim graduate international students on their experiences of culture, language and religion while studying in the Netherlands and how these encounters have affected their sense of self.

In the following part, we will be concentrating on the research conducted on this cohort of students who attended schools located in a variety of Western nations and how the experience of studying abroad impacted them. My research findings provided more in-depth case studies, which demonstrated that individuals are experiencing greater complexity and difficulty inside themselves. While I am primarily fascinated by the cultural, social, and linguistic shifts Indo/Pak women experience due to their time spent studying outside the country. As a result, one of the things that I want to do in the chapters of my case study is investigate the many interpretations of my participants' religious and national identities.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Over the past few years, examining identity has garnered substantial attention in applied linguistics research. In particular, the experiences of international students who reside and pursue their academic endeavours in diverse cultural contexts have been extensively investigated to their effects on their identity. Nevertheless, certain aspects of their identity demand further investigation, and additional research is essential to understand the various transformations they undergo.

The current investigation was primarily concerned with revealing the experiences of Subcontinental women residing in the Netherlands and how such encounters have shaped different aspects of their identity. A qualitative research methodology was selected to understand these experiences comprehensively. This methodological approach enabled a thorough exploration of the participants' lived experiences [120]. Qualitative research designs are particularly advantageous in uncovering the subjective experiences of individuals, given their emphasis on active listening and acknowledgement of individual perspectives and interpretations of life events [120].

This chapter clarifies the methodological approaches employed in the present study. Although this study's primary focus is qualitative, a pilot questionnaire was initially administered to obtain the perspectives of Subcontinental women residing in the Netherlands on a broad spectrum of issues and to identify prospective candidates for the main qualitative study. This preliminary phase aligned with Creswell's recommendations for conducting qualitative research. Subsequently, a pilot interview was conducted to elicit participants' views on the intersection of gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and language [121]. The pilot study yielded 20 responses, constituting the preliminary dataset for addressing the research questions and generating interview questions.

The research approach of qualitative methods is particularly well-suited for studying a complex and nuanced phenomenon such as the development of Subcontinental women's identities, beliefs, and practices while studying and living in the Netherlands. As Creswell emphasised, this methodology is best suited when seeking a detailed understanding of the subject under investigation and when the context is integral to interpreting findings [121]. In line with this approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen participants to explore the various factors that have impacted their identity development in Subcontinent. Subsequently, a subset of six participants was selected for detailed case study analysis, which will be discussed further in the next section.

3.1 Case study

The present study aimed to examine the development of Subcontinental women's identities, beliefs, and practices while studying and living in the Netherlands, focusing on the influence of cultural and religious factors. In order to attain the desired outcome, a case study approach using qualitative methodology was employed. According to definition, this particular design involves a comprehensive portrayal and examination of a limited system [122]. It was deemed suitable for investigating the complex real-life experiences and the identity development of six Subcontinental women during their SA journey in the Netherlands.

Case study research is utilized in this study to gather detailed descriptions of the real-life events of the cases under investigation. Case study research is particularly suited to providing insight and understanding of the particularity and complexity of a single point within its essential circumstances. In this study, six cases are chosen to increase the transferability of the findings. Using multiple cases can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation and can allow for comparisons across subjects. The research procedures for each case should remain consistent to ensure the study's validity.

The study employs a qualitative approach and multiple cases to elucidate the uniqueness of each woman's experience and identity development. The use of numerous cases allows for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the impact of the Subcontinent on the identity of Indo/Pak women in the Netherlands. The themes that emerged during data analysis cut across the six cases, revealing shared life experiences but with personal nuances. Using six case studies provides a deeper and more detailed understanding of the complex relationship between identity and the subcontinent, enabling a more comprehensive view and experience of the women's interpretations of themselves and their world [122].

The six case studies exploring the experiences of Subcontinental women studying abroad could potentially provide valuable insights into constructing their identity as learners and their socio-cultural adaptation to new academic environments. While the outcomes of these case studies may not be extrapolated with conventional representativeness, they can offer a critical understanding of the complexities and challenges inherent in the study abroad process for female Subcontinental students. By closely examining these research findings, policymakers and academic administrators can acquire a more profound understanding of the nuances and difficulties Subcontinental women face in pursuing overseas education, thus allowing for the establishment of mechanisms to alleviate these obstacles and empower this burgeoning demographic in their academic journeys.

3.2 Research questions

The present investigation aimed to tackle the subsequent concerns: What religious and cultural connections did participants have with the English language and countries that spoke English before participating in the study abroad programme? How their identities, beliefs, and practices evolved while they were in the Netherlands? How do religious and cultural beliefs, language and positioning affect this? How will this event affect their aspirations, relationships, and country?

Through these questions, the consequences of the intercultural experience of studying abroad on the identity of Indo/Pak women and the changes in their views, beliefs, and cultural values while living abroad will be analyzed. The importance of English proficiency to their empowerment is a primary area of focus. This was done because English has a contentious position in Subcontinent for cultural and theological reasons, i.e., it is seen as the language of the West. Exploring their similarities and contrasts may help us understand how religion, culture, and studying abroad affect one another, how students might benefit from their experiences, and the changes they may face, particularly in English, culture, and religion.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

(a) Data collection

To gather this information, a comprehensive online questionnaire specifically in English was used and shared with Subcontinental women in the Netherlands' on social media networks. The wording of the questionnaire items was not intended to be objective. Instead, they were made to address and counter a

range of stereotypical Subcontinental discourses. Participants needed to feel safe and at ease to give their full attention. Thus organizers made sure to avoid making anything too westernised or frightening. A wide variety of questions were provided. Participants were asked to answer the questions covering a wide range of topics in the four parts of the questionnaire. To get a feel for how Indo/Pak women in the Netherlands regard gender roles, cultural values, social factors, and language roles, we divided the questionnaire into several areas.

This pilot questionnaire included responses from 20 Subcontinental women living in the Netherlands. Following the analysis of the quantitative data, the decision was made to recruit participants who fulfil specific criteria, namely being Bachelor/Masters candidates with a residency in the Netherlands exceeding two years. This decision was prompted by the observation that a majority of the rich qualitative data, obtained from open-ended questions, was provided by this particular group. During the participant selection process, careful consideration was given to ensuring representation from various regions within the Subcontinent.

To collect a sample of Subcontinental female students from diverse backgrounds, with varying beliefs and lifestyles both in their home country and in the Netherlands, several recruitment strategies were employed. The aim was to obtain a comprehensive and representative understanding of the Subcontinental experience in Holland. Initially, participants were recruited by reaching out to those who had provided their contact information in the synopsis and met the criteria of being graduate candidates and having spent more than two years in the Netherlands. Out of the 20 students who participated in the pilot questionnaire, only 15 provided their contact details. Of those, five did not meet the criteria as they had spent less than two years in Holland, and four had already left the country upon completing their studies. This left me with only six eligible participants, who were contacted and who agreed to participate.

From the outset of the interview process, the selected women for this study stood out due to their eagerness to share their stories. The length and richness of their narratives made them unique cases that provide a deeper understanding of their identity development, as well as their personal, social, and spiritual experiences in the Netherlands.

Furthermore, these chosen participants not only serve as "information-rich cases" [123], but they also represent diverse trajectories, capturing different experiences and orientations. They come from different regions of the Subcontinent, have varying maternal statuses, and pursue different academic disciplines. All of them are university students who have spent a significant amount of time in the Netherlands, either studying the English language or pursuing their master's degrees. The purpose of purposeful sampling in qualitative research is to carefully select and study a small number of individuals or unique cases that yield detailed information and facilitate an in-depth understanding of the people, programs, cases, and situations being studied [123].

In this study, the emphasis was placed on quality rather than quantity, as the sample size was determined by how effectively the selected participants could provide data for a comprehensive understanding of the group [124]. Their demographic details are given below:

Table 1: Participants' Demographic details

Participants	Marital status	Age	Degree	Years abroad	Home country
Azbah	Married	33	Masters	6	Pakistan
Ume Hala	Unmarried	23	Bachelors	3	Pakistan
Ramla	Married	27	Masters	5	India
Fatima	Unmarried	24	Bachelors	4	Pakistan
Billie	Married	28	Masters	5	India
Marwa	Married	30	Masters	6	Pakistan

These women are at the core of this thesis, as they are exceptional Subcontinental individuals who have profoundly influenced me throughout the interview process, as well as during the numerous instances of listening to the interview audio recordings, transcribing, and analyzing their stories.

This synopsis is a pilot project to gather general feedback and observe the resulting perspectives. Data analysis was conducted with the intent of informing participant recruitment and the development of interview questions. To give the reader a sense of the breadth of perspectives evoked and the relative popularity of different beliefs, we report several clear trends from this data *(while not making claims to representative sampling)*. The results can be found in the appendix.

This research examines how studying abroad has changed the sense of self among Subcontinental women in the Netherlands. Thus, in-depth interviews were the primary method to elaborate and investigate the study's preliminary findings. Semi-structured open-ended questions were utilised to elicit participant responses that were rich in detail and reflective of their lived experiences [121]. Given that the interview data quality mainly depends on the interviewer [123], the most effective method of conducting interviews was chosen for the research. The primary interview guide method adopted is structured but allows for considerable leeway in composition [124]. This method ensures that the same topics are covered with all participants and provides flexibility in the specifics of the questions and the extent to which they can be probed and explored [123]. Examples of experiences were requested following each question in the semi-structured interviews. While the reliability of self-reported data has been questioned in linguistics, Willoughby argues that this does not diminish the value of participant data in identity research [125].

Rather than focusing on whether or not a speaker is telling the truth when describing their language use, researchers are interested in how speakers integrate their language habits into more meaningful stories about who they are and the values they espouse [126].

The interview questions *(complete list in attachment)* were developed after reviewing the existing research on international students, their identities, and their study abroad experiences. Some of the social, cultural, and religious concerns have been highlighted. For instance, Islamic feminism has recently been discussed in several Subcontinental studies [127]. Hence a collection of questions on this and similar topics has been compiled. The first quantitative study's findings were also taken into account. Participants were given an explanation of the study's purpose and a consent form, and their interviews were conducted in a private venue (such as a university library or a café) chosen by the participants, and some were conducted through online platforms.

The interviews were conducted in a casual, conversational setting with the participants and most importantly the interviews are in the English language. Participants' experiences were understood in greater depth because of their openness and the use of semi-structured questioning. Our conversational format helped me get to know each participant, tailoring my follow-up questions to their responses. Using this method, the interviews were tailored to the reactions of the participants by omitting or adding questions. The discussions were loosely planned, allowing for the modification of questions to have a more personal tone with each participant. Notes were taken during the interviews to aid in finding key quotes and developing questions to explore unexpected areas of interest.

(b) Data analysis

After the initial interview, data analysis began. For analyzing the interview data, thematic or content analysis has been used. Throughout the study, the procedures of data gathering, analysis, and writing merged and intertwined [121]. Following each interview, the data was transcribed, notes were taken, and critical points were marked for each participant [121]. The data was organized promptly after completing each session. Given that several interview questions touched on unique personal experiences, emphasis was placed on actively listening to the participants' responses rather than solely relying on the prepared questions.

The women's identities were analysed [128, 129], and the women's standing [130, 131] within their and the host community. Case studies illustrate the significance of the participants' varied experiences [132]. Each case study's data were coded according to chronological order and three overarching categories. Before, during, and after studying abroad were the primary headers for each case study.

- The first significant topic covers the discussions of the participants' histories, recollections of their formative years, and defining traits of their personalities. The significance of the English language and culture in their decision to pursue further education in a foreign country.
- Under the second area, the discussion focused on how their time overseas shaped their linguistic, social, religious, and national identities.
- In the final section, the focus was on their hopes for the future, desired changes in their countries, and recent events impacting their sense of self.

The information is displayed this way so readers can see how their lives have progressed through time. The goal was to demonstrate the linear progression from one stage of their lives to the next as they lived it. If their stories are laid up like this, it will be easier for readers to find connections and understand how their identities have evolved. The research supervisors made consistent updates to the original and refined themes.

3.4 Summary

The current study utilizes a qualitative, content and case research design to explore Subcontinental women's journeys in pursuing higher education in the Netherlands. To achieve this aim, the research employs a mixed methods approach, beginning with a preliminary quantitative data-gathering phase to develop a general understanding of the research problem and to inform the recruitment of participants for the subsequent qualitative phase. The qualitative phase of the research employs semi-structured interviews to elicit in-depth and nuanced accounts of the participants' experiences. The forthcoming study chapter presents the findings through a detailed analysis of the cases of six Indo-Pak women, providing

rich insights into the challenges and opportunities that arise from undertaking higher education in Subcontinent.

Chapter 4: Results

This research aimed to investigate the narratives and metamorphoses of six female students from the Subcontinent who embarked on a journey to the Netherlands to pursue higher education. The objective was to cultivate a comprehensive comprehension of their narratives and obstacles. The interviews were arranged via electronic mail and conducted through the Microsoft Teams and zoom, as per the participants' preference. The discussions were allotted one and a half hours. Following each consultation, the participants' primary themes were identified and emphasized, connecting them to the research inquiries. The study sample consisted of individuals aged 23 to early 30s who had resided in the Netherlands for a minimum of 2 to 6 years. Out of the group, four individuals were married and had children, while the remaining were unmarried.

The analysis of interviews yielded ten key themes that depict the experiences of Subcontinental female international students before, during, and after their study abroad. The themes that were identified from the data collected in the interviews include Identity, Attitudes towards the English language, proficiency and usage, Pre-departure training, Cultural adaptation, Linguistic and cultural acquisition, Social networks and engagement, Personal growth and development, Significance of religious identity, and Aspirations for the future and societal change in Subcontinent.

Each theme pertains to the three research purposes:

- To explore the essence of Indo-Pak female international students' experiences of religious and cultural connections with the English language and countries that speak English.
- To investigate how their identities, beliefs, and practices evolved while they were living abroad.
- To probe how this event will affect their aspirations, relationships, and country.

4.1 Themes

(a) Identity

The role of identity is significant in the experiences of individuals who pursue education abroad, from the initial decision-making process to the culmination of their experiences. Each of the study's participants provided a personal account of their identity.

Azbah held firm viewpoint regarding the structure and functioning of a family unit. Her notions and perspectives on the ideal family were intimately intertwined with developing her identity during her formative years.

> *"Many families seem to have lost touch with one another because members are always busy with their pursuits. Although we were a large family, we were close. Previously, we ate every meal together as a family. We have a snack and tea in the evenings as we watch a show together. Despite the hectic schedule of my dad, he never failed to make time for me and my sister. Even though there was a bus, Dad insisted on driving us there so he could have some quality time with us on the way to and from school. They instilled in us the importance of saying goodbye with a kiss and a prayer. I did my best to model this for my children. I taught them that, and now they*

won't let me out of the house without saying it, but they still do not do it to their dad, never mind. It bothers me that they've stopped paying the attention to him, but it's my job to bring it up constantly. I want for them the same kind of life I had so that they might experience the warmth of family life as I had."

This suggests that Azbah prioritises familial relationships and subscribes to the notion that one's identity is intrinsically tied to their family. It is posited that an individual's identity cannot be fully realised without the family.

On the other hand, Ume Hala's self-perception is significantly influenced by her mother, as she frequently engages in self-comparisons with her. She served as a source of inspiration for her. According to Ume Hala, her mother possessed qualities of peacefulness, religiosity, and wisdom, which she attributes to acquiring these traits.

"I take after my mother in being somewhat reserved and timid. And I enjoy that there is a part of me that makes me similar to her. She was very devout, and I owe her much of what I know about Islam and doing good without seeking praise from others. She was never one to exert her will on anybody, even us; she never yelled at us or tried to command us into doing anything. I'm very moved by the times we shared, and I often find myself reflecting on her past self and how she interacted with us. I didn't appreciate the extent of her impact on me until I was an adult. She was a selfless giver; she often helped others at her own cost. I strive to emulate her generosity, but it's draining. And you know, I wouldn't say I like this mellow quality I inherited from my mother because sometimes I feel it's more like a weakness than mellowness. Sometimes people don't like it, yes, they see you minding your business and not defending yourself, and sometimes I don't want to go down! Just ignore them; I do. They see you as weak, but I'm okay with it."

Ume Hala has acknowledged that she is gradually adopting characteristics similar to those of her mother, which she regards with admiration. Simultaneously, she recognizes that emulating her mother can be arduous, yet she persists. The individual in question expressed discontent with specific attributes and the potential for others to perceive them as indicative of vulnerability. Despite this, she remained steadfast in accepting said traits and did not feel compelled to alter them. This provides insight into the identity and coping mechanisms of Ume Hala, as well as her approach to situations that do not align with her preferences or values. An individual's identity is primarily influenced by the traits inherited from their parents. Her mother has significantly influenced Ume Hala's identity.

The dominant aspect of Fatima's identity was her religious affiliation. The focal point of all her narratives revolved around the influence of religion and its adherents on her identity. When prompted to discuss additional impacts of her schooling experience, the individual in question recounted inappropriate conduct exhibited by female peers during her secondary education. Specifically, she recalled cases where said peers would regale one another with tales of their romantic exploits with male counterparts. The subject exhibited an early understanding of societal norms and values, prompting her peers to refrain from sharing specific anecdotes in her presence. This was due to their recognition of her religious beliefs and disapproval of such conduct.

She adopted a religious stance and disassociated herself from her companions, persistent in her efforts to rectify their misdeeds. At this juncture, Fatima was considerably satisfied with her religious affiliation. The pursuit of religion provided her with a sense of fulfilment and served as the primary motivator in her

life. The significance of religion was underscored by various sources in the life of the individual, including her parents, particularly her mother, her elder sibling, her extended family members such as grandparents, uncles and aunts, as well as the educational institution and broader society, all of whom were committed to providing guidance and instruction on matters about religion.

For the individual in question, religion served as a standard for distinguishing between ethical and unethical behaviour and a motivating force for acquiring knowledge and exhibiting proper conduct. The experience evoked a sense of wholeness and belonging within her. The essence of her identity was her religious nature.

Ramla has formulated her understanding of religion and customs through the influence and direction of her family. The religious practices of her family members were not characterised by strict adherence to spiritual beliefs. The enforcement of fundamental religious practices and the significant emphasis on traditions were prioritised. The individual provided a summary of the group's perspective.

> *"You have to pray on time, and you have to do all the cultural things, you know, hijab, the fundamentals, yes and in my family, we do not listen to music; it helped me form my identity. A female should be well-behaved, keep your voice down, you do not sit with your legs apart; my mom despised it; I did it all the time." This became a source of contention for Ramla as a young girl, and she rebelled against the gender expectations placed on women and girls in Indo-Pak culture. "Don't sit like guys; sit up straight! She'd yell at them."*

She provided a sarcastic account of how societal norms continued to dictate her conduct. The author highlights a societal expectation for Muslim girls to embody specific characteristics, such as modesty, shyness, and politeness. This expectation is often reinforced by portraying Muslim girls as their community's default or ideal representation. As noted by various scholars [133, 134, 135], this portrayal often involves adhering to specific behavioural and sartorial norms, such as speaking softly, sitting upright, and dressing in long skirts and dresses. Despite her mother's expectations, Ramla resisted conformity and sought opportunities to deviate from the prescribed path. Nevertheless, compelled by parental expectations, she consented to these cultural customs and feigned compliance, as exercising her convictions and principles was not a viable alternative.

