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South Asian Immigrant Women's Cultural Hybridization in Canada: A Postcolonial Feminist Intersectional Framework

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***Abstract*:** Research on migration often presents adaptation to Western societies as a linear and uniform process, drawing mostly on Berry's acculturation model. This framework, however, tends to overlook immigrants lived experiences, particularly the gendered and socio-cultural contexts that shape women's migration journeys. Women's experiences should influence immigration policies and resettlement practices. In practice, such policies derive from androcentric perspectives. In this paper, we report on a qualitative study that explored pre- and post-migration experiences of 10 South Asian immigrant women in Canada, with a focus on how they negotiated cultural expectations and constructed hybrid identities during the resettlement and adaptation process. An integrated, postcolonial feminist intersectional framework, informed by theories of intersectionality and cultural hybridity, guided the analysis. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews. The findings show that participants encountered intersecting structural and representational barriers, including family kinship systems, gendered cultural expectations, and limited access to resources such as childcare. At the same time, women actively exercised agency by selectively drawing on both heritage and host cultural norms to form hybrid identities. The study highlights the fluid and context-specific nature of adaptation in the host country and findings challenge generalized assumptions that immigrant women share uniform experiences. By incorporating pre-migration histories and post-migration negotiations, this research contributes to a globally relevant understanding of immigrant women's adaptation from a postcolonial feminist intersectional perspective. Importantly, findings contribute to the body of female immigrant perspectives to inform immigration policy and resettlement practices.

Keywords: Cultural hybridization, adaptation, South Asian immigrant women, postcolonial feminist intersectional framework

In the field of migration research, the process of adaptation—adjusting to the new environment, culture, or set of conditions—has often been presented to Western mainstream society as a straightforward and linear process, commonly explained through dominant theoretical

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frameworks such as Gordon's (1964) assimilation theory and Berry's (2005) acculturation model. The latter theories do not illuminate the complexities of the experiences of immigrants from formerly colonized regions such as the Global South, especially how inequitable socio-economic structures and power relations in the host country affect immigrants' resettlement experiences (Van Ngo, 2008). Postcolonial theories, emerging during the 1980s and 1990s, influenced by Edward Said's (1978) seminal text, Orientalism, do challenge Eurocentric world views and deconstruct colonial power structures and hierarchies organized around race, gender, class, culture, language, and civilization (Karmi & Salar, 2024; Rani et al., 2025; Young, 2020). However, postcolonial theories are often criticized for the limited attention given to gender inequality and the ways colonialism shapes women's experiences (Rani et al., 2025; Tyagi, 2014). Feminist theories address the latter critique by drawing on concepts such as intersectionality to provide insights into how marginalized women's lives are shaped by interrelated systems of oppression (Carastathis, 2014). Nonetheless, postcolonial feminists (e.g., Gajjala et al., 2026; Mohanty, 2023; Spivak, 1988) argue that mainstream Western feminism frames women as a homogenous group, thereby ignoring or overlooking the specific challenges faced by immigrant women, including how colonialism, racism, class, age, and social, economic, cultural, and political structures intersect with gender to produce distinct forms of marginalization. Recent literature reports on the adaptation experiences of marginalized immigrant women through a feminist intersectional lens in Canada (e.g., Amoako et al., 2024; Crawford et al., 2024; Finet et al., 2026; Gurer, 2019) and internationally (Gulzar, 2025; Hamada & Wakamatsu, 2025). While this literature does show how intersecting factors affect immigrant women's lives, it does not explicitly incorporate an integrated perspective of key postcolonial concepts (e.g., cultural hybridity and third space) and postcolonial feminist constructs such as subalternity. The study reported in this paper draws on postcolonial constructs, postcolonial feminist perspectives, and feminist intersectionality to examine the adaptation experiences of South Asian immigrant women in Canada. The specific research question addressed is: How did the challenges experienced by South Asian