While other women in Ramla's society did not have such freedoms, she did. Regardless of the rules in her nation, this has bolstered her confidence and made her feel whole. Thus, she was able to confront the norms and unfairness of society against women since her mother encouraged her independence (even though she is illiterate) and her father supported equality [136, 137]:

> *"If I gave in to the pressures of society, I would be a shattered person. I don't think Subcontinent has a particularly awful culture yet; women are not welcomed in this society. They are not compassionate when deciding what constitutes decency and what is acceptable. It's OK if women work excessive hours or are treated poorly. Even if they don't participate, they're OK with it. A guy hits his wife; what then? Some cultures accept this and even make excuses for it (he loves you!) or attempt to shame you into ruining your own family. In addition to relieving pressure on the guy, it makes you feel more accountable for keeping things running smoothly. Your decision will rip the family apart, but the guy who struck you won't be responsible. This is unjust, and I have a strong preference for fairness. Therefore I have resisted the urge to break the rules as much as possible in my own life. That wasn't something that ran in my family. But I did see it elsewhere. I also know*

what I do not want and will fight for what is rightfully mine as a human being, no matter what others think or say. I don't give a damn of what they have to say about me. Certainly not! I am not referring to marriage but to a life in general."

The portrayal suggests that Ramla possesses a robust sense of self-identity, independent of gender, and exhibits a rebellious disposition towards the societal norms, whether sociocultural or religious, that does not aligns with her beliefs.

Billie harboured divergent perspectives, yet she consented to the prevailing current, akin to her maternal figure. The individual had a strong aversion towards gender segregation and made attempts to challenge it. However, despite these efforts, they recognised the necessity of conforming to societal expectations, as they had been ingrained in the individual's psyche due to prolonged exposure. Billie acknowledged that the societal standards and expectations during that era profoundly impacted her.

“My family and I used to spend a lot of time together while I was in high school. I suppose I picked up some of their beliefs, like accepting early marriage for girls, but that's all well with me. They always made fun of me for thinking I would get married while still in high school. But I never thought that day would come! Because I saw firsthand how my mum handled taking care of me when my dad left the picture. The need for economic autonomy was clear to me.”

Following her mother's remarriage, Billie resided in a global community where she could establish friendships with children from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Korea, India, and various Muslim nations. Living within the international compound significantly influenced her sense of self, mainly through exposure to diverse religious beliefs.

“I became more tolerant due to my interactions with non-Muslims, developing connections and travelling to see them. Her stepfather was an avid traveller, often taking the family on vacations to exotic locales. At 14, she spent a month in a summer camp in Lebanon, saying, “It shaped my personality, and I came out different. I lived there for a month. My mom wasn't on board, but my stepdad pushed me to do it anyway. At first, I felt he just wanted to get rid of me, but now I see that experience as formative.”

Billie believed that her residence in an international compound, attendance at a summer camp in Lebanon, and early engagement in reading served her as an initial exposure to the external world. This exposure played a role in shaping her identity and fostering a sense of tolerance.

Historically, the education system, schools, and teachers have pressured young girls to conform to specific behavioural norms dictated by religion, culture, and society.

"Back when I was in school, we had to wear uniforms. In addition, several young women confided in me that they had been exposed to religious recordings of preachers warning of Allah's retribution in the classroom. However, I was not significantly affected by the intimidation at school.”

Similar to Ramla, Billie exhibited defiance towards religious dominance and coercion. She recounted her experience of being captivated by preachers who possessed a gentle and captivating storytelling approach. Billie sought a discourse on Islam, intending to find a compassionate interlocutor to engage with on a spiritual level. The individual sought to establish a connection or commonality within a societal

framework that had previously imposed its values and beliefs upon all members. Billie discovered a religious affiliation that resonated with their cognitive and spiritual faculties in conjunction with specific types of preachers.

Marwa's father exhibited a strong inclination towards education and was a primary advocate for his daughter's academic pursuits. However, this preference for education may have led to his undervaluation and disregard for Marwa's mother. Marwa's motivation to pursue her studies was primarily driven by her father's attitude towards her mother rather than his encouragement. Marwa observed the presence of imbalanced power dynamics, whereby her mother's limited educational background prevented her from being allowed to express herself. Marwa allied with her maternal figure and provided a defence on her behalf. The individual's drive stemmed from a desire to combat patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes in their domestic sphere. Her brother's stance on women was a cause of vexation and ire for her, given that he would adopt an extreme perspective on the matter, surpassing even that of their father.

Marwa ascribes her brother's behaviour to the impact of their southwestern community. In contrast to the other participants, Marwa did not identify similarities between herself and her mother. She expressed, "I used to assert that I would never resemble my mother." The inferior social status of her mother was attributed to her inadequate education. Therefore, pursuing academic advancement ensured a more favourable position for the daughter. Despite being illiterate, Ramla's mother exhibited strength and independence, motivating her children to progress.

Despite having a weak personality, Marwa demonstrated the fortitude to challenge her community on multiple occasions. She deviated from the norm and violated numerous regulations. Despite being the subject of gossip, she persevered and used it as a motivator to confront societal norms. She was among the initial individuals in the southwestern region to receive a scholarship, notably the first unmarried female recipient which was a big achievement.

> *"When I found out about the scholarship opportunity, I felt it was something I had to pursue. My folks had no idea what I was talking about when I initially informed them! No one has ever heard of this before, and I do not know anybody from my area who has ever received a scholarship or been international—even males. A foreign existence has never been considered by anybody...No one can even begin to fathom how bad it is. They laughed at me and didn't take me seriously when I said I wanted to apply for the scholarship."*

Marwa is challenging the societal expectation of assuming a submissive role as a woman who relies on marriage for salvation. Despite her vocalisation, her message failed to resonate with the intended audience. The father's stance would occasionally align with his daughter's, but subsequent interactions with other relatives would sway his opinion back to their side. Marwa was resolute in overcoming societal opposition, even if it meant sacrificing familial support and endorsement.

> *"Her parents were not anti-education, but the unknown nature of studying and living abroad always intrigued her. The West would bring the unknowns—the ideals, beliefs, and ethics—. She had an aversion to things she did not fully comprehend. She enjoyed seeing her daughter succeed but would not have wanted it if she had had a say."*

(b) Attitudes Towards the English Language, proficiency and Usage

Language is also a significant concern for study abroad students, including their country and their attitudes towards the Western language, their pre-departure ability, and its impact on their lives abroad. And the comparison between pupils with high English proficiency and those with lower proficiency will be evident.

Azbah's initiation into the English language commenced at the tender age of six. In contrast to her peers, Azbah started her English language studies during her first year of primary school. Her English proficiency may be attributed to her prior residence in a military compound and attendance at a public school that employed highly qualified educators, including a British English instructor. Azbah's father demonstrated a strong interest in providing his daughter with optimal opportunities for growth and readiness for the future. As such, he made a point to enrol Azbah and her siblings in additional English language and computer courses following their regular high school curriculum.

Nonetheless, she failed to cultivate any inclination and exhibited a complete lack of enthusiasm towards the English language. Azbah's disposition indicates those in her immediate social circle, including her extended family and the southern community. Additionally, she elaborated on her unique ability to comprehend and utilise the English language up to the present moment.

While Prescott and Orton have observed that parental L2 proficiency is not a prerequisite for assisting their children's L2 acquisition [138], Azbah's parents' restricted educational background and inadequate English language skills may have impacted this matter. If Azbah's father could communicate in English and encourage her, it could have served as a source of motivation for her. Azbah completed secondary school with restricted proficiency in English, which is a common occurrence among Subcontinental students in that stage of education. According to academic sources [139, 140], the individual demonstrated the ability to comprehend essential English dialogue.

Azbah opted to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology (IT) for their undergraduate studies. Urdu served as the primary language of instruction during this period, thus preventing the need for English language acquisition. At that juncture, her disposition towards the English language remained unaltered, and the notion that English was not a requisite for her academic pursuits was reinforced. Following her graduation, Azbah's proficiency in the English language remained significantly restricted. Nevertheless, Azbah's realisation dawned upon her when she secured the teaching assistant (TA) position at a university. The individual was aware of the necessity to pursue higher education overseas, as it was mandated by their employer, given that certain universities in Indo-Pak stipulate that obtaining a scholarship is a prerequisite for contractual obligations. Before her journey to the Netherlands, Azbah exhibited contentment with her proficiency in the English language and did not anticipate encountering any difficulties with it.

On the other hand, Fatima referred to Urdu as "the National Language" when discussing languages. The individual established a connection between the language in question and her native tongue, as well as her religious beliefs, as it was the sole language utilized by her for reading the true meaning of the Quran. Fatima believed that the Urdu language held significant value, in contrast to the English language, which was commonly associated with Western culture and non-Muslim individuals. As a result, the individual's unfavourable perspectives towards Westerners and their impact on religious beliefs created a sense of detachment from the English language [141].

Furthermore, her inclination towards connecting with her native society, culture, and religion impacted her perspectives towards the English language. Fatima engaged in introspection regarding the impact of her cultural and religious upbringing on her perceptions of the English language. This process led her to disassociate from the language and express unfavourable sentiments towards it. Fatima demonstrated a robust cultural affiliation intricately linked to their religious identity. The appreciation of the English language was comparatively lower than that of spiritual knowledge among individuals who were not native speakers of English.

Ramla commenced her formal English language education in high school when she was 12. During the seventh year of a child's education, they are introduced to the fundamentals of the English language, including the alphabet, basic vocabulary, and elementary grammar. At age ten, Ramla observed the inaugural broadcast of some local channels, the English-language television channels like national planet, HBO etc. The window allowed her to investigate and comprehend the external environment. Motivated by her curiosity, she began acquiring language skills through various forms of media.

> *"I found a TV station where men and women are shown conversing in English. You know, the music they play and the romantic comedies we had at the time were just like, 'Oh my gosh!"*

Previously, she exhibited a keen awareness of the intricacies of language and the customs of Western society. Nonetheless, her mother did not appreciate or accept her disposition towards such channels. As mentioned above, Ramla's mother opposed such media primarily due to its use of the English language, which is associated with non-Muslims, and its provision of content that diverged from other national channels. Due to her mother's lack of English proficiency, she could not comprehend the material, consequently harbouring doubts about its veracity.

During her developmental phase, Ramla has demonstrated a significant inclination towards the English language, with Channels as her primary source of linguistic acquisition. According to Bada and Okan, the presence of television positively impacted the individual's motivation to acquire L2 skills [142]. Additionally, Jylhä-Laide noted that television provided an avenue for linguistic development for individuals learning English as a foreign language [143]. The case of Ramla resembles that of an extraordinary eight-year-old Finnish girl who achieved a remarkable level of oral fluency in English solely through repeated viewing of cartoons, without any formal language instruction or exposure to the language, as documented by JylhäLaide in 1994. Jylhä-Laide emphasised that this girl's case shows that novice language learners can derive advantages from watching "regular" television programmes.

Scholars in applied linguistics have acknowledged the significance of media in promoting intercultural awareness. The experience of Ramla is reminiscent of the findings of Chao, whose study focused on utilising media to foster intercultural comprehension among English majors who exhibited a solid inclination to participate [144]. The author concluded that incorporating media, such as films, into the curriculum for teaching culture is advisable due to its potential to enhance the language acquisition process in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. According to Chao, language learners can improve their cultural knowledge and language proficiency by comprehending the substance of a film, which enables them to infer the social context [144].

The English language provided Ramla with a means of expression and facilitated her ability to capture the attention of others. The praise she received for her linguistic proficiency instilled in her a sense of assurance, prompting her to express herself and exhibit her language skills. The individual believed that

English language proficiency could set her apart from others and enhance her intellectual capabilities. It was evident that the interviewee had a strong command of English, as she specifically requested that the interview be conducted in this language. Moreover, she demonstrated ease in discussing diverse subjects in English.

According to Norton, Ume Hala was keenly interested in language acquisition from an early age. The introduction of the English language brought about aspirations of achieving a sense of identity and inclusion [145]. The individual expressed a desire to align themselves with individuals who spoke English and envisioned themselves as a member of the English-speaking community. The individual's proficiency in English served as a form of cultural capital, particularly in comparison to Azbah. English was deemed to hold significant power and value within her society, resulting in her recognition and admiration for possessing such skills. As her proficiency in the language increases, her fondness for it grows, resulting in a deep-seated affiliation and attachment to the language and its associated culture. The individual in question displayed a propensity for increased learning and social interaction, which fostered a positive feedback cycle regarding their high level of attainment.

Ume Hala viewed English as a valuable investment and therefore opted to pursue a major in the English language during her undergraduate studies, primarily utilising the English language. The English language introduced novel concepts, fresh approaches to daily life, and innovative modes of cognition and existence. Studying English allowed her to transform and distinguish herself as unique, thereby setting herself apart. Despite the limited impact of her formal education, she discovered solace in alternative forms of mass communication. Literary works, such as books, significantly impacted her cultural and linguistic progression.

Ume Hala was intensely preoccupied with English and determined not to overlook any aspect. Additionally, the individual possessed a firm conviction regarding the significance of education. Given that English was her chosen field of study, she was resolute in her pursuit of mastery of the subject matter. She maintained that this pursuit profoundly impacted her decision-making processes throughout her life.

> *"One of my professors in my first year of college kept referring to Applied Linguistics, and I had no idea what she was talking about. In my first year of college, we studied grammar and other such topics, and I remember thinking, "This is it! The more I read about applied linguistics, the more I realise I want to enter this field of study."*

Ume Hala's persistent interest in the English language and education persisted, prompting her to pursue overseas studies to further her understanding of the language and its associated culture. The individual in question expressed a desire to engage in immersive language learning by residing among individuals who are native speakers, as they found conventional media such as television, books, and the internet to be insufficient for their language acquisition goals.

At eight, Billie commenced her formal English language education when her mother enrolled her in a private school. The mother of the individual in question, an English language instructor, exhibited a notably optimistic disposition towards the abovementioned language.

> *"My mother was an English teacher, and she put a lot of effort into encouraging me to read from an early age, so I was already an avid reader by age five. However, I didn't start speaking English until third grade."*

According to Gardner et al., the participant's mother actively promoted and motivated her to acquire English skills while conveying positive attitudes towards the language and its speakers [146]. Billie adopted her mother's perspectives on English communities, which fostered her desire to integrate. The impact of parental attitudes towards the second language and its community can significantly affect the motivation and success of their children in learning the language. This is supported by research conducted by Feenstra and Lambert, highlighting parents' crucial role in fostering or undermining their children's motivation towards L2 [147, 148].

Television served as an effective tool for enhancing second language acquisition. Following her relocation to the international compound, Billie noted a surge in her daily intake of English television programmes as she sought to engage with her peers' viewing habits and conversational topics. According to Elias and Lemish, media can serve as a tool to aid L2 learners in various ways, such as promoting social integration and facilitating their assimilation into local youth culture [149]. Billie employed a strategy of observing the media consumption habits of her peers to identify shared interests and facilitate communication, ultimately leading to the cultivation of her proficiency in the English language. Ramla relied solely on television as a means of reference. In contrast, Billie utilised television and social interaction with individuals from diverse backgrounds to enhance her proficiency in English and social aptitude.

Billie's motivation has been influenced by the school environment, which is considered an external factor according to Dörnyei's research [150]. Her enrollment in a private school resulted in a productive experience. The individual's educators, peer groups, and educational resources encouraged learning English. At fifteen, she was registered in an institution renowned for exceptional English language instruction.

> *"It was a thing you knew to be able to speak English, and they taught us in an exemplary manner, a distinctive way; I read many books written in English, and my friends spoke English constantly. They spoke adequate English, but not great."*

Marwa's initiation into the English language commenced at thirteen in a publicly-funded secondary school. Her lack of interest in language learning was evident as she solely focused on studying to achieve passing grades.

> *"For a long time, I actively avoided speaking or studying English. In college, I decided to learn Urdu. When I was younger, I insisted I could get by without knowing the language. My younger siblings were more enthusiastic about it than I was, but my eldest brother and I both remember thinking English wasn't all that vital."*

Like Azbah, Marwa did not attach any significance to the English language as a subject in school. To her, it was merely an additional course that she had to excel in. Marwa and Azbah hailed from a common region, where their southern community held comparable unfavourable perspectives towards the West and the English language, which was perceived as the language of the Non-Muslims [151, 152]. During her childhood, she exhibited a preference for her native language and culture over the English language, which had an impact on her motivation to acquire it as a second language, as noted by Chastain in 1975 [153]. In contrast, the parents maintained a neutral stance towards developing English and refrained from providing any form of encouragement or motivation towards its purchase [153]. Furthermore, it appears that her parents' limited education and English proficiency may have contributed to her reluctance to

acquire the language, despite her motivation to pursue her studies stemming from her mother's educational shortcomings.

Marwa completed her university studies without possessing proficiency in the English language. According to her report, due to her major in Urdu and lack of English coursework during her undergraduate studies, she expressed difficulty comprehending basic English conversations. The individual in question experienced a lapse in their English language proficiency acquired during their secondary and high school education. This reinforced the belief that English was not necessary for their academic pursuits.

After completing her academic programme, Marwa found herself without any further obligations. The individual desired more significant opportunities beyond the confines of her societal limitations. She recognised that a potential avenue for advancement was acquiring a scholarship, which necessitated proficiency in the English language. At this juncture, she recognised the significance of developing proficiency in the English language.

> *"Used to hate the English language. I decided I didn't need it. Prior to my enrollment in the scholarship programme, I possessed no knowledge of the English language. I need to learn English if I ever want to leave that culture and pursue further education. I now understand how crucial it is. Therefore, I spent seven months studying a few words of English before applying for the scholarship. It was apparent to me that English was the key to success. You can't go forward without it."*

During her formative years, Marwa did not perceive English as possessing any significant influence or contributing to her cultural prestige. According to some reports, English was not widely embraced by the general populace due to its association with non-believers [154]. Subcontinental students primarily utilised the language solely within academic settings. Despite not yet receiving final approval for the scholarship programme, Marwa recognised the significance and necessity of acquiring proficiency in English. Without delay, she initiated self-directed learning at home.

Regarding linguistic preferences, Marwa was fond of Urdu as her preferred language. The language held a significant value for her beyond being a mere native language, as it pertained to her academic pursuits, including her field of study and significance. Throughout her undergraduate studies, she commenced composing and sharing Urdu prose and poetry on the social media platform Twitter, which held significant personal value for her. The individual discovered herself immersed in the Urdu language. The language in question was the most effective means of expressing her innermost sentiments and affective states. The language in question was the sole linguistic system that she possessed. At a particular juncture, the individual realised that proficiency in Urdu alone would not suffice for a prosperous future. It was deemed necessary to acquire ability in an additional global language. The individual expressed a desire for a language that would enable them to achieve their future aspirations.

(c) Pre-departure expectations

Individuals often experience a combination of nervousness and excitement when embarking on a new experience, particularly when travelling to a foreign country. Such individuals may be apprehensive about encountering unfamiliar cultural norms, linguistic differences, and novel surroundings. The participants were asked to express their pre-departure sentiments and provide insights into how they prepared to

depart from their country of origin and navigate the unknown challenges that awaited them in their new environment.

“You may laugh at me when I tell you this”, Azbah began her response, anticipating a negative response. She wanted me to understand that her primary motivation for flying to the Netherlands to pursue her academic interests was not to be delighted or interested in life or the people. She relied on her spouse to handle the scholarship-related issues. She seemed more tolerant and satisfied with her level of English. She was worried about her hijab since she didn't want to alter how she covered herself.

Ume Hala is exceptionally eager to travel and study abroad; her brother, her guardian, is her strength and weakness. In response to the topic of what a guardian should be like, Ume Hala expressed the following:

> *"Of course, I agree it would be best to have the guardian... It would help if you had support, emotional support, so having a pleasant person around can make things simpler. The Mahram [guardian] is the person she can get along with since they know each other well. You don't want to come here and have to deal with the stress of learning a new language, the focus of trying to get entrance to a university, the pressure of adapting to a new culture, and the stress of having someone who is meant to be there for you add to your burdens.”*

Ume Hala said she is thrilled to see herself transform in the days before her departure. She isn't worried about the language, culture, or social barriers she would encounter on her study abroad trip but about her caretaker duty.

Being apart from her home, family, and friends is the one thing that Fatima finds difficult and upsetting. Fatima had a combination of homesickness and anxiety about leaving her family behind when travelling. Despite her desire to study in the Netherlands, she said that as the time to go approached, she felt that travelling to the country was "a joke, as though it was not going to happen." During our discussion, Fatima discussed her lack of preparation:

> *“Nothing had been prepared. We (Fatima and her friends) just applied to enter the Netherlands. We had no idea the difficulties we would face in our host nation. Me and my friends just applied.”*

She started to feel terrified about leaving her family as the day of her trip drew near, and she lost control of her emotions at the airport. She discussed this incident and said the following:

> *Shock and awed: "Oh, my God! The most difficult part was being separated from my mother, sisters, and other family members. Honestly, I was thinking. Going to the Netherlands seemed like a joke, but as the departure date drew closer, I felt anxious about leaving my family. You also know that I created drama throughout the journey day. As a result, both my mother and I were in tears. It's not easy for me; this is the first time I've ever been away from my mum and siblings.”*

Ramla used to study abroad to reject her role as the perfect Muslim lady and to relaunch her life by taking on a new identity as a global woman with cross-cultural experience. As a place of emancipation, that is. She resolved to live independently of family expectations and according to her values. Her perceptions of this event as "a powerful way of reinventing identity and finding a brighter future" aligned with those of Takahashi's participants. Ramla has the same opportunity to escape her oppressive environment via education abroad as Yoko, Chizuko, and Yuka [155]. This suggests that, like the Japanese ladies, she came to the Netherlands not merely to study but also with a strong desire to "transform her identity." Ramla is

heading there to pursue her master's and PhD with a strong command of English, which makes this situation different. The best result among my participants came from her IELTS exam, which received an overall score of 8.

In conclusion, this trip was not just about earning a degree and learning language and cross-cultural skills; it was also connected to the conventional role of women in the Subcontinent. It was Ramla's first vacation abroad, and she travelled to the Netherlands without her daughter but with her nephew, who served as her mahram. Under Islamic law, male relatives are required to accompany female scholarship recipients.

Billie had to study overseas and get master's and PhD degrees to be employed, much like Azbah and Ramla. Following her employment, she began searching for colleges that offered her major. Only one American institution and several British universities had a master's programme, according to her search. She applied, and the Netherlands responded more quickly, which she liked since their major was more advanced and offered more subfields to specialise in if she chose to continue her studies there. She was not enthusiastic about living in the Netherlands, though:

> *"Nothing remarkable was said to me about the Netherlands. My perspectives shifted when I arrived here. The city is pleasant and suitable for living. Billie planned to study in the Netherlands since she knew she would get an excellent education there. Nothing else mattered to her until she was admitted to one of the top institutions in the Netherlands."*

Being accepted in the Netherlands sped up her departure from her home country since she had always desired to leave the country as soon as possible. She had no worries about her capacity to have a religious or social life since she was happy with her English abilities and ability to handle living there.

Marwa's participation was not contingent on her completing an overseas education programme. She had decided she wanted to further her education. She had just completed her bachelor's degree programme when she decided to apply for the Scholarship Programme. Her plans for the future were unclear, and she worried less about where she was going than how soon she could get out of there. Due to the stress of the days leading up to her travel, all she wanted to do was get away:

> *"People began phoning my parents to tell them I would return pregnant and never get married if the word got out. A few days before I left, when everything was set in stone, my father told me, "I'm not going to stand between you and your future. The rumour mill is already turning over your name, your dignity. As a result, I realized this was a watershed experience for me. It wasn't a breeze, either."*

Under immense pressure from her family, Marwa patiently waited to embark on a new life. She was too preoccupied with getting ready to face her community to do any research on her destination. She first relocated to the United States for language school. And several times when she was there, she was harassed because of how her face looked. After a year, she decided to pursue her master's degree in the Netherlands without researching the country since it held little interest for her. She would have done everything to get her degree:

> *"I was a little concerned about my safety because of what happened to me in the United States; I didn't anticipate multi-culturalism; I was prepared to feel uncomfortable... I was set on getting my degree, and nothing would stand in my way."*

Though she knew that leaving her home country to pursue her future would not be easy, she was sure that whatever hardships she went through would be worthwhile. She realised that leaving society was her only option if she wanted to improve her position and social standing within it. She mainly used English for this purpose.

(d) Cultural shock:

The concept of culture shock refers to the impact that individuals undergo during the process of shifting from a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one. The phenomenon involves the sensation of confusion that emerges from being in an unfamiliar environment, interacting with a multitude of individuals for the initial time, and gaining insight into the traditions and rituals of a foreign country. The study's participants exhibited similar occurrences to language, gender roles, social behaviour, gender-integrated settings, and other related factors. Let us listen to their perspective.

Azbah spoke out about the struggles she had as a young woman. After just a short time in the country, she enrolled in English courses. Three months following the birth of their two toddlers, her husband began his studies and remained at home to care for them. Both of them were under pressure since his relatives back home had always urged him 'to be a man' and go to work on his studies, making sure he didn't let her beat him to the finish line.

Her spouse has made it clear from the beginning that he is not interested in helping with the kids or the household tasks. He felt he had to go to school since he couldn't stand taking care of the kids while she went to school. He was enthusiastic about the prospect of further education overseas, but Azbah had higher expectations, given that she was the scholarship recipient.

> *"Helping out around the home and with the kids doesn't seem incompatible with being a father to me. When I initially arrived, I saw that many dads often took their infants out in public. I grew up with a father who did things like cleaning and helping out around the home while my mother was out with friends or neighbours, which is unusual in our culture. Men in Subcontinent tend to believe that the father should be the head of the household and the provider, while women should take on more domestic chores. Since I married and had a family, I have to care for everything and can't leave the house without my kids. My spouse is not like my father; he is incapable of acting in this manner due to the distinctive cultural norms of the community in which he was raised. This isn't even a problem with their duty as a parent or husbands in Islam; it's just something we need to improve as a community. Islam is a religion of ease, yet women are expected to do too much in the Subcontinent that we are not obligated to perform according to Islamic teachings. The Prophet Muhammed was known to assist out around the home."*

Azbah experienced distress and an inability to manage her recent life changes due to her husband's demeanour. The significance of her education is noteworthy; however, her familial ties hold equal importance. The individual assumed various roles, including those of a mother, a spouse, and a scholar. Azbah has taken an increased number of obligations, and if they are not fulfilled, no alternative party exists to undertake them. This experience caused her to undergo a cultural shock. Azbah experienced a state of perplexity, ambiguity, and powerlessness. The individual's personality traits, limited exposure to the host culture, ineffective assistance, and deficient English proficiency impeded her progress in surmounting this phase expeditiously. Azbah endeavoured to simplify her life by conforming to

conventional gender roles. However, her spouse's dominance extended beyond this as he tried to rear their offspring in a manner consistent with his upbringing.

Like other individuals in the study, Ume Hala is accompanied by a guardian who happens to be her brother. It is worth noting that Ume Hala's brother exerted control over her behaviour beyond the confines of their residence, as he disapproved of her socialising with men.

> *Ume Hala: "My brother strongly prefers limiting my interactions with individuals of the male gender, including but not limited to my supervisor. Up to the present time, from the initial stages, he has consistently rejected the entire concept, resulting in frequent conflicts between us. The individual consistently advises me to exercise caution in accepting prominent roles within Subcontinent, as such positions may entail interactions and communications with male counterparts."*

Question: What is your response to that situation?

> *Ume Hala: "He has my disagreement. I don't engage in sleazy conversations with males. A courteous lady, that's me. Why he thinks that way, I can't fathom! He used to be employed by a firm that welcomed both sexes. I'm helpless, but Allah will surely question him on this."*

Ume Hala couldn't comprehend her brother's attitude towards gender mixing since she felt it was inappropriate from a religious perspective. Because of his prior experience working in an office with both men and women, she knows he does not approach issues from a religious perspective. Ume Hala, like Azbah, challenges the status quo by refusing to accept either a religious or cultural explanation for her brother's behaviour. If he were a devout guy, she could understand and even admire his viewpoint (because she places high importance on religious instruction). Still, the fact that he had engaged in gender-bending activities in his home country made him a source of confusion and further inquiry.

Ramla's "previous social non-existence" was brought to her attention during a formative experience. It happened when the apartment's leasing agent asked her to sign the contract. Like in Subcontinent, she assumed her nephew would sign all the necessary documents on their behalf. It took her a few days and instances to fully grasp the implications of her new status as an adult in the Netherlands. She said that her childhood was "a surprise after a surprise" and that she still had "the Subcontinental mentality" (i.e., was impacted by the legislation requiring a male guardian) when she was an adult.

This demonstrates how, according to the values and worldviews of the culture, which define the significance of persons as social actors at any given time, people occupy distinct social positions in different professions [156]. Ramla's routine changed as a result of his surroundings. This is in line with the findings of a reesearch, who used Bourdieu's theory to shed light on the paradoxes African women encounter when they move between various settings, such as why some women oppose power while others do not [157]. Ramla's situation exemplifies how men and women are socialised to act differently depending on the context (Subcontinent vs the Netherlands, for example). Ramla had culture shock due to the leasing dispute. After returning home, she began to reflect on her past experiences and make comparisons between the legal status of women in the Subcontinent and the Netherlands. She wondered how cultural norms could prohibit the rule of law from being fairly applied. The agent's insistence on her physical presence and using her signature brought to mind a delicate scenario in her own home country.

For Ramla, this was a wake-up call. She was unaware she had the right to be autonomous under the law [158]. Just thinking about it exhausted her from constantly having to accomplish what was required. This is a groundbreaking topic about what it means to have legal rights and obligations, and it is much more than merely signing a piece of paper. Ramla needed a few months to re-create and acclimate to her new culture. She made an effort to incorporate aspects of both cultures into her life. She became aware of the need to appreciate her worth as a woman in a culture that does so. She no longer wanted to be treated as a second-class citizen by her society or as someone who needed male protection. She became more comfortable in her skin as she engaged more fully in the new culture [159]. She had learned the norms of both civilizations and was aware of the differences in status, relationships, and duties. She knows who she is in connection to herself and the environment across time and place.

Billie spent the first six months in her new home, immersing herself in the local culture and learning all she could about it. The first few days of her life were jarring for her:

> *"I was taken aback by the rapport established between educators and pupils. It's straightforward! I found that teachers and students interacted as equals at the English language institute. And here I was thinking it was only the English department. But it was the same when I began my master's degree! I plan on bringing this with me to my own country. My superiority over others is purely chronological. Friends warned me that it wouldn't fly in Subcontinent because they are not prepared culturally."*

She had come from a disciplined school where the interactions between professors and pupils would have been unthinkable. In Sucontinental culture, instructors are held in great regard [160]. They are often equated to "the status of a messenger," with Muslims seeing teachers as personifications of the Prophet, who himself served as a moral and ethical educator. It took her some time to adjust to her new surroundings once she had found herself in an unfamiliar scenario. Billie had waited six months for this sort of contact to cease. She was trying to convince herself that this was all a dream, that once she began her master's degree, everything would return to normal with the titles and great politeness she had become used to.

This formative encounter had a profound effect on her. She didn't feel any anxiety or sadness, but she was nonetheless uneasy and ready for this phase to be over. She had progressed to Stage 5 of the Integration Process in her willingness to adopt Dutch culture and customs and take them back with her when she left [161]. She liked how easy it was to communicate with the instructors and how respectful they were. And despite being told that her culture was not ready for such practices, she was eager to give them a go. Billie's behaviour like this proves she is an anti-authority rebel. The conversational and empathetic aspect of her character is shown. It exemplifies her generosity, modesty, and willingness to provide a hand.

Marwa was resolved to make something of her life and progress towards her goals. Marwa left nothing on the table when she was in the United States. She studied hard and tried various methods to speed through the English course. And she did remarkably, considering she travelled overseas knowing no English. She used to "go in deep discussion about it with non-Muslims and uncovered Muslim girls" while Marwa was covered entirely (niqab and abaya). She also isolated herself from the world outside her Indo-Pak circle of friends. Therefore, she was conforming her lifestyle to that of her own country while in a foreign country. According to her, she believes her culture is the best. She was clearly in the defensive phase, as seen by her lengthy conversation with others and her unfavourable attitude towards the host

culture, which she saw as the "other." She felt the host culture was a threat and worked hard to uphold the ideals of her homeland [162]. Like Azbah, her experience was hampered by the gap in cultural norms between Subcontinent and the United States [163].

In the United States, Marwa was not allowed to be herself. She was automatically labelled as a fundamentalist Muslim or, worse, a terrorist. She was denied the freedom to pray and dress as she pleased. She remembered feeling like a rigid Muslim and hearing advice to relax her rules. Many people had already challenged her about her niqab, but she had refused to remove it. She never once questioned the status quo. While alone, she felt a profound loneliness that she had never experienced around her friends or brother. She had far more trouble and felt less safe since she knew no other Subcontinental friends [163]. She finally decided to remove the niqab since she could do nothing else to halt the harassment. At the time, she didn't like the concept that something as central to her identity as the niqab might also be the source of her shame, her inability to speak out, and her lack of strength. She was experiencing cultural shock since she found wearing the niqab to be an emotionally draining experience.

> *"After some time, I wondered why one would limit their behaviour. Let go and enjoy life. It wasn't a matter of faith but rather a matter of survival. I wore them initially because I felt we were obligated to and had never considered going without them. The absence of it would have been catastrophic."*

She consciously decided to reveal a different aspect of her personality, one that would make it easier for her to express herself freely. She knew the Netherlands was unlike the United States and that she could do religious rites wherever she went, but she still chose not to put on the niqab or abaya. When it comes to the abaya and niqab, Marwa isn't thinking of them as "an affirmation of [her] faith or an act of submission to God", in contrast to many Muslim women throughout the globe [164]. Here, Marwa entered the adaptation phase [165], using her cultural differences to her advantage. To sum up, Marwa was taken aback by the need to abandon and replace an essential part of her identity. Even though she followed it, she was once again taken aback by the realisation that it had never been a part of her but rather the culture in which she found herself. Thus, her time abroad served as a means of entering her identity.

While in the Netherlands, Fatima found it difficult to conform to the standards of behaviour expected of female students in the Subcontinent. Fatima confessed that she had previously taken things at face value, unthinkingly adhering to the preexisting cultural and religious standards of her native country, which, she said, were founded on Islamic teachings.

> *"Being an international student has given me an objective, critical view of my country and its customs. It dawned on me that many long-standing customs are highly regarded in the Islamic faith. A Subcontinental woman, for instance, is subjected to several limitations in the name of Islam, such as being required to wear a veil that completely conceals her face. Women do not need to hide their faces in the Quran or Prophetic tradition."*

Fatima also provided the most eloquent depiction of an individual challenging established cultural conventions. This was her first response upon touching down in the Netherlands.

> *As an outsider, "I heard there was racism in the Netherlands, but once I landed here, I discovered that we are racists, not them. Even though I was not influenced by Dutch culture, I experienced*

culture shock upon arriving there. This was not a result of differences between my culture and my host country. I'm not trying to offend anybody, but I've started losing respect for my heritage. I think it's all an act, and everyone involved is a hypocrite."

Even though Fatima's religious identity and the impact of religion in their cultural environment first coloured her views and reactions to coeducation, she has now become "used to it," and her opinions and responses have changed. She reported a dramatic shift in her formerly timid attitude and behaviour towards males, saying she is now more inclined to join in debates and interact with her male peers.

(e) Linguistic and cultural gains

This topic pertains to exploring the cultural and linguistic benefits that individuals have experienced while residing abroad. The sensitivity surrounding one's language and culture is a significant factor, as it can be challenging for individuals to assimilate and integrate a second language into their cultural identity.

As we said before, Azbah never developed an interest in learning English as a child, and her feelings about the language never changed.

"I had to learn English to communicate with locals and get by in this country since I arrived here and realised that everything is in English."

Her reason for studying English was purely pragmatic. While she acknowledges the value of acquiring a second language, she believes it is primarily of academic significance:

Q: Do you believe that learning a second language is essential? Okay, how about English?

Azbah: Undoubtedly, it holds importance; otherwise, how can one acquire knowledge? The limited availability of Urdu translations necessitates proficiency in additional languages for individuals seeking to broaden their cultural knowledge and engage with various literary works.

Q: Do you incorporate English into your life or try to avoid it?

Azbah: I'm not too fond of it, but I do my best to hold on to what I have. Having lost so much of my native tongue throughout my PhD studies, I try to preserve what little remains.

Q: So, how often do you use English?

Azbah: Occasionally, I use English when communicating with my children to clarify the definition of specific Urdu terms. Typically, we speak Urdu, our native and national language.

Q: How fluent are you in the language?

Azbah: Not now; I had more success with it while earning my master's degree.

Q: Why?

Azbah: Perhaps it's because I used to have so many homework commitments! Working with other students on group projects was a great way to hone my language skills. As I told you before, I rarely use it now except when conversing with my supervisor and my readings, and even then, much of the terminology is academic.

Like Azbah, Fatima avoided using the language until essential, both at home and outside of it, since she was not a people person. She has established herself as a native speaker, developed a strong emotional connection to the language, and hopes that her children will one day speak it as their mother tongue.

She thought her English was fine for school and didn't place much value on being able to speak the language effectively. She made it evident that her inability to communicate in English was the root cause of her discomfort. She dislikes coming out as weak, and her limited command of English prevents her from putting herself in a position of strength.

Q: How about the experience of learning a new tongue? A good use of the English language on your part. How do you feel about it?

Fatima: Nothing, Just fine! Let me tell you something: my English is neither excellent nor terrible.

Q: How do you feel about it now that you can speak and comprehend a second language?

Fatima: Okay, I really couldn't give any attention either way.

After moving to the Netherlands, Ramla's opinion towards the English language has not altered. Given her lifelong admiration for bilingualism and everything it entails:

"It [English] made a lot of things possible for me; it was beneficial. Speaking English well is essential to my career. Moreover, reading and comprehending English has allowed me access to a wealth of resources that would otherwise be out of reach. In my experience, English folks seem to have a particular outlook on life. Their minds aren't closed off. They are learning that language and the culture that goes along with it. Therefore, they tend to have a more fascinating mixed personality than monolinguals. However, some monolingual persons may also prove to be fascinating. Meaningful interactions with others need more than just understanding their language."

Ramla, too, had faith in the efficacy of the English language.

"The English language alone has magical properties. At least for me, it provided me with such incredible abilities in various settings in my homeland and the Netherlands that it's hard to overstate. To illustrate, once upon a time, when my daughter was hospitalised, the physicians were discussing her condition between themselves and paying me no attention. Eventually, one mentioned dialysis, so I stood up and asked, "Does she have kidney failure?" They were all taken aback by the question. After that, he directly inquired whether I was in medical school. They began to fill me in on everything from that point on! They recognised me! Everyone started taking me seriously; I was the boss. When you speak English, people treat you as an equal instead of condescendingly."

Ume Hala did not have the same problems some participants had with her studies or academic writing when she was in the Netherlands. The rare request to "Rewrite, it is more like ideas not writing," she said her supervisor made from time to time, was a source of frustration, however. You have a brainstorming session or anything, and he asks you to re-explain things. She blamed cultural norms and said they influenced her classroom speech and behaviour.

Culture has a role in academic writing disparities, as Hyland noted, and various cultures have various methods of constructing meaning [166]. He also pointed out that different classrooms call for different

approaches, and it's important to consider students' prior knowledge when designing lessons [166]. Ume Hala's writing style was influenced by the characteristics of Urdu argumentation, such as repetition, overemphasis, stylistic elaboration, and stylistic exaggeration, as noted by Barakat and Patai [167, 168].

She was sure that her time spent studying and living in the Netherlands had profoundly affected how she communicated verbally and in writing. She grew intellectually in the Netherlands, consistent with research showing that Subcontinental students studying abroad increase their academic literacy [169]. Her accent is now a hybrid of Dutch and Indo/Pak, and she has picked up slang and idioms from her host culture. Her linguistic abilities as a whole have grown:

> *"It would be better if you lived with the language and used it more. As the saying goes, "Practice makes perfect." And most significantly, being here expanded her theological lexicon: After studying English in the Netherlands, I could more effectively discuss religious matters in the language."*

In Subcontinent, grammar, idioms, etc., take precedence over teaching vocabulary as such. So, going overseas allowed her to gain insight into her culture by actively seeking out and expressing such ideas; she also took advantage of opportunities to learn new phrases from the locals. She stresses the need for a less rigid approach to teaching English grammar. She is advocating for an increase in the time spent teaching English vocabulary to pupils so that they can better articulate who they are and where they come from.

Ume Hala advocates for Subcontinental English and accent, a type of English to convey the individuality of Indo-Pak people. In contrast, most of my participants wished to grasp the dialect of the host culture. Ume Hala's educational experience in the homeland and the Netherlands was positive overall, although she wished she had had more opportunities to practise her English in social settings. She views English as her most vital communication skill and hopes to make more friends by expanding her social circle via the language.

Billie's passion for the English language has grown since she began her studies in the Netherlands. She believed that knowing English was the primary factor in her success:

> *"Being able to communicate in two languages in the Netherlands is a far more significant advantage than it would have been in my home country. Since there aren't many opportunities to use English in my homeland, I don't consider myself exceptionally talented linguistically. However, here, I've had the privilege of attending a top-tier educational institution and researching and reading literature in a second language."*

She did not think of herself as particularly remarkable for being able to speak English, unlike Ramla. If not extensively, English was spoken among her friends, family, and neighbours. Unlike Ramla, she took English for granted rather than treating it as a hobby. But after studying overseas, she saw the potential that English offered:

> *"One who speaks and understands English sets themselves out. Willing to use a variety of tools. Individuals who do not impose restrictions on themselves while engaging in activities such as watching television, reading, studying, or working tend to exhibit higher levels of productivity, self-esteem, and aspirations. You may express yourself freely in English. You have access to tools that will ultimately shape who you are."*

Billie could integrate into her made-up group because of her proficiency in two languages. She wanted to become a researcher and network with other professionals in her home country. Billie is more relaxed while speaking English. She tried to connect with other scholars in her profession, marking the beginning of an emotional investment in her made-up community. She saw the possibility of working with her coworkers in the future and was motivated to make it happen. As we shall see in the following chapters, she is persistent and patient. The fact that she is now in the Netherlands and can communicate well in English is a significant step towards connecting with the community she has created in her mind, which, as Pavlenko explains, will encourage her to make conscious efforts beyond language to alter her immediate environment and bring about the changes she seeks [170]. As a result, her host nation turned English into something more than simply a language: it became a means to a better future and a better her. In addition, it gave her confidence:

> *"I couldn't be here if I didn't know the language. Because I am more fluent in the language, I am the de facto head of the household. I do everything from reading contracts to leading conversations to assisting my husband with his studies as he cares for our newborn."*

She took the reins as the de facto leader of the household because of her superior command of the English language. Ramla found similar opportunities for advancement in her new sector. With English as her capital, her position in the new field increased, altering the existing balance of power [171]. Learning English gave her more options, but she still considered Urdu her mother language.

> *"My kid and I speak only Urdu together; I just began doing so lately. I'd want her to learn two languages."*

Here, Billie recognises that her ability to speak two languages, not only English, gives her the upper hand. Since language is not just a voice but also a culture [172], she hoped that her daughter could communicate in both English and two other languages.

Marwa did not study English in school and did not have a positive attitude towards it until she opted to attend university in a different country. She wanted a future and a career. Therefore that was her primary reason for studying English. She put her all into studying English since she knew it would help her succeed. She was so dedicated to learning English that she could complete the programme in a year and get an IELTS score of 6.5. This enabled her to enrol in the Dutch master's programme. However, she knew she still needed to work on her English proficiency. She felt that getting her master's and doctorate in academia had benefited her language skills:

> *"I used to feel embarrassed and uncomfortable about making errors in English, but after beginning my master's and doctoral studies, I thought I was more confident with the language."*

She recognised that she was in the situation of a second-language student and must work to improve, making errors along the way. She attributes her self-assurance partly to her ability to converse freely and openly with native speakers.

> *"Speaking with the Dutch is far more enjoyable than conversing with Indo-Pak people because of how critical Subcontinental people can be. Your accent is the only criterion by which they (Indo-Pak people) evaluate your linguistic abilities. They fail to recognise the significance of language as a medium of exchange."*

Marwa realised that studying English would improve her prospects of finding stable employment. She also grasped its significance for facilitating mutual understanding across cultural divides, expanding one's horizons, and surfing the web. Therefore, not only is it useful, but it's also fun and entertaining to have. Despite English's rising status, she never stopped speaking her language.

> *"I don't want to say that English is better than Urdu, but English is the language of this world and this generation. Even in a monolingual nation, the ability to speak English opened up doors to new ideas, cultures, and information. Doctorates have been earned in both Urdu and English in my department. People who have done this in Urdu have found it difficult to publish their work or to communicate with pupils from other countries. Whenever pupils from other countries are in their class, they ask for interpreters. Needing others to translate papers for you so you can keep up with professional developments is a sign of weakness. Thus, you are not superior with language, but you may extend your horizons."*

Cross-cultural contact in Subcontinent mostly takes place in English. The fact that English is spoken worldwide—including Subcontinent—makes it unique as a lingua franca [173]. Marwa's understanding of the English language expanded. Its usefulness led to more agency and a new outlook:

> *"Knowing English has given me confidence and allowed me to interact with people all around the globe. I'm not talking about faith in one's character here; rather, I'm referring to the power of words and the confidence that comes from using them. I learned this in English. My address to the graduating class was the first public speech I had ever given, and I spoke pretty loudly."*

(f) Social isolation

The experience of loneliness can exert significant effects on both our psychological and physiological well-being. Relocating to a different country can elicit a range of emotional responses or stages, including but not limited to enthusiasm, dissatisfaction, adaptation, and self-assurance. This study aims to examine the content of emotional experiences that participants encounter during their overseas sojourns and the strategies they employ to manage and mitigate these effects, such as cultivating relationships with individuals from the host culture.

I asked Azbah whether she was interested in making more Dutch friends, and she gave me an unexpectedly positive answer. She had no desire to broaden her social horizons and was content with her connections inside the Subcontinental group. She preferred similar people to those who were different from herself. Even in school, where local and international students have ample opportunity to mix and mingle. In Azbah's mind, she was not academically connected to any other pupils. Azbah has made it apparent that she does not want to develop friendships with native English speakers, stating that she would only do so "if something happened to her or if she has something useful to say." If she has trouble expressing herself verbally, she may try to save her little time at school. This was her general demeanour towards anybody who would discuss it with her.

Fatima, like Azbah, had limited opportunities to use English, but she showed little inclination to do so. When a coworker expressed curiosity about her background, she may have used the opportunity to provide information about her culture and practise her language skills. Different things set off Fatima's reactions to him and other people. Consider her view on socialising generally: "I just don't like it." That "he is a man" is her theological justification for opposing intersex relationships. Her family also put a lot

of pressure on her to avoid guys. She concluded by describing herself as bashful. It's possible that her lack of time or self-assurance in English led her to avoid striking up discussions with the ladies around her. She kept all talks brief, even with women, which may have been owing to language barriers or her limited time, studies, religion, shyness, or family pressure. She may be making up some of these justifications as she goes along. Like Duff's kids, Fatima kept quiet to avoid being embarrassed by her peers because of her cultural and language barriers [174].

As a newbie to the Netherlands, Ramla was aware of her situation. She took on the role of a foreigner and responded by maintaining only the most superficial relationships with local students at her university. She desired a more committed connection with them but never pursued it because she figured they would be against it. Perhaps this is because of her cultural upbringing since Ranta and Meckelborg contend that students' upbringing might have a chilling effect on their confidence in starting conversations [175]. For one, Ramla anticipated the Subcontinental's famous hospitality [176]. By taking on the role of the stranger, she forced her hosts to take the initiative in developing a friendship with her. She anticipated warm greetings and generous aid because of her country's heritage [177, 178]. Not being hospitable may hurt your reputation and social standing [179]. Because social conditions in the subcontinent are nebulous, complicated, and context-dependent, Ramla could not develop a workable solution. She tried to talk to her neighbours, but when she didn't get a positive reaction, she shut down and stopped trying to make new friends.

Ramla realised that there are few opportunities for meaningful connections in the Netherlands. She can't have the kind of friendship or neighbourhood she's always wanted. She identifies only with the role of student since it is the one in which she excels. Like the Chinese students in Gao, she employed English as a tool in her quest for further education and professional advancement [180]. This notion was driven home repeatedly during the interview when she said, "My life in the Netherlands is nothing extraordinary; it is completely academically focused," despite her wishes for more adventure and excitement.

Like the dark-haired Chinese ESL students in Miller's study, Ramla felt she was singled out for prejudice because of her nationality [181]. She did not record any instances of racism, but she does think that people were extra courteous to her because of anti-vilification legislation.

However, Ume Hala stands out as one of the few interviewees who appears to have taken a more laid-back approach to the topic of gender fluidity:

> *"I arrived from Subcontinent, where gender roles are strictly enforced, and realised that Westerns lack a cultural norm of interacting with those of the other gender. It was challenging since you couldn't tell what was acceptable and what wasn't."*

Coming to the Netherlands has allowed Ume Hala to disobey the gender stereotypes she was taught to fight. She had previously been unaware of the effects of gender segregation on herself and other Subcontinental women until she moved to the Netherlands. She understood that owing to inexperience, they had no idea how to approach men:

> *"To fit in with the local culture, you must first understand how men and women are expected to interact with one another. As a result, it was difficult."*

Recognising her inexperience, she began to study the Dutch, hoping to learn from their behaviour how to connect appropriately with men. However, she could still communicate with guys in the Netherlands despite her little exposure to males in the past.

> *"I'm not young, and I'm dealing with guys who are younger than I am, so I don't feel very confident. The males here are much nicer than in Subcontinent, where each conversation with a man always ends with the question, "What is your phone number?" Their views on women are very different."*

Ume Hala did not shy away from interacting with males and instead persisted in attempting to understand them. She was assisted in her quest to meet people of the other sex by two factors: first, her age. The fact that she was older than most of the guys in her immediate vicinity gave her the confidence and independence to approach them and seek out connections. It's worth noting that Muslim women of a certain age may abandon the hijab if they aren't actively pursuing a partner or marriage [182]. This comforted her since Ume Hala was not engaging in these interactions to form such a connection. The second thing that pushed her to pursue relationships with Dutch men was the high degree of civility and respect she received from them.

> *“After hearing the first complaints about Subcontinental males in the Netherlands, such as "They stare! Don't let them in here! I have dealt with several of them. Therefore I have no qualms about striking up a conversation with them. But if I were to engage them in conversation, it would be just theoretical. That is, I won't refer to them as my buddies.”*

According to Ume Hala, Subcontinent's cultural norms shape how males see women. Their Indo-Pak attitude is evident even in the Netherlands. As a result, she avoids developing any personal ties with Subcontinental people. She risks losing respect in the Subcontinental community if she is seen as having pals of the other gender. She was guarding her heart. As before, she disagreed with Azbah and saw her relationship with males as more of a cultural obligation than a religious one. Nonetheless, she saw it as her religious responsibility to guard her reputation, which motivated her ired.

Billie, like Ramla, had little trouble adapting to life in the Netherlands intellectually, but she struggled to make friends among the locals. She, unlike Ramla, persisted in looking for a solution, nevertheless. She originally went by "Billie," a Westernised form of her given name ", Balqees." This allowed her to conceal her native Subcontinental identity and adopt a new, more global one. Though she assumed it while working in a homeland hospital, the concept of a Westernised name did not originate in the Netherlands. She similarly named her spouse "Abraham" rather than "Ibraheem." Having a more Westernised name was a strategy for fitting in socially and for self-defence.

To return to school for her doctorate, Billie also stopped wearing the hijab. While working on her master's degree, she wore it for over three years. Like her choice to change her name, the motivation for its removal was a desire to blend in with the populace and avoid harassment:

> *Billie said, "Hijab was an obstacle and a source of hurt and torture! I took it off because I refused to be mistreated. People in the Netherlands reacted differently to me while I was wearing the hijab than they do today. Whether or not it's true, I get the impression that people no longer look at me when I enter a room where they formerly did. My identity as an Indo-Pak and a Muslim has rendered any more gossip about me impossible. People seem friendlier and more approachable to me now, and I find myself more easily able to connect with them.”*

Q: Did anybody comment on how they see you now that you're not wearing a hijab?

> *Billie: I did question a couple of folks I knew from earlier since I didn't want to assume that I was alone thinking this way. According to what they mentioned, they now feel more connected to you. They were shocked since it was the first time they'd seen me without my hijab.*

Billie was a brown-skinned Muslima who wore a Western name and didn't wear a headscarf. Her sense of global citizenship has always been significant to who she is. As a child, she struggled mightily against the societal conventions of the Subcontinent since she felt so out of place there. She met people from all over the world and soon found herself living in a global community. She is committed to developing this aspect of her character. She elaborates on the possible causes of her peculiar feelings:

> *"I'm far more self-assured and capable with Subcontinental people than I am around the Dutch. Even though I am fluent in English, I am most at ease when interacting with my culture people. You sound more articulate while speaking Urdu. I find it easier to communicate with them, but I have more in common intellectually with the Dutch."*

Billie felt more comfortable interacting with Subcontinental males in the Netherlands after working at a hospital, a mixed-gender job in Subcontinent. She would be cautious with impolite males, taking the time to assess their character before responding appropriately. Here, Billie summed up the conventional understanding of women's roles in Subcontinental culture:

> *"Although it is a worldview that has nothing to do with Islamic teachings, the concept is that males are responsible for working outside while women assume the role inside the home. This conventional perspective produced the male-dominated culture in Subcontinent, even though women now work outside as teachers and in mixed-gender medical professions. There, males still hold positions of authority and control. Women's presence in mixed-gender workplaces is seen as abnormal or unique, as seen by Billie's use of the words "intense, couldn't talk, felt strange, doing something wrong" to describe her experience."*

Marwa's social life outside of university in the Netherlands was restricted to the Subcontinental community for various reasons, including the language barrier. She improved her English and was more open to new friendships and relationships after moving to the Netherlands because of her desire to alter her outward look. She had always dreamed of studying in another country.

Q: Do you hang out and make acquaintances with Dutch people?

> *Marwa: By the conclusion of my master's programme, I had made three close friends from other countries, and my connection with them was even more potent than my friendships with the Subcontinental females. It took me a while to figure out how to become friends with them, but after I returned to do my PhD, we reconnected, started seeing each other again, and are now frequent visitors who have even met each other's spouses.*

Like Billie and Ramla, Marwa was concentrating on her schoolwork but also had an open mind about making friends who spoke English. Her arrival in the Netherlands marked the beginning of her education in making first contact. She also discovered that speaking Dutch made her feel completely comfortable in her skin, regardless of how she presented herself. She says she does feel at home there. Nothing held back, no need to pose as someone else:

Q: Do you alter your behaviour with Indo-Pak and Duch people?

> *Marwa: I must be cautious and monitor what I say among Subcontinental persons. Most of my Subcontinental acquaintances are conservative and complex; they believe the current situation is transitory. Thus they seldom entertain new views. I don't feel comfortable being honest with them; therefore, I don't. But whatever I say in front of Dutch folks, it's never a huge problem. I have no qualms about being completely open about my spouse and love story.*

During our conversation on socialisation in the Netherlands, we touched on a critical topic for Marwa: the impact of Subcontinental culture on her social life, particularly her interactions with males.

> *"Even though I consider myself a tolerant, well-informed, and wiser person because of my time here, I still believe that Subcontinental culture profoundly influences my interactions with males. Even as a woman, I'm influenced by these norms; I've been taught to keep my voice low and quiet among males, and it's rude to interrupt them while they speak. Each time I have a conversation with a human being. I'm always awkward with new people because, deep down, I still have some anxiety."*

Marwa alludes to the 'ideal Muslim female' ideals she was taught to uphold as part of her upbringing. Women are expected to be quiet and submissive while males are around. She claims to have grown and moved over it, but her admission of dread in her voice suggests otherwise. But she does her best to overcome her apprehension by attending seminars and panels where both sexes are represented. She feels more equipped for the future after engaging in conversation with guys. She went even further by becoming a volunteer with a Subcontinental organisation in the Netherlands, where she works side-by-side with Subcontinental males to plan events and prepare for Subcontinental holidays. Marwa envisioned her future and set out to make it a reality by facing her fears and taking the necessary risks. She did not accept her reticence and timidity as inherent parts of her personality, as Azbah did, but rather as cultural influences she was working hard to overcome.

Marwa shared Azbah's aversion to heterosexual couples. She eventually realised it was possible within reasonable limits and that integrating the sexes may be mutually beneficial. She is not blindly adopting Western practices but evaluating them for their potential to improve her culture.

> *"When I initially came, speaking with a male, Subcontinental or otherwise, was completely foreign. Fearful that I was doing anything wrong, I eventually learned that sometimes you must talk to a guy to get what you need. He might be a professor, a manager, or a trainee. We cooperate in the classroom; we support one another without going overboard."*

(g) Personal growth

Through cultural immersion and learning from native individuals, individuals can expand their perspectives and develop a more nuanced understanding of various experiences. This can lead to enhanced self-confidence, linguistic proficiency, increased tolerance for ambiguity in the face of social and cultural differences, and a greater appreciation for religious diversity. The participants will provide insights on how studying abroad fosters a knowledgeable outlook and a broader understanding of diverse cultures and individuals.

Azbah's replies often demonstrated her stubbornness and unyielding personality. She was dead set on impressing onto me her unwavering sense of identity:

> *"The old me is still here. It's been six years, yet I'm still the same Azbah. People tell me that even though they anticipated me to be different, I have stayed the same when I visit for the holidays."*

As was previously said, her extended family and friends opposed the notion of SA. Therefore, she could not accept change and had to battle it to demonstrate her strength and devotion to Islam. In reality, she was critiquing the transformation of the Subcontinental population during the last several years:

> *"Look, I generally observe how people have evolved religiously in Subcontinental culture. High school and college students nowadays are the worst. They don't have the "I'm religious, so I must be strict!" attitude. They don't get any religious vibes from it at all! They're not my type at all. They have their hands complete with socialising and watching television. I wasn't always that way; my friends and I used to hang out with our neighbours, but back then, we had different hobbies than young women have now."*

Being in the Netherlands, apart from Indo-Pak culture, has reinforced her views on the value of education and the significance of providing her children with the finest chances. Her opinions on gender roles have shifted due to her time in the Netherlands, and the topic has become so personal to her that she shared them with her father-in-law, something she never imagined she'd do before.

Q: Do you embrace the norms of society regarding gender roles?

> *Azbah: No, I don't feel that way. I told you previously that collaboration is beautiful in any relationship, and I still think so. You don't make one person shoulder the burden of the household alone. The woman is expected to shoulder all household duties. We aren't usually the ones that handle it, and it's not required of us (according to Islam).*

Q: Do you advocate for this kind of thing? When do you run across situations like that?

> *Azbah: The in-laws have been driving me nuts, so I finally exploded lately, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. My father-in-law and I had a heated discussion over this; I told him, in essence, that you force women to do things that aren't their responsibility and disregard their rights. Until he was utterly at a loss for words, I continued to fight and discuss.*

Q: How is your husband doing? What did he say, exactly?

> *Azbah: In the unlikely event that he was there, Azbah would have been speechless.*

Fatima seems to have conflicting views on what it means to uphold gender norms. She has previously declared that she does not believe in gender equality. Still, her outspoken rejection of the conventional Subcontinental gender norms here demonstrates a degree of fundamental questioning that may have been prompted by being in such a strict and traditional setting. She did not feel connected to them and actively sought a separation. Again, this reflects her religious character: she yearned to be above them.

She began to provide more personal details about herself as the session progressed. She claims to have grown up, shifted her focus, and become less tolerant of other people's superficiality.

Q: Have your impressions of Western countries altered since your time in the Netherlands?

> *Fatima: I don't blame my nation per such; instead, I look at its citizens and find plenty to fault with them. My perspective has shifted due to my time in my homeland; I no longer place the same value on the same things as before. They set a premium on superficial things that I find meaningless. I now value education and learning experiences above sightseeing and eating at fancy restaurants. This was a significant expenditure category for them.*

Ramla travelled to the Netherlands in search of an inner transformation. In her delight, she described how she now feels "more accepting of people and less judgmental" due to her newfound power and autonomy. The experience of living in a multicultural nation and interacting with individuals of many ethnicities and faiths would have a profound effect on a person who had grown up in a country with a single dominant culture [183]. Ramla had developed an openness to other cultures [183]:

> *"When I return home, I fit in immediately; I refrain from criticism. I always go back without loathing anything, accepting them as is; I never say (you still do this or that) no. I'm no longer who I used to be, yet my country is still my beloved home."*

She developed the ability to accept others without conditions. She realises that other people's views on life will differ from hers since they lack her own experiences. She is attempting to bridge the gap by embracing it since it is her country's culture, and she is a part of it. Her tolerance does not extend to condoning their behaviour, and her evaluations are not based on bias towards other cultures. She's starting to show interest in, and even respect for, their unique culture [183]. Ramla said many times throughout the interview that she does not find boasting attractive. She avoids publicly demonstrating her beliefs: "I don't show that I have changed. I go out and have fun as there is no need to show that I know better and smarter." To her, critiquing is just another kind of egotism.

Billie left her homeland for the Netherlands for perfect personal space and independence from her conservative family. Even before moving to the Netherlands, she sensed that she differed from other Subcontinental persons.

> *"I always have a new experience when I travel to my home country on vacation. I see a change in myself whenever I let go of a family member. When you return home to find that everyone still believes the same beliefs you left behind, on the other hand, you can't help but form a new perspective. And if you ask my family, they will tell you she has changed and no longer appreciates us. However, I did not intend to alter myself; we now have no common ground. Despite being of the same age, I exhibit a greater degree of mental stability compared to my counterpart. The fairness of such a statement is questionable, however, it is my personal perception that I have undergone a process of maturation while they have not. One of them earned her master's in Canada, so it may be education that pulls us together, and the other one spent most of her life in the United States, so we think similarly, but now I only like two of them. People tend to talk a lot between themselves. I tend to voice my ideas emphatically."*

Billie does not feel at home in her home country, unlike Azbah and Ramla. This disconnection only worsens with each return visit, which makes sense given that she never really felt at home there. She's realising that she's not like the rest of society, and she's giving up on dealing with older people and the narrow-minded because of it.

"The opinions of others formerly mattered to me, but not anymore. But now it makes no difference at all! Particularly the elderly members of my family! Then suddenly, I felt the weight lift off my shoulders."

She is not just slamming women of her grandparents' generation for holding such views, but also females her age. Those with advanced degrees or international experience are the only people she genuinely connects to because she can relate to people and find something in common to discuss.

Ume Hala is becoming more apart as a result of her divergent interests and styles of thinking and doing brought on by SA. Ume Hala began making sweeping generalizations about society and culture, as well as the individuals in it:

"For a long time, Subcontinental expectations of women's roles puzzled me. I often pondered the need for this or that practice when I was younger. I used to despise how society condemned women for the same shortcomings as men. Before, I would have agreed. Before coming abroad, I used to believe in the "must-have kids" myth, but now I know that anybody can become whatever they want. They may tie the knot without starting a family if they so want. Since they know their parental shortcomings, they have chosen not to have a family. Because of our background, I've never been exposed to this way of thinking."

Ume Hala's biggest gripe is the sheltered existence society has imposed on her, in which she is denied fundamental freedoms like deciding whether or not to have a family. Coming here opened her eyes to the obvious truth that everyone should be allowed to make life decisions.

Marwa applied for a scholarship and left her home country to pursue further education and a more isolated lifestyle. She was prepared to give it her all to achieve her goals. However, she failed to account for any potential inner shifts from this encounter. She didn't actively try to alter her personality as the other participants did, nor did she do anything to fight alteration actively. However, the experience of studying abroad changed her significantly:

"Before, I was a gloomy guy. I used to feel helpless and evaluated by the people around me in my culture. When I was younger, I thought my life was terrible. I used to be a pessimist; even after receiving the scholarship, I still had doubts about my future and was afraid it would be different from my sisters. I used to worry that I would never be able to marry the person I love, that my field of study would never lead to gainful employment, and that my hometown would reject me upon my return. My early successes and master's degree grades suffered due to persistent pessimism. My outlook on life has shifted dramatically due to my three years of living here; if anything awful happens, I tell myself that something good will come out of it, which has significantly impacted my success. My future won't be like my sisters', and that's okay with me. My newfound optimism has opened up a world of possibilities."

No one else in the study was as hopeless as Marwa. She had no idea what was happening, and whereas her peers had the backing of at least one parent, Marwa had just her younger sister for company. She thought she was merely going to college until she decided to pursue the light at the end of the tunnel. Her renewed hope encouraged her to take risks and put in more effort to improve her future. She applied to many institutions in her homeland when she was in the Netherlands for her master's degree and was eventually hired as a teaching assistant at one of them.

She was also uninterested in an arranged marriage or waiting for a guy to make the first move. After completing her master's degree, she returned to her country and contacted a guy she loved, beginning a mutually respectful relationship with him. Since "after all, it is my life, and I wanted to make sure I did the right thing and married the right person," she contacted him and arranged a meeting without consulting her family. Marwa considered herself competent and deserving of the right to choose her path in life. Marwa grew in power and autonomy as well. She makes no secret of her goals and plans for the future and clarifies that she is committed to achieving them.

> *"I tell my husband all the time, 'I love you so much, and I can't picture my life without you, but if you attempt to come between me and my future, whether it be a job or anything else, I will leave you.' and he became somewhat depressed; nevertheless, I have worked hard, endured pain, and kept track of both days and nights to get to this point, and I am not going to give any of it up for anybody, not even him."*

Although Azbah expressed a similar sentiment to her husband, she was somewhat frightened by the prospect. However, Marwa is taking a stand in this case. She puts her identity as Marwa first and her role as a wife second since she values herself more.

Even after getting married, Marwa would defend her father's treatment of her mother, saying, "I would always tell her in front of him 'why would you accept that treatment from him, or he doesn't have the right to treat you that way or take your money' and my brother always gets mad, but I don't care, I have to speak up."

Marwa found her voice and established her distinct character. She is not shy about voicing her opinion or offering scathing criticism, even when it comes to members of her own family. She could no longer adhere to the rigid gender norms of her home culture.

(h) Understanding of religion and religious identity: Religion is always the drive

Religious concepts, institutions, artwork, regulations, and dedications have significantly influenced the history of Muslims worldwide. Religion has the potential to provide individuals with solace and direction. It can serve as a foundation for ethical convictions and conduct. Moreover, it can foster a feeling of communal belonging and establish a link to cultural heritage. The selected topic explores how individuals perceive their religious identity and how it transforms during their vacation in foreign lands.

Fatima's religious beliefs affected her interactions with the Dutch culture. A religious yardstick was used to evaluate everything. As we've already established, the headscarf, a religious practice, was the only thing on her mind when she moved to the Netherlands. Because of her headscarf, she anticipated harassment, which may explain why she was always so defensive [183]. This may also explain why she seldom interacts with Dutch and spends so little time outside the home. In Fatima's mind, the Dutch and their ways of thinking were inherently wrong even before SA. She was in the defensive phase because she feared the non-Muslim culture and how it differed from her own [183]. But as she continued to describe how everyone treated her with respect due to her headscarf, her concerns gradually subsided, and it became evident that she did not have any animosity towards Dutch culture.

Fatima continued to shun them because she saw them as strange and had no idea how they would react to her or her culture. She evaluated the kindness shown to her based on her religious beliefs and concluded, "It is nice that they respect my hijab." It was her best attempt at justifying their admiration.

According to Fatima, her religious beliefs and wearing the headscarf made her culture the only one that mattered [183]. Cole and Ahmadi's request for research on the experience of veiled women and how their veil impacts their experience abroad in a non-Islamic country is well shown by Fatima's case [184]. In this case, Fatima's veil served as a filter for her perceptions.

Fatima attempted to reconnect with her heritage by engaging in activities she had enjoyed, such as reading the Quran or other Islamic scriptures or watching television. Still, she found that these activities no longer appealed to her. Despite having lived in the Netherlands for many years, she had the 'cultural superiority' view that her culture is the best [183]. As a result of her unfavourable preconceptions about the host culture and her stance of religious defensiveness, she was in the "other" stage of the religion-defence process.

While in the Netherlands, Azbah felt that she could grow spiritually and transform her religious identity "not in a bad way; on the contrary, I have become religiously mature." She discussed how her isolation from her family and friends allowed her to devote more time to researching religion online. She also felt that her time in the Netherlands profoundly impacted her outlook on life and, most significantly, on questions of faith. She explained her process of looking for answers outside of the religious text. But when we spoke more about it, she said:

> *"When people start questioning my faith during a conversation, I don't do that!" I don't analyse or reevaluate my beliefs on religious subjects since I take them for granted. To put it simply, I don't delve very far. I accept this without question. It's like saying, "1+1=2."*

Like Fatima, Azbah said that if a fatwa has been made on a religious topic like the hijab, gender-bending, male guardians, etc., she will not dispute it. When she spoke to "searching and analysing," she referred to a quest for the deeper spiritual meaning hidden within religious teachings. She decided to do additional research and read on improving her Muslim practice. Once the fatwa is issued, however, she has no recourse. She also discussed how the culture of the Netherlands had an impact on her sense of spirituality:

> *"Look, being in a workplace with people of different genders has had a negative impact on me! It's unfortunate because I'm less reserved and modest here, and you know (modesty is a kind of religion). In addition, I have challenges every day. I feel like I've slacked off practising in the Netherlands." As a result of being exposed to people of both sexes, she no longer identifies as a devout Muslim but rather as someone less introverted. This makes her even more confident that the fatwas against intersex are justified in their stances. Azbah's religious identity was impacted by the secular influences of her time in her homeland and the more conservative values of her adopted home in the Netherlands. This, like Fatima's, reflects her religious leadership and prominence.*

For Azbah, Islamic feminism is seizing what Islam has given women and reclaiming it, regardless of how it has been interpreted or shaped by culture or tradition. She thinks it's essential to uphold Subcontinental traditions and customs since they've helped advance the status of women in the country. She defended the treatment of women in the Subcontinent, saying that the country's strict rules and regulations are in place for their welfare. She went on to say how they were treated like men and how much worse it was for women in the Netherlands and the West. She boasted about how her husband always foots the bill when they eat, although everyone is expected to chip in in the Netherlands. It was obvious that having

him in control boosted her sense of femininity. She further said that women are discouraged from working on construction sites as in the Subcontinent.

Ume Hala discovered faith in Allah, apart from the scrutiny of society. She had an intuitive grasp of their connection and could communicate with him uniquely. She is a dedicated individual who has seen religion not as a chore but as a spiritual need. It's not what other people think you should do to become closer to Allah but what you wish to do. And she stresses the importance of personal agency and the right to choose when it comes to matters of faith. By doing so, she challenges a fundamental tenet of Subcontinental culture. For her, faith is the most essential part of her religion. She is still working on her performance, but it has evolved into more of an inward state. She is freeing her spirit from the constraints of conventional religious practice to find her spiritual voice.

Her independence and capacity for critical thought were expanded during her time in the Netherlands, making her more open to religious doubt and inquiry.

> *“The Quran has a different effect on me. Ahead of this, I just felt obligated. These are Allah's Words; therefore, read them and ask yourself, "Do you not then reflect?" Thank Allah, I now understand the significance of these words after thinking they all had to do with the hereafter. The Quran is about creation, and when I pass down the street, I think, "Do not they look at camels, how they are created?" Reflection.”*

She discusses the similarities and differences between the religious cultures of her homeland and the Netherlands. Her time in the Netherlands opened her eyes to new perspectives on faith and religion. Ume Hala agrees with Ramla that transitioning from a mostly one culture to a more diverse culture has broadened her worldview.

> *"Before I left my country, I was confident that every one of those Christians, Jews, and Buddhists was destined for the fires of Hell! And no one else is going to Heaven save Muslims. But when you look around and see people praying, singing hymns, and praising a higher power, you can't help but conclude that such things are beyond our comprehension. This is not how we're meant to think! No assurances can be made. We should focus on developing ourselves and letting God care for others.”*

She has extended her religious horizons by challenging her assumptions about different faiths. She has never encountered a Christian, Jew, or Buddhist in her homeland, and she is sure Islam is the only true religion. Being in the Netherlands allowed her to see and appreciate how individuals of many faiths and backgrounds spoke about and interacted with God. After that, she stopped making snap judgements about individuals and started thinking about how to improve herself.

She came to this conclusion and advocated for others to reconsider the oppression of Muslim women in the same way:

> *“I don't believe that all Muslim women are oppressed similarly. Specific oppression exists, and some laws repressed women, but this is an oversimplification. We both know that is not the case, as do many other women. Women's lack of abaya-wearing has no bearing on the oppression of others across the globe. Women in Russia are treated as nothing more than white enslaved people and sex slaves, and no one seems to mind.”*

Ramla saw the Islamic norms of the Subcontinent as a barrier that prevented her from achieving her goals. This might be because her mother saw the English-speaking world as a threat, even if she saw it as a potential for growth. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that traditional society banned and condemned a lot of activities in the name of religion:

> *"In light of my company, I have concluded that I am not religious. Nonetheless, I regularly pray, observe the fast during Ramadan, and study the Quran. I act per what I think Allah desires from me. Before coming here, I didn't consider myself to be very religious. However, in light of what I've seen, I realise I'm a devout Muslim. The shift is dramatic. I'm pleased to call myself a Muslim. I am. I still am what I once was. Now that I know I wasn't coerced into moving here, I am satisfied that I'm still the same person. Simply having that sensation is gratifying. When I moved here from Subcontinent, I could remove my headscarf but chose not to. I was thus free from coercion. Those sensations aided in the development of my sense of self. The way I pray, behave, and don't shake hands with guys—these are all things I'd want to alter, and I know I'm capable of doing so. I am the sum of these characteristics."*

Ramla's cultural understanding of religion and her sense of religious self has evolved. In the Netherlands, she is no longer seen as "a bad Muslim" by the general public. The context is everything. She struggles with her religious identity since it is fluid and ever-changing, like every other part of her identity [185]. She had opinions that went against the grain of Subcontinental Islamic society, but when that culture shifted, she felt encouraged to act on her convictions.

The removal of her abaya and the facial covering indicates this shift in her culture's norms of attire. "my hijab now became a lifestyle. I don't wear it as a religious practice," she says, but she continues to cover her hair and shoulders. Her prior self-perception and set of values persist [186]. Even if she has accepted her new religious culture and begun questioning and rejecting her old one, her former religious identity remains strong. It is expressed in her previous way of life [187]. She still carried with her the perspective and identity shaped by her family, friends, and culture of her youth [188].

Billie had a rich cultural and religious experience in the Netherlands, thanks to the diversity of the individuals she encountered. However, she does not really like discussions about religion:

> *"I find religious debates and conversations boring. This is a delicate subject, and it causes me worry whenever it is brought up in conversation."*

Billie was on the lookout for serenity inside. She avoided anything that would cause her emotional discomfort. She was unwilling to defend herself or start an argument. She removed her hijab to better integrate into her new community. She prioritised fitting in with her new community above maintaining her Muslim identity. Hijab impeded her pursuit of tranquilly and was a source of potential damage. She had an innate understanding that Islam does not advocate killing innocent people.

> *"Hijab is fundamental in Islam, but I have an opinion on it which made it simpler for me to remove it; if it is going to cause a problem, remove it. However, the abaya is more of a cultural than a religious symbol. The option to wear them or not must be left open. It's OK if people want to wear them, and it's fine if they don't. We have to accept things and learn to coexist with others."*

Billie's few comments revealed deep thought and analysis about her faith. "Islam is all about making it easy and not difficult," she realised. She agrees with Ramla that the abaya is more of a cultural than a

religious symbol, but she still views the hijab as a necessary part of Islamic practice. Her choice to stop wearing the hijab was discussed with her spouse.

> *"My husband said, "It's up to you," but my mom was unhappy, and I didn't even bother to ask her. I called her and said that I was concerned for my well-being. She complained, "What if this person sees you?" but I couldn't care less about other people's thoughts. I formerly cared about other people's thoughts, but now I don't. I would have listened to her advice if I still had to share a house with my mother. And that includes my hubby; quiet is essential to me."*

Billie had a strong bias towards preachers from an early age; she disagreed with them and their message. Thus she didn't respect their religious authority. On the other hand, she had a great deal of regard for religious academics who thoroughly understood their subject. Preachers who try to scare their congregations into following them have her complete opposition. And despite her admiration for experts, she sought out novel perspectives: "I once read the translated version of the Quran." It was a sight to see. She was especially considering this Heaven description and, upon discovering it in English, thought, "Oh, wow, so nice" If I were to read the whole Quran in English, I suspect my understanding of it would change drastically.

She fears being confused and struggling if she delves too deeply into her religious identity, even though she recognises its centrality to who she is. Therefore, she accepts some probing as a means of maintaining her silence. It was challenging to question Hadith's narration on one's own, mainly if one had been taught from a young age to accept such texts at face value and seek clarification from experts rather than relying on one's assumptions. Her critical thinking prompted her to oppose some norms of the time:

> *"My opinions on several aspects of Subcontinental culture have shifted since moving here. Before considering them from the viewpoint of the individuals in this building, I thought they were acceptable. For instance, in Subcontinent, it is common for individuals to marry close relatives. Still, when I first brought up the topic here, many were astonished by the thought, saying things like, "Wow, how would someone marry their cousin!" Like a brother to me! I looked into it and believed such customs are detrimental and must be outlawed."*

Like the other participants, Marwa receives religious education through her formal education and everyday experiences. Her society is more conservative than others in Subcontinent and has a richer blending of religious and cultural traditions. So, even at a young age, she had a hard time reconciling the discrepancies she saw between the religion she was taught in school and the religion she saw in everyday life:

> *"I was taught what I currently know about religion in school, and we often consulted our parents for clarification on religious matters. Contrast this with how we act with our extended family and the general public. For them, it's all off-limits. I've always had an internal conflict between what I was taught in school and what society told me regarding religion. I've always been kind to probe my mother for details and dig for answers."*

Marwa has come a long way, as seen by the contrast between her former and current selves. After the events of SA, she no longer views herself or other women as helpless, powerless second-class citizens. Once again, shifting contexts resulted in reorganising authority structures [183]. She no longer views religious rituals as sacred and instead as just cultural. The religious practices that have long been

emphasised in Indo-Pak cultures—such as the niqab, aversion to gender mixing, blind obedience to one's husband's instructions, and the status of women—are being rejected by her. She also stressed the importance of scholarships to her sense of self, noting that the scholarship holder's social position is elevated within the context of her marriage.

> *"Scholarship women are distinct from women whose spouses accompany them. Life is different for them. They face the world every day! They are more powerful, more educated, and more armed."*

She got to go out and meet new people since she was the one studying. She was able to adapt because of this. She was in a strong position after becoming bilingual and graduating from college. This allowed her to question long-held beliefs about women and expand her perspective. She created a fresh interpretation of Subcontinental femininity, which is often associated with faith:

> *"Contrary to popular belief, parenting is not about doing nothing except caring for the house, cooking, cleaning, and making your spouse feel special. It's about becoming financially and socially self-sufficient but respecting religious rather than societal norms. What the world needs right now is femininity like this."*

(I) Future dreams and making change

Pursuing an education in a foreign country facilitates the acquisition of new languages, fosters an appreciation for diverse cultures, enables surmounting obstacles associated with residing in an unfamiliar land, and engenders a more comprehensive comprehension of global affairs. Furthermore, it instils a sense of accountability to effect positive transformations within one's nation and foster cultural, social, and economic growth. The participants are enthusiastic about implementing and realising various modifications as their aspirations materialise.

Azbah possesses numerous aspirations and ambitions for the forthcoming times. The individual expressed enthusiasm when discussing her aspirations yet refrained from sharing them due to perceived hindrances posed by her spouse. Azbah clearly expressed the notion that her husband was impeding her progress.

Q: What is your envisioned future self? To what extent do you believe visual representation impacts your current approach to academic pursuits and daily activities?

> *Azbah expresses having numerous aspirations, envisioning themselves as a professional attending multiple conferences and conducting innumerable meetings. The desire for women to attain prominent positions and exhibit creativity is hindered by the oppressive behaviour of some husbands, who seek to stifle their spouses and diminish their aspirations*.

Observing Azbah's sincere dedication to academia was commendable despite encountering challenges. The woman's spouse exerts significant influence over her life, as he believes that occupying certain positions may expose her to interactions with men, which he disapproves of. The individual knows that assuming such roles entails duties and accountabilities demanding a significant portion of their time. These aspirations lack practical feasibility. Azbah is actively pursuing her goals and demonstrating a determined effort to attain them. The hypothetical persona she envisioned did not significantly influence her academic aspirations, as a more pressing ethical responsibility binds her. The attainment of these aspirations appears unfeasible due to the presence of the subject's spouse and herself.

Like Azbah, Fatima holds a firm conviction that the fundamental responsibility of women is to nurture their offspring.

Q: What is the most significant accomplishment of Subcontinental women, in your opinion?

> *Fatima's statement pertains to the impact of a particular phenomenon on the current and future generations. This represents a significant accomplishment as it reflects our generation's enthusiasm for education and exceptional abilities.*

Q: Are there any additional societal developments within the country that evoke a sense of pride in the advancements made by Subcontinental women?

> *Fatima highlights that their current state of being is a result of their upbringing, which is a testament to the accomplishments of their mothers. This represents a significant accomplishment. Notably, women have attained prominent positions, including deanship in various universities, and have demonstrated their organisational skills by hosting conferences and serving as examiners. This progress is commendable and indicative of their contribution towards effecting positive change.*

She expresses appreciation for the change while acknowledging the pivotal role of mothers in nurturing the current generation towards effecting change. Fatima perceives herself as a future catalyst for change. She intends to instil in her offspring the ability to effectuate the transformation that eluded her and attain the position beyond her reach. The individual in question perceives that her journey has reached its conclusion, yet she maintains aspirations for her progeny to establish their accomplishments. Fatima acknowledges the significance of education. However, she envisions a future where the practical application of such education may not be feasible.

Fatima arrived in the Netherlands with limited proficiency in English and a solid motivation to achieve her goals. However, she encountered difficulties in realising her envisioned trajectory. The individual in question appears to have insufficiently considered the matter at hand. While harbouring aspirations of pursuing a career in academia, research or a similarly esteemed field, she has not taken the necessary steps to actualize these ambitions. Fatima lacked a specific strategy and failed to implement practical measures to achieve her desired outcome. The individual's academic aspirations conflicted with their religious and familial obligations, resulting in a perceived need to decide.

Ramla's expectations for her future in Subcontinent were not as extensive as her initial aspirations before she arrived in the Netherlands. After transforming, the individual exhibited increased self-assurance and efficacy, demonstrating a heightened level of maturity and a solid drive to pursue her goals through diligent effort.

Ramla prefers living in the present moment rather than making plans, citing past experiences of unsuccessful planning. However, I am determined to exert diligent effort towards achieving my goals.

The individual currently emphasizes the importance of taking concrete steps to achieve their goals. Engaging in idle conversation and indulging in fanciful thoughts would not lead her to any tangible outcome. The individual prefers establishing attainable objectives and exerting diligent effort towards their accomplishment. By following this approach, she can prevent experiencing feelings of dissatisfaction.

Nonetheless, this does not imply that she harbours pessimism towards her prospects. The individual strongly desires to return to Subcontinent and commence a new phase in their life.

Q: Do you consider remaining in the Netherlands after completing your academic programme?

> *Ramla expressed a negative response. Self-approval is not within my capacity. I have a strong affection for my place of residence. The Netherlands is desirable for habitation due to its legal system and overall societal structure. This location presents opportunities for material advancement, which may facilitate securing gainful employment. However, individuals who resemble themselves are often present concerning their social life, recollections, and early years. This is a place of residence. I am unable to depart from it. Despite my daughter's presence, Subcontinent remains my residence. I eagerly anticipate completing the task at hand and my departure.*

Ramla's academic interests were nurtured in the Netherlands, leading to enhanced opportunities she could take advantage of in that country. Nevertheless, she is declining the allure of luxurious living in the Netherlands in favour of her desire for belonging. The individual developed a sense of being unable to establish belonging in any location except the Subcontinent. This pertains to a place where individuals can reconcile their past and plan for their future. The individual envisions a forthcoming period that she aspires to be more favourable to her offspring.

> *“When my daughter is an adult, I pray she will hold herself in the highest regard. She considers her own goals, identity, and potential rather than accepting the limitations imposed by others. I pray that by then, the rules and regulations of Subcontinent will have been altered to enable her better to pursue her own goals.”*

Ramla's aspirations for her daughter reflect her desire for autonomy and liberation from societal constraints. The mother aspired for her offspring to mature in an improved societal milieu and to possess a more positive self-image. The mother's aspirations for her daughter motivated her to return to Subcontinent, aiming to effect more incredible societal transformation and foster a more promising tomorrow.

Billie's decision to remain in the Netherlands is motivated by her apprehensions regarding her daughter's prospects. Similar to Ramla, Subcontinent holds significant personal value for her as it represents her place of residence and familial ties.

> *"My family is irreplaceable to me. Open-minded or not, I always feel better with family. I have always seen myself living with a family.”*

Throughout her lifetime, Billie demonstrated a tendency to resist authoritarianism and close-mindedness, and she remains determined to prioritise her familial relationships despite any obstacles. While in Subcontinent, she frequently desired to depart from society and relocate overseas. However, presently she is exhibiting a sense of affiliation with society, despite any divergent perspectives. During a discussion regarding plans, the individual in question prioritised the topic of her daughter and how she intends to raise her upon her return.

"In the future, I want to be more tolerant with my daughter; I intend to be her friend and not impose my will on her in any way... I will not discriminate between my son and my daughter, yet I may be more cautious with my daughter regarding societal pressures."

Billie initially aimed to initiate the transformation within her family, and akin to her maternal figure, she aspired to safeguard her offspring. The individual expressed a desire for the recipient to possess fortitude and consciousness of their entitlements and to refrain from emulating certain uninformed Subcontinental females.

"I wish to alter all of the conventions of society, from the smallest to the largest. The plight of women in the Subcontinent is tragic. My goal is to change their worldview. More women need to be able to stand on their own. A family member shattered my heart! On the day the monarch issued his order allowing women to drive, her brother confronted her and threatened to murder her if he ever caught her behind the wheel. She's been through a divorce, has no job, and is my age."

Despite recent legal and governmental developments, Billie expresses discontent with the impact of social norms and traditions on the advancement of Subcontinental women. The individual in question strongly desires to educate and inspire a group of women, thereby granting them more excellent agency and self-determination.

Marwa's demeanour underwent a remarkable transformation after her study abroad experience, as she transitioned from a reserved and negative disposition to one characterised by a more hopeful and idealistic outlook on life. She expressed confidence in the ability of women to assume leadership roles in the country, citing her own newfound sense of empowerment. The individual demonstrated a strong resolve to exert diligent effort and attain success, and expressed a desire for the same for all young females in Subcontinent, particularly those who may lack knowledge in her locality. The individual's primary aspiration is to pursue a career as a public speaker advocating for women's rights.

"A PhD isn't enough for me; I want to speak publicly on women's problems in two languages."

The individual expressed a desire to serve as a representative for women in Subcontinent, both domestically and internationally. The author described a desire to utilise an alternative voice, specifically the English language, to raise awareness about women's experiences in Subcontinent. The dream serves as a manifestation of the significance of bilingualism to the individual, highlighting the pivotal role that English has played in granting her agency and a means of self-expression. The individual in question exhibited a vital concern for the plight of women in the Subcontinent and expressed a desire for individuals to refrain from engaging in criticism and judgement based on physical appearance, a pervasive issue in Indo-Pak society, particularly for women.

"That [guys judge women based on their looks] has always bothered me. What males dress is of little concern to them. I keep telling my spouse that I wish I could make my commencement address without my niqab. I wore it because I didn't want to make my dad feel bad. My whole extended family was listening to the live podcast of the event, so I hid my face in shame before making my presentation. Don't make fun of me, my dad warned me. Many will speak ill of me behind my back. They have no business prying into your personal life. That day, I let my emotions get the better of me. It made me feel hypocritical. However, embassy employees advised me that covering up would

help my southern accent be heard. The people there are closed off and have no idea what it's like here."

Like Marwa, Ume Hala exhibited a strong desire to effect change, albeit gradually, recognising the situation's complexity. Nevertheless, it appeared that she had grown weary of conforming to societal expectations solely to gain approval from others. She is resisting the enduring notion of the "ideal Muslim girl" who adheres to modest dress. The individual expresses remorse for having heeded the advice of others in the past and yearns for the opportunity to reclaim her authenticity. The individual expressed a desire not solely to have auditory attention directed towards them. Marwa exhibits a progressive outlook. The individual displays a solid commitment to returning to the Subcontinent and actively participating in efforts to effect positive change, particularly about women's rights, in light of recent legislative developments.

Despite her desire to leave, Ume Hala appears more inclined towards a sustainable future in Subcontinent than the other participants. Ume Hala exhibited a lack of hesitancy regarding potential conflicts that her contemporary perspectives and stances may engender with her familial relations in her country of origin. The individual was mindful of the arduous nature of addressing her domestic concerns, yet she found solace in her personal growth and the support of her younger sibling. Furthermore, it should be noted that the individual in question had plans to reside in the capital city instead of the southern region. The ongoing transformation and globalisation of the Subcontinent are of paramount significance, as articulated by the individual and expounded upon in the subsequent segment.

(j) Worries about the change in Subcontinent

The Indo-Pak population's increasing global connectivity facilitates progress and reform as the government endeavours to implement economic diversification initiatives and gradual social liberalisation reforms. The present study explores the participants' perceptions of the observed change's positive or negative implications.

Azbah exhibits a reluctance to embrace changes. The individual harbours a preference for the status quo of their current lifestyle. The individual expresses a strong desire to return to the previous way of life in the Subcontinent and finds the ongoing societal transformations unsettling. The perspectives mentioned above may be associated with either religious beliefs or the disposition of the subject's spouse and their respective viewpoints. The increasing prevalence of gender integration in both professional and public spheres may cause Azbah considerable distress, as it could limit her interactions and mobility and compromise her career prospects.

Despite spending nearly six years in the Netherlands, there appears to be no discernible impact on her beliefs or thoughts. Her time in the country has seemingly reinforced her conservative views.

Q: Based on your experience residing in the Netherlands, are there any aspects you believe could be improved in your homeland?

Azbah expressed her desire for the establishment of libraries explicitly catering to women. The intended demographic for this topic is exclusively female. Providing gender-segregated libraries and parks exclusively for women is a topic of interest in academic discourse. Azbah's ethnocentrism was strengthened by the experience of being exposed to a different culture.

Fatima found life in the Netherlands to be unsuitable and complicated. The individual's restricted social engagement, linguistic proficiency, religious convictions, and familial circumstances collectively contributed to this outcome. The desired transformation she sought in Subcontinent was not observed during her time in the Netherlands but emerged due to her experiences in the host nation. The individual expresses a strong desire to return to their previous life in Subcontinent, citing a fondness for cultural practises and societal norms. This sentiment is exemplified through their passionate defence of the education system in the Subcontinent.

Q: Please provide more context or information about the user's educational experience in Netherlands and Subcontinent. What level of education are they referring to? What specific aspects of their educational experience do they want to compare?

> *Fatima observes that the education system in Subcontinent has undergone significant development in recent years, leading to a notable difference in her recent experience compared to her experience. The situation is inequitable.*

Q: Could you elaborate on your experience with teachers locally and elsewhere?

> *Fatima notes that teacher-student interactions differ in her current academic setting, with teachers exhibiting more remarkable amiability. She observes that, unlike her previous experiences, teachers do not adopt a condescending attitude towards students. The current situation appears straightforward in this location, whereas in that location, a noticeable discrepancy exists within the relationship.*

Q: Has your perspective on acquiring the English language changed since your arrival here?

> *Fatima expressed the necessity of acquiring proficiency in the language.*

Q: The methodology employed for English language instruction interests me. Do you believe the current location is superior to the alternative?

> *Fatima remarked that she could not compare as the teaching methodologies have transformed Subcontinent.*

Fatima hesitantly discussed specific inadequacies within the Subcontinental educational system. To a certain degree, she criticised her educators while refraining from commenting on the governmental sectors and the educational system. The individual in question may perceive educators' attitudes as personal characteristics open to critique. However, it is noteworthy that she refrains from expressing negative sentiments towards her homeland, which could stem from feelings of appreciation and patriotism. The subject's negative disposition towards acquiring the language underscored the exclusion of English from the Subcontinental educational system. Stated differently, the individual in question appears to believe that English does not hold significant value within the academic framework of the subcontinent. This perspective is evidenced by her assertion that she was compelled to acquire proficiency in the language solely to pursue studies in this region. Furthermore, she maintains that no meaningful parallels can be drawn between the two educational systems.

Q: Based on your experience residing in the Netherlands, are there any aspects of the Subcontinent you believe could benefit from being approached differently?

> *Ramla: Certainly, there is a significant amount. The rapid pace of transformations occurring in the Subcontinent is a daunting experience for everyone involved. The current state of affairs is characterised by considerable change, which yields positive outcomes. The Subcontinent's Vision primarily concerns the societal mindset, particularly women's empowerment and establishing a secure and equitable domestic environment. We are making significant progress in our efforts towards them. However, several other concerns remain, such as the presence of male guardians. It is anticipated that these issues will soon be resolved.*

The promulgated decrees and decisions proved quite overwhelming for her, as they were precisely what she had anticipated for a considerable duration. Nevertheless, the alteration in the society's constituents' conduct excites her. Ramla's initial aspiration to assimilate into Dutch society waned. She was supplanted by a yearning to be a part of the Subcontinental community, where she could connect with individuals with similar backgrounds, physical appearances, and perspectives.

> *"The change process is not limited to me alone, as even Subcontinent is transforming. Other individuals also receive a scholarship and are returning to their previous academic pursuits. The country's identity is transforming, which is perceptible to me. The occurrence has yet to transpire within the confines of the Subcontinent. Thus, the observation appears not limited to my personal experience alone."*

Ramla recognises the scholarship programmes' impact on Subcontinent society's cultural makeup. The individual believes that such scholarship programmes are the primary catalyst for instigating transformation. The individual in question is presently affirming the predictions regarding the transformative impact of scholarships on the Subcontinental populace [189]. Specifically, it is expected that those who return from their studies will strive to create a novel culture that incorporates elements from both their native culture and the culture of their host country, resulting in what Grundy refers to as a "third culture" [190].

According to Billie, the ongoing developments in Subcontinent are excessive and cause a sense of being inundated. The alterations in laws and societal norms are both significant factors to consider. The individual expressed surprise regarding the evolving attitudes and acceptance towards previously prohibited behaviours. This observation aligns with the notion that cultural norms continuously transform over time, as Geertz posited [191].

Billie's inclination towards progress is evident as she has eagerly anticipated change throughout her lifetime. While she acknowledges the swift pace of change, she requires time to assimilate and comprehend it, as she did not expect its arrival so soon. The individual's frustration stems from the perceived hypocrisy of religious individuals who lack steadfast principles and conform to societal norms. The individual believed that individuals who adhere to religious practises actively advocate for their beliefs. Consequently, the individual experienced a shift in perspective as she observed individuals deviating from their professed views. The individual is exhibiting anger towards a group of individuals and attributing responsibility to them for losing time in her life.

Conservative individuals previously viewed studying abroad as a significant concern and a potential source of moral decay. However, it has come to the author's attention that there has been a shift in societal attitudes towards this matter, with an increasing number of individuals recognising its potential as a pathway to future success. Like Ramla, Billie expressed enthusiasm regarding the ongoing developments in Subcontinent while concurrently experiencing dissatisfaction with historical limitations imposed upon Subcontinental women.

> *"Culture, not religion, is responsible for making what was once bad right. In today's culture, women have risen to the top. We lag significantly behind the other Muslim nations; Kuwait, Malaysia, Indonesia, Middle East, in particular, is far more liberal and open than we are. Things have changed for women since the 1970s. They are more visible in the media, can wear anything they choose, and are less inhibited when interacting with males. And I think a Kuwaiti guy looks at a Kuwaiti lady like she's his sister."*

Billie's confidence and admiration towards the conservative society of the Subcontinent diminished. Societal factors were attributed as the cause of the intricate dynamic between males and females by the individual. The evolving legal landscape has resulted in a shift in the status of women, prompting a corresponding change in attitudes among various groups, including religious individuals who previously placed sole responsibility on women for multiple matters. The individual believes that the current era presents an opportune moment for women in Subcontinent to prosper.

> *"Women are also trying out new heavy sports; I know a few girls who practise Karate and have competed in international championships to represent Subcontinent; I can only imagine how proud they must be; they did something..." The conditions are perfect for feminism to flourish now. The current scenario is shifting, and it will keep moving. People are still reeling from the impact of these shifts, but they will persist. Women now have more freedom of speech. I can't see somebody telling me I'm not a safe driver if there is legislation in place to safeguard women, then. As soon as the bill changed, attitudes shifted, and today parents who formerly discouraged their daughters from driving are actively urging them to do so. It's via going that they can alter their social standing."*

Ume Hala was elated by the progress made by Subcontinental women. Like Ramla, she had a strong emotional connection to the group and yearned for acceptance as a full member. A synthesis of the two civilizations they've known, including elements from both. She was so delighted and proud of them that she couldn't stop gushing over them. She thought driving was the first step towards improving their status in the nation, contrary to Ramla's view. Despite these shifts, Billie is inevitable that some women's difficulties are embedded too deeply in society ever to be resolved:

> *"Whatever you do, they won't think it's enough to restore the dignity of girls, and I don't think it will ever change since males are still valued more than women."*

Ume Hala's perspective can be interpreted as reflective and insightful, as she demonstrates a keen awareness and comprehension of her cultural and societal context. She has actively worked to challenge patriarchal norms and systems throughout her life. She has observed that even relatively minor issues have taken significant time to be addressed or altered, and problems that challenge the dominant patriarchal structures of Subcontinental society have been remarkably resistant to change.

Marwa, along with the other participants, is currently observing the societal transformations in Subcontinent. Notably, there has been a shift towards greater freedom of choice for women. Nevertheless, her lack of surprise or agitation sets her apart; she has grown weary of anticipating this transformation and is simply grateful that it has finally materialised.

> *"The societal landscape has transformed, with women exhibiting greater autonomy and self-sufficiency. They have initiated their entrepreneurial ventures. I have concluded that my current level of activity is insufficient. Publishing books under one's real name is a relatively uncommon practice in the southern region, yet they have managed to do so. Individuals who previously spoke negatively about me have transformed and now desire an opportunity similar to mine. Whenever I encounter them, they inquire about the process. I am regarded as a positive influence for their female children."*

Marwa's stance has transformed from being perceived as a negative influence on young girls in the southern region to that of a positive role model. She has transitioned from a rule-breaker to a trailblazer who has controlled her destiny. The shift in Subcontinental individuals' mindset is manifested through their position change. The speaker exhibits a sense of prescience regarding the imminent occurrence of the event. The individual believes that contemporary Subcontinental society is characterised by the emergence of novel perspectives and the innovative ideas of the youth rather than being rooted in traditional customs of the past.

Individuals who have pursued an education in foreign countries are responsible for introducing elements from their host culture to their native culture, thereby creating a novel culture, referred to as the third culture [190]. This culture is instrumental in promoting societal and economic transformations that benefit the nation—creating a cultural environment that will effectively manifest the envisioned outcome.

4.2 Summary

Much of the scholarly literature on international students' experiences centres on diverse challenges related to adapting to a novel academic environment and navigating transitional periods. The participants were expected to predominantly discuss cultural, language, and religious difficulties. The narratives provided by our subjects have revealed an unexpected level of intricacy in the encounters of female Subcontinental students in the Netherlands. Distinct from other cohorts of global learners, these postgraduate students encounter exceptional obstacles. In addition to navigating the cultural and religious norms of their country of origin, which may require them to be accompanied by a male family member and adhere to a particular dress code while studying abroad, these women must also acclimatize to academic and public environments that are secular and mixed-gender.

Scholars have previously observed that international students maintain various aspects of their identity, particularly when engaging in formal or informal interactions with their culture and community. Cultural identity pertains to individuals' convictions about themselves, shaped by their cultural, historical, and religious milieu. This encompasses the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and traditions passed down through generations [192, 193, 194]. The experience of studying and residing in the Netherlands prompted the participants to contemplate and occasionally scrutinize their convictions and customary cultural practices. Most female participants recounted personal experiences that significantly impacted their perspectives on Subcontinental society. Several respondents reported experiencing various

transformations, including increased self-assurance, bravery, and autonomy, during their time in the Netherlands.

Simultaneously, challenging cultural norms and established gender roles resulted in sure participants experiencing a sense of discord with other members of the Subcontinental community. These individuals either disapproved of our participants' conduct or levied accusations of excessive liberalism against them. Some participants in the Journal of International Students reported experiencing a feeling of unease as they navigated the expectations of two disparate cultures - a patriarchal Subcontinental culture and a liberal Dutch culture. Subcontinental women experience a sense of unease that stems from various factors, such as social, psychological, cultural, religious, and political pressures within their home country and while pursuing their education overseas [195].

Azbah was up in a pious but less conventional home, but her in-laws and other relatives taught her about Subcontinental customs and the expected duties of women in society. Azbah had a poor impression of English even as a young kid. Later, in her early 20s, she was convinced she could get by without ever learning English. Azbah was happy with her relationships, her place in the Subcontinental society, and her command of the Urdu language before she moved to the Netherlands. She moved to the Netherlands with little English proficiency and compelling self-interest. She struggled to become the person she had always pictured herself to be since doing so required a high level of English proficiency, cultural awareness, social and intellectual networks, and openness, all of which she lacked. Despite developing favourable views of Western civilization during her time in the Netherlands, she mostly cut herself off. Azbah doesn't think she's a failure for having this outlook, nor does she think her method is the only correct one. It's a moral or religious stance that doesn't seem likely to shift after six years.

Fatima had a solitary academic life in the Netherlands. Her religious convictions, linguistic abilities, and personality all significantly shaped her time in the Netherlands. She worried that learning English, excelling at school, and becoming a "good Subcontinental woman" were all mutually exclusive goals. Her aspirations for a more equitable society and her anticipated career as a prominent scholar who often attends conferences were nothing more than "wishes" [196, 197]. She knew what it would take to be accepted into this made-up group. Changes inside and outside the home were necessary, as was learning and speaking the local language. But Fatima has no interest in any of it since it portends future conflict. She could not succeed since the standard methods of getting ahead went against her morals, such as socializing and networking. Because of what happened to Fatima, it is clear that not everyone exposed to new ideas, cultures, and worldviews is eager to adopt them, particularly if they anticipate resistance from their group. Although Fatima's life in the Netherlands did not challenge her fundamental Islamic beliefs, it did cause her some internal conflict. She may not change due to her study abroad experience but she is questioning things and learning to deal with disputes.

Ramla was raised in a religiously conservative household that prioritized maintaining cultural norms. Despite her best efforts at defiance, she was compelled to participate. She was never happy with her place in the Subcontinental society, so she studied English and left for the Netherlands. Before her trip to the Netherlands, Ramla often referred to herself in English and admired Western culture. She spoke fluent English and was eager to make new acquaintances in the Netherlands to immerse herself in the culture. However, after her first try, she closed down because she wanted to communicate on her terms. She felt like an outsider because of the prejudice she faced from locals and because of her actions. This identity conflicted with the one she wished to cultivate. Because of this, she avoided interacting with the locals as

much as possible [198]. Although she failed to keep her friend and neighbour status, she did improve her academic standing. She was influenced by the imbalance of power [199]. Instead of being at the margins of society, she was encouraged to pursue greater possibilities in the academic sphere to keep a better standing and obtain authority.

Ume Hala is from a traditional and devout household, yet she appears to have a great time in the West. Despite her contempt for those who speak it, Ume Hala proves her commitment to the language. She made English "a part of herself" by appreciating its "linguistic and cultural capital" [183]. As a result, a broader sense of identity was developed [200]. The assertion made by Jackson [198], regarding the efficacy of rich qualitative data in illuminating the experiences of individuals during their stays abroad and debunking the notion that mere exposure to the host speech community is sufficient for all sojourners to benefit, is supported by the limited interaction of Ume Hala just like Azbah and Ramla had with locals. Ume Hala developed a stronger sense of religious and national identity throughout her travels. She dreamed of escaping Subcontinent and beginning a new life elsewhere. Surprisingly, she wanted to come to the Netherlands and make it her permanent home.

Billie's global outlook and upbringing made her unable to conform to Subcontinental culture, and she rebelled early. She had always been outspokenly rebellious, but in recent years she had begun unwittingly serving some of society's mores. Her mother was a powerful role model for her, setting an example of independence and rejecting societal standards. Everyone she knew anticipated that she would eventually decide to leave and attend university in the Netherlands. Since she constantly made unambiguous statements to that effect. Like Ramla, Billie, too, felt like an outsider in the Netherlands, despite her desire to make this country her permanent residence. She decided to do all in her power to blend in and waited patiently to see results. She attempted to meet new people by, among other things, ditching the headscarf and adopting a Western-sounding name. Billie had a new perspective on religion. She began by reading the Quran in English, which gave a whole new dimension to the text. Because of this, she started to have doubts about not just secular but also religious principles. By questioning and critiquing, she adopted a global religious identity, learned about religion from many cultures, and gained a new viewpoint. Billie, a renegade for a long time, finally found solace in the Netherlands. She was finally free from the constraints of her family and community, and she began to embrace her global identity. This encouraged her to use her right to freedom of choice and do what she wanted, and her husband's encouragement made it possible for her to settle down anyplace she pleased.

Marwa never planned on moving to the Netherlands or living overseas. Her life in Subcontinent had reached an impasse, and she had no other options, so she made the choice suddenly. She had no direction and felt lost until she discovered the scholarship programme. She was determined to invest in her future by furthering her education, so she went to another country. Marwa was generally discontent with her circumstances and the expectations of Subcontinental women. She could not speak out against the mistreatment of women in her culture, particularly her mother. Marwa discovered her life purpose and unique voice after studying abroad and learning a new language. She now has the confidence to speak up for gender equality and the rights of all women because of her life experiences. She went overseas clinging to her old self-perception and defending her previous ideas and principles, only to learn that they no longer represented who she was. While studying abroad, she discovered a side of herself that she enjoys. She found a strong, confident lady inside herself. A female speaker whose only purpose is to be heard. Marwa's stay abroad served more to inspire her and offer her a new path than to improve her English proficiency. Her attitude towards the English language still seems applicable, although productively so.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research shows that Subcontinental women pursuing graduate degrees overseas have distinct difficulties. Participants' beliefs and perspectives on life, society, and community were profoundly altered by their time spent studying and living in the Netherlands. Some of our participants' accounts highlighted how gender segregation, cultural expectations, language barriers, and religious beliefs impacted their participation in educational and social activities overseas. These results shed light on the challenges female students from traditionally patriarchal communities face in the classroom.

The present study employed a phenomenological methodology to examine the cognitive and affective experiences of six Subcontinental students. It pursued its studies at different levels and durations in the Netherlands. To scrutinise the participants' responses in the study, a theoretical framework encompassed various gender identities, social identities, and a range of theories and models. To contextualise the analysis of the responses, a discussion was conducted regarding the prevailing social and gender identities within Subcontinent. The present study undertook a comprehensive review of prior research endeavours that explored the encounters of Indo-Pak students pursuing tertiary education in Western nations concerning gender, society, culture, language, and religion.

The **first research question** examined the religious and cultural relationship of the participants with the English language and English-speaking countries prior to their study abroad experiences. The narratives shared by the six women in this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the attitudes held by Subcontinental students towards English, a topic that has been largely neglected in second language acquisition literature. These narratives highlight the role of agency and the environment in shaping learners' investment in learning the language.

The participants' stories revealed the connection between their attitudes towards English and the social and cultural circumstances that influenced them. In the Subcontinent, there exists a central tension and a love/hate relationship with English as both a language and a culture. English has long been regarded as a necessity for nation-building, modernization, and globalization. It has been viewed as a requirement for career advancement and a means to attain a better life. However, English has also been perceived as anti-Islamic and as a tool for Westernization.

The participants' narratives underscored the challenges they faced in navigating the conflicting attitudes towards English and the West, particularly in relation to Islam. Their upbringing in a society characterized by gender segregation, emphasis on male superiority, forced religious practices, and traditional values contributed to their confusion and ambivalence towards English. English represented notions of gender mixing, adultery, equality, and a departure from religious practices, which contradicted their cultural upbringing.

The women's narratives demonstrated how their relationship with English was influenced by family members and the broader society. They responded to their circumstances by either embracing English more strongly or distancing themselves from it. The narratives also highlighted how learning English provided the participants with access to symbolic and material resources, enhancing their cultural capital and social power.

Furthermore, the different attitudes towards English among individuals from diverse backgrounds reflect the negotiation of tensions between English as a language and its associated culture. The narratives also shed light on how cultural traditions within closed societies, such as the southern region of the Subcontinent, can hinder the language learning process. Importantly, the participants' narratives challenge stereotypical perceptions of Subcontinental women as passive members of society, emphasizing their agency and the uniqueness of their evolving identities within the context of study abroad.

The **second research question** explored the development of identities, beliefs, and practices among Subcontinental women during their study and life in the Netherlands, and the role played by religious and cultural beliefs and positioning in this process. The women's narratives revealed both individual pathways and shared experiences. They hailed from diverse backgrounds and had varying experiences in the Netherlands, with each experiencing a certain level of cultural shock upon arrival.

Religion and culture played significant roles in mediating their interactions, shaping their identities, and influencing their overall study-abroad experience. Cultural and religious influences such as notions of modesty, extreme gender segregation, forced hijab, and familial and tribal affiliations in their home country had a profound impact on the participants. Their religious and national identities underwent shifts and strengthening to different degrees, prompting them to reevaluate the meaning and role of religion in their lives.

The women's narratives highlighted their discovery of positive personal traits, increased independence, and improved English language skills, research abilities, and critical thinking during their time in the Netherlands. However, while they shared common thoughts, their experiences and responses varied based on their backgrounds, personalities, and reasons for studying abroad.

The women's religious and cultural backgrounds influenced their positioning and how they perceived others' positioning of them. Their narratives illustrated how individuals deliberately assumed certain positions to construct particular identities, enabling them to rationalize their interpretations and reactions to various aspects of their study abroad experience. Their identities developed through the negotiation of positions and social interactions within Dutch society.

While previous research has explored the personal, social, academic, and linguistic development of study-abroad participants, religious development has received limited attention. This study demonstrated how studying abroad can be a transformative journey, encompassing the exploration of faith and spirituality. It also revealed the dynamic and fluid nature of religious identity, which can serve as a site of struggle.

The **third research question** examined the participants' beliefs about how this study abroad experience would shape their future goals, relationships, and their home country. The women in this study envision their lives upon returning home, particularly amidst the significant changes occurring in their respective countries. They perceive being Subcontinental as an opportunity to contribute to the future, rather than holding onto the past. They strive to be leaders rather than followers, and they aim to actively participate in building and shaping their countries.

Initially, the women embarked on their study abroad journey with the primary goal of obtaining a degree and excelling academically. However, their identities evolved throughout their time in the Netherlands, and they began envisioning their future roles and contributions upon their return. The study also

emphasized how the blurring of religion, nationalism, and culture can lead to confusion and identity loss. The participants discovered that being Subcontinental does not necessitate adhering to outdated Indo-Pak traditions or blindly following religious norms. They learned to question, inquire, and conduct research to reach their answers and conclusions.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The thesis contributes to the existing literature and theory in several ways, providing advancements and theoretical implications. It contextualizes subcontinental women's experiences and provides insights into the complex interplay of these factors, expanding on existing theoretical frameworks like intersectionality. The thesis also explores the role of language, particularly English, in shaping their identities and investigates how cultural adaptation and negotiation processes unfold for Subcontinental women in the Netherlands. Additionally, it examines the influence of religious factors on their identities, beliefs, and practices, shedding light on the intersection of religious, cultural, and linguistic influences.

Overall, the theoretical implications of this thesis lie in its contributions to existing literature and theory by offering a specific context and lens through which to understand the development of Subcontinental women's identities, beliefs, and practices. It advances our understanding of the complex interplay of cultural, linguistic, and religious factors, highlighting the importance of context-specific analyses in exploring women's experiences in multicultural settings.

5.2 Practical Implications

The thesis has several practical implications that can benefit women working in different organizations belonging to different cultures across the world. These implications are as follows:

It contributes to organizational awareness and sensitivity regarding the unique experiences and challenges faced by Subcontinental women. By recognizing the influence of cultural, linguistic, and religious factors on their identities, organizations can create an inclusive work environment that fosters cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. The thesis also highlights the importance of cultural competence and effective communication in multicultural contexts, suggesting that organizations develop training programs to promote these skills, leading to improved teamwork and overall performance. Additionally, by acknowledging the specific needs of Subcontinental women, organizations can implement policies that empower and support their career development, including mentoring programs, leadership training, and initiatives addressing gender-related challenges. The thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the intersectionality of cultural, linguistic, and religious factors in shaping women's identities, suggesting that organizations consider similar perspectives when developing diversity and inclusion strategies, and valuing different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. Lastly, the thesis offers insights into the experiences of Subcontinental women in multicultural settings, providing best practices for global organizations to learn from in terms of identity development and cultural adaptation. Implementing these strategies can promote the well-being and success of women from diverse cultural backgrounds within organizations.

In summary, the research can contribute to creating inclusive work environments, enhancing cross-cultural communication, promoting talent retention and empowerment, fostering interdisciplinary approaches to diversity and inclusion, and informing best practices for global organizations. By leveraging

these practical implications, organizations can strive towards creating a more equitable and supportive workplace for women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

5.3 Limitations

While the thesis provides valuable insights into the subject matter, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The first limitation that can be identified is the small sample size, emphasizing the need for a larger sample to enhance the representativeness and generalizability of the findings. While the thesis offers valuable insights into Subcontinental women in the Netherlands, it acknowledges the importance of including participants from different cultural and religious contexts to improve the study's applicability. The qualitative research design provides rich insights, but the thesis recognizes the value of incorporating quantitative methods for stronger statistical generalizations. To address potential bias and subjectivity, the thesis suggests measures such as data triangulation and involving multiple researchers. Furthermore, while the thesis explores the development of women's identities within a specific timeframe, it recognizes the need for a longitudinal perspective to gain a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of cultural, linguistic, and religious factors. Incorporating a longitudinal approach would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the identity development process.

Despite these limitations, the thesis serves as a valuable starting point for further research in the field. Addressing these limitations through larger sample sizes, broader cross-cultural comparisons, quantitative methodologies, and longitudinal perspectives would enhance the validity and applicability of the findings, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the development of Subcontinental women's identities, beliefs, and practices in diverse cultural contexts. This research can inform government authorities, higher education institutions, and Subcontinental women themselves, guiding them in preparing for and maximizing the study abroad experience. This research will offer something new to the literature on Subcontinental women's experiences interacting with people from other cultures. This research will likely turn up some fascinating discoveries, one of the most intriguing of which will be that today's women are in a position to move the nation forward.

Chapter 6: Overall Conclusions and Recommendation

6.1 Conclusions

In conclusion, this thesis has delved into the intricate development of subcontinental women's identities, beliefs, and practices during their study and life in the Netherlands, with a specific emphasis on the multifaceted influence of cultural, linguistic, and religious factors. The preliminary analysis of the pilot study yielded significant findings, shedding light on the unfamiliarity that Subcontinental students encountered when immersed in a cross-cultural environment characterized by religious and linguistic differences, as well as mixed-gender dynamics. The participants reported both challenges and advantages stemming from their experiences. Through rigorous data analysis, ten overarching themes emerged, encompassing the participants' multifaceted encounters in the host country. Notably, the thesis explored the concept of Islamic feminism, which was extensively discussed by the participants during their interviews, providing rich insights into their perspectives. The research illuminated the impact of Subcontinental cultural norms, such as gender segregation and distinct socio-cultural and linguistic behaviours, on the participants' ability to assimilate into the new host country. The narratives revealed that the experience of being in the Netherlands significantly influenced the participants' cultural, national, religious, and linguistic identities. The complexity of exploring lived experiences was evident throughout the data analysis process, highlighting the intricacies and interplay of various factors. The thesis acknowledges the commonality of certain experiences among Subcontinental women as international students, acknowledging that religious and national identities are inseparable from their broader cultural identities. The participants unanimously emphasized the importance of patience in overcoming challenges and the need for time and a positive attitude to achieve goals and implement new ideas. They advised against implementing changes too quickly, as it can overwhelm their families as well as themselves. The study found that participants who chose a host environment similar to their home environment had an easier adjustment to their culture.

6.2 Recommendations

(a) Future research directions

The study opens up several avenues for future research in this area. Other researchers can build upon this study by exploring additional independent and dependent variables to generate different outcomes within the same thematic stream. For example, they could investigate the impact of socioeconomic factors, educational opportunities, or family dynamics on the development of Subcontinental women's identities. Additionally, future research could delve into the career challenges that international women, including Subcontinental women, face due to cultural differences. This could involve examining issues related to gender equality, workplace discrimination, and the integration of cultural norms into professional settings. By exploring these dimensions, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the development of Subcontinental women's identities and provide insights to address the challenges they encounter in various aspects of their lives.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology Survey Questions

Section 0: Demographic details

1. How old are you?
2. Where were you born: Town/ city: …… country: ……
3. What is your relationship status at the moment?
   I. Married
   II. Unmarried
   III. Divorced
   IV. Widow
4. Have you got kids?
   I. Yes
   II. No
5. Education?
   I. Undergraduate degree
   II. Graduate degree
6. What is your field of study? .....
7. What is your current profession? ……
8. Excluding Holland, have you resided in a nation other than your home country for more than six months?
   I. Yes
   II. No
9. Have you ever travelled to western countries before studying abroad?
   I. Yes
   II. No
10. Have you worked before studying abroad?
    I. Yes
    II. No
11. Prior to beginning formal education in abroad, which language(s) were you fluent in? …….
12. Have you taken any English lessons prior to your arrival in Netherlands?
    I. Yes
    II. No

Section 1: Gender Norms (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

1. During the course of the past 15 years, there has been a shift in the traditional roles that men and women play in Subcontinental culture.
2. At work, men and women face distinct sets of challenges and obstacles.
3. In Subcontinent, various duties that men and women play within the family are distinct from one another.
4. I am the one who is responsible for the cooking, cleaning, and other domestic activities in my family.

5. There are far too few women working in top roles across the board.
6. Girls and boys are raised differently.
7. The Indo-Pak school system either purposefully or subconsciously encourages gender segregation in the workforce that are seen as more suitable for women or men.
8. The Indo-Pak culture places differing values on sons and daughters.
9. Male children in Subcontinent generally enjoy more privileges than female children.
10. Some behaviors are deemed acceptable for men but unacceptable for women.
11. There is no difference between men and women in terms of their capabilities and intelligence.
12. It is true that distinct laws apply to men and women in Subcontinent.
13. In my opinion, males should be the exclusive decision-makers at home.
14. I, like many Subcontinental women, value having a male legal guardian.

Section 2: Cultural Norms: (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

1. The Islamic faith that I practice has a significant impact on my daily life.
2. It should be up to the individual Subcontinental woman to decide whether or not she wants to drive.
3. Concerning culture, I have certain reservations regarding Subcontinent.
4. In my opinion, it is not inappropriate for a lady to display her face to an unfamiliar male.
5. As a practising Muslim woman, I do not feel compelled to wear the traditional black abaya.
6. Subcontinental gender segregation affects my Holland social life.
7. Gender segregation isn't necessary to protect Subcontinental women's chastity and honour.
8. Generally speaking, women in Subcontinent do not have the rights they deserve.
9. I value preserving my Subcontinental heritage in food, dress, art, and more.
10. I believe that I am a typical Subcontinental woman.

Section 3: Social Norms: (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

1. My stay in the Netherlands has helped me mature into a more self-reliant and assured person.
2. I believe that my children should be educated in Holland.
3. Due to my experience here, I am more receptive to new perspectives.
4. I have more independence and a different daily routine since living here.
5. I acquired new acquaintances that are fluent in English.
6. I get out with Indo-Pak friends or visit them in their houses.
7. The vast majority of my close friends in the Netherlands speak Urdu.
8. I don't believe my hijab is creating any issues here.
9. I am at ease interacting with Subcontinental males.
10. In most contexts, interacting with men doesn't bother me as much as it used to.
11. I experience homesickness in the sense that I miss my country.
12. I don't mind in public to do my religious duties.
13. I do not experience discomfort or feel different due to my cultural origin, ethnicity, language, or religion.
14. I spend time at campus with English-speaking colleagues.
15. To fit in with the new culture, I had to adjust my behavior and appearance.
16. I often help with Subcontinental community-related events and activities in Holland.
17. As a Muslim, I am concerned that my children will be exposed to everything in the Netherlands.

Section 4: Language Role: (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

1. My family as well as other Subcontinental people should speak and comprehend English.
2. As a result of living in Netherlands for a while, I feel that I've substantially improved my command of the English language.
3. I like to watch English television shows and films.
4. I devoted a great deal of time to learning and research on the internet.
5. When I consume media via the internet, I do it in English.
6. I have no trouble carrying on a discussion in the English language.
7. I use English on a regular basis.
8. I like to listen to English music.

Appendix 2: Survey Results

Table 2: Presents the participants' collective consensus regarding inquiries pertaining to gender roles.

SECTION 1: GENDER NORMS	PROPORTION OF CONSENSUS (COMBINATION OF AGREE AND STRONGLY AGREE)
DURING THE COURSE OF THE PAST 15 YEARS, THERE HAS BEEN A SHIFT IN THE TRADITIONAL ROLES THAT MEN AND WOMEN PLAY IN SUBCONTINENTAL CULTURE.	87 %
AT WORK, MEN AND WOMEN FACE DISTINCT SETS OF CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES.	86 %
IN SUBCONTINENT, VARIOUS DUTIES THAT MEN AND WOMEN PLAY WITHIN THE FAMILY ARE DISTINCT FROM ONE ANOTHER.	88 %
I AM THE ONE WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE COOKING, CLEANING, AND OTHER DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES IN MY FAMILY.	83 %
THERE ARE FAR TOO FEW WOMEN WORKING IN TOP ROLES ACROSS THE BOARD.	75 %
GIRLS AND BOYS ARE RAISED DIFFERENTLY.	77 %
THE INDO-PAK SCHOOL SYSTEM EITHER PURPOSEFULLY OR SUBCONSCIOUSLY ENCOURAGES GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE WORKFORCE THAT ARE SEEN AS MORE SUITABLE FOR WOMEN OR MEN.	74 %
THE INDO-PAK CULTURE PLACES DIFFERING VALUES ON SONS AND DAUGHTERS.	68 %
MALE CHILDREN IN SUBCONTINENT GENERALLY ENJOY MORE PRIVILEGES THAN FEMALE CHILDREN.	71 %
SOME BEHAVIORS ARE DEEMED ACCEPTABLE FOR MEN BUT UNACCEPTABLE FOR WOMEN.	65 %
THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IN TERMS OF THEIR CAPABILITIES AND INTELLIGENCE.	64 %
IT IS TRUE THAT DISTINCT LAWS APPLY TO MEN AND WOMEN IN SUBCONTINENT.	50 %
IN MY OPINION, MALES SHOULD BE THE EXCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKERS AT HOME.	32 %
I, LIKE MANY SUBCONTINENTAL WOMEN, VALUE HAVING A MALE LEGAL GUARDIAN.	20 %

Table 3: Showcases the participants' general concurrence on matters relating to culture.

SECTION 2: CULTURAL NORMS	PROPORTION OF CONSENSUS (COMBINATION OF AGREE AND STRONGLY AGREE)
THE ISLAMIC FAITH THAT I PRACTICE HAS A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON MY DAILY LIFE.	95 %
IT SHOULD BE UP TO THE INDIVIDUAL SUBCONTINENTAL WOMAN TO DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT SHE WANTS TO DRIVE.	80 %
CONCERNING CULTURE, I HAVE CERTAIN RESERVATIONS REGARDING SUBCONTINENT.	78 %
IN MY OPINION, IT IS NOT INAPPROPRIATE FOR A LADY TO DISPLAY HER FACE TO AN UNFAMILIAR MALE.	65 %
AS A PRACTISING MUSLIM WOMAN, I DO NOT FEEL COMPELLED TO WEAR THE TRADITIONAL BLACK ABAYA.	67 %
SUBCONTINENTAL GENDER SEGREGATION AFFECTS MY HOLLAND SOCIAL LIFE.	65 %
GENDER SEGREGATION ISN'T NECESSARY TO PROTECT SUBCONTINENTAL WOMEN'S CHASTITY AND HONOUR.	60 %
GENERALLY SPEAKING, WOMEN IN SUBCONTINENT DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHTS THEY DESERVE.	62 %
I VALUE PRESERVING MY SUBCONTINENTAL HERITAGE IN FOOD, DRESS, ART, AND MORE.	50 %
I BELIEVE THAT I AM A TYPICAL SUBCONTINENTAL WOMAN.	30 %

Table 4: Illustrates the participants' overall agreement on social aspects.

SECTION 3: SOCIAL NORMS	PROPORTION OF CONSENSUS (COMBINATION OF AGREE AND STRONGLY AGREE)
MY STAY IN THE NETHERLANDS HAS HELPED ME MATURE INTO A MORE SELF-RELIANT AND ASSURED PERSON.	90 %
I BELIEVE THAT MY CHILDREN SHOULD BE EDUCATED IN HOLLAND.	86 %
DUE TO MY EXPERIENCE HERE, I AM MORE RECEPTIVE TO NEW PERSPECTIVES.	88 %
I HAVE MORE INDEPENDENCE AND A DIFFERENT DAILY ROUTINE SINCE LIVING HERE.	84 %
I ACQUIRED NEW ACQUAINTANCES THAT ARE FLUENT IN ENGLISH.	78 %
I GET OUT WITH INDO-PAK FRIENDS OR VISIT THEM IN THEIR HOUSES.	76 %
THE VAST MAJORITY OF MY CLOSE FRIENDS IN THE NETHERLANDS SPEAK URDU.	70 %
I DON'T BELIEVE MY HIJAB IS CREATING ANY ISSUES HERE.	72 %
I AM AT EASE INTERACTING WITH SUBCONTINENTAL MALES.	30 %
IN MOST CONTEXTS, INTERACTING WITH MEN DOESN'T BOTHER ME AS MUCH AS IT USED TO.	65 %
I EXPERIENCE HOMESICKNESS IN THE SENSE THAT I MISS MY COUNTRY.	66 %
I DON'T MIND IN PUBLIC TO DO MY RELIGIOUS DUTIES.	63 %
I DO NOT EXPERIENCE DISCOMFORT OR FEEL DIFFERENT DUE TO MY CULTURAL ORIGIN, ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE, OR RELIGION.	60 %
I SPEND TIME AT CAMPUS WITH ENGLISH-SPEAKING COLLEAGUES.	56 %
TO FIT IN WITH THE NEW CULTURE, I HAD TO ADJUST MY BEHAVIOR AND APPEARANCE.	44 %
I OFTEN HELP WITH SUBCONTINENTAL COMMUNITY-RELATED EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES IN HOLLAND.	40 %
AS A MUSLIM, I AM CONCERNED THAT MY CHILDREN WILL BE EXPOSED TO EVERYTHING IN THE NETHERLANDS.	35 %

Table 5: Elucidates the significance attributed to the acquisition of the English language.

SECTION 4: LANGUAGE ROLE	PROPORTION OF CONSENSUS (COMBINATION OF AGREE AND STRONGLY AGREE)
MY FAMILY AS WELL AS OTHER SUBCONTINENTAL PEOPLE SHOULD SPEAK AND COMPREHEND ENGLISH.	90 %
AS A RESULT OF LIVING IN NETHERLANDS FOR A WHILE, I FEEL THAT I'VE SUBSTANTIALLY IMPROVED MY COMMAND OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.	85 %
I LIKE TO WATCH ENGLISH TELEVISION SHOWS AND FILMS.	70 %
I DEVOTED A GREAT DEAL OF TIME TO LEARNING AND RESEARCH ON THE INTERNET.	73 %
WHEN I CONSUME MEDIA VIA THE INTERNET, I DO IT IN ENGLISH.	72 %
I HAVE NO TROUBLE CARRYING ON A DISCUSSION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.	66 %
I USE ENGLISH ON A REGULAR BASIS.	60 %
I LIKE TO LISTEN TO ENGLISH MUSIC.	55 %

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

A. Personal questions

1. Describe childhood experiences, including family structure, routines, and holiday traditions.
2. How have factors like religion and education influenced your personal and academic identity development?
3. What messages about the role of women did you receive during childhood from family, school, and media? How did these messages shape your self-perception as a woman?
4. How are women's roles portrayed in Subcontinental media and society?
5. How do you define your identity as a woman, and how did your parents and society influence your self-perception?
6. Compare your own aspirations for education, marriage, and career with those of your mother and grandmother.
7. What aspirations do you have for your children, including daughters and granddaughters?
8. Describe the path that led you to your current situation, considering education, role models, and personal experiences.
9. What were your childhood aspirations for your future career or occupation?
10. To what extent does your current situation represent a compromise compared to your desired path?
11. Who or what has had the most significant influence on your life choices and personal development?
12. Can you identify a defining moment in your life that had a significant impact on your personal growth?

B. Questions related to living in the Netherlands:

1. Describe your daily routines and activities in the Netherlands, and how they differ from your hometown and holiday visits.
2. Do you socialize and make friends with Dutch people? Do you engage in activities or arrange playdates with them, especially for your children?
3. How have your perceptions of the Netherlands changed after living and studying there? Provide an example.
4. What are your thoughts on gender mixing or separation, both in general and when comparing the Netherlands to your home country?
5. How has the presence of male classmates and teachers influenced your experiences and perceptions of the male gender? Provide specific examples.
6. Are there any aspects of life in the Netherlands that you would like to see implemented differently in the Subcontinent?
7. Would you consider staying in the Netherlands after graduation? Explain why or why not, and discuss the importance of returning to your homeland.
8. How do you believe others perceive you as a Muslim/Subcontinental female? Share an experience that influenced your feelings or thoughts.
9. How do you think Dutch and non-Subcontinental students perceive you, particularly those from Indo-Pak backgrounds? How has this perception affected you?

10. Do you behave or feel differently with your Subcontinental friends compared to friends from other backgrounds? Explain why.

C. English Language:

1. Why do you consider learning a second language, specifically English, important? What does learning and speaking English mean to you?
2. Are you comfortable speaking English with native and non-native speakers? How do you feel when using English?
3. When and why do you use English? Does English play a role in your daily life outside of class?
4. Do you embrace the English language or try to keep it separate from your life? If you have children, do you encourage them to use English more while in the Netherlands, or do you emphasize the use of Urdu?
5. Describe your journey of learning the English language, including when you started and its accessibility in your home country.
6. How do you perceive people who can speak English in the Subcontinent compared to those who cannot?
7. Compare your educational experiences between the Netherlands and the Subcontinent in general.
8. Which has a greater influence on you: exposure to the English language through studying and English media in your home country or the experience of living in the Netherlands? How does exposure to a new language (English) in the Subcontinent compare to exposure to a new culture (Holland)?
9. How has your experience in the Netherlands changed your views on learning the English language?
10. How do you feel about being bilingual or multilingual? Specifically in the Netherlands, do you think it has had any effect on your life?
11. In what ways do you think learning and speaking the language in the Netherlands has opened new opportunities for you socially, religiously, and academically?
12. When you return to your home country, would you embrace different educational methods of teaching and interacting with students?
13. Do you believe that culture affects the way you write, speak, and interact in the classroom? Do you notice differences in verbal and nonverbal communication or behavior between yourself and students from different backgrounds?
14. Have you ever received feedback from your supervisor or teacher asking you to rewrite or further explain yourself?
15. Do you think that learning and speaking English has empowered or transformed you in any way?
16. How do you envision yourself in the future, and does this vision affect how you approach your life and studies now?

D. Cultural identity:

1. Describe your social, religious, and national identity before coming to the Netherlands.
2. What did it mean to you to be an Indo-Pak person before studying and living in Holland? Was religious identity important to your national identity? Does being Subcontinental hold the same meaning to you now as it did before studying in the Netherlands? Explain.

3. Have you traveled back to your home country since living in the Netherlands? If so, describe your trip and whether your perceptions of home changed after being in Holland (e.g., religion, gender dynamics, education, social norms, family obligations).
4. Do you believe that other Subcontinental people perceive you differently now? Provide examples.
5. Have your perceptions or ideas about religion changed? Has the role of religion changed in your life? How? Has exposure to different cultures affected your religious identity? Do you notice differences in the religious behavior of other Subcontinental individuals, both male and female, when they come to the Netherlands?
6. What do you think has changed the most for you since living and studying in the Netherlands?
7. How do you believe being an Indo-Pak person has influenced your experiences in the Netherlands? Do you feel it has had a positive or negative impact? Provide examples.

E. Your gender role:

1. Identify differences between Dutch and Subcontinental gender roles. Which ones do you prefer? Do you believe they contradict the gender roles assigned to women in Islam?
2. Would you be willing to sacrifice marriage and having children for a successful career or high position in society?
3. Do you accept traditional gender roles? How do you feel about the potential injustices associated with these roles?
4. How do you view yourself in relation to men: as equal, lesser, or complementary?
5. What are your thoughts on women being responsible for passing on cultural norms, including honor, within a society?

F. Women in Subcontinent:

1. How do you understand the disparity between women's high educational achievements and their low societal status?
2. Describe the evolution of Subcontinental women within your lifetime, considering areas like education, employment, social life, and politics.
3. In your opinion, what have been the most significant achievements for Subcontinental women? How were these achievements attained?
4. What do you consider the current biggest challenges for women in the Subcontinent, whether political, legal, societal, etc.?
5. How might demographic variables impact a woman's status in the Subcontinent, such as age, income, tribal affiliation, and education?
6. How do Subcontinental women compare to women in other Muslim states and globally?
7. How did your perception of women's roles in Subcontinental society change over time?

G. Islamic feminism:

1. In what ways do you see your identity as related to Islam?
2. What is your personal understanding and perception of the abaya and hijab within your religion and culture?
3. How do you respond to the Western stereotype that Muslim women are oppressed?
4. Do you know someone who has defied their family or societal expectations? Please explain.

5. Are you familiar with the term "Islamic Feminism"?
6. How do you define the term "feminism," and what does it mean to you? How do you react to it?
7. In your opinion, how does feminism fit within Subcontinental culture and society?
8. Do you consider yourself a feminist?
9. Do you believe that the authority of current interpretations of the Quran depends on their correctness or on the social and political forces supporting them?
10. Did living and studying in the Netherlands provide you with a new perspective on understanding religion? Do you interpret the Quran or Hadith differently now?
11. Have you ever engaged in a conversation where explaining a cultural or religious habit made you reconsider or question your beliefs?
12. When reading Islamic texts or fatwas, do you try to learn and think critically or blindly follow the words of those who came before? Why?
13. Do you believe that women are capable of interpreting the Quran or issuing fatwas? Why? Do you think this would lead to progress for women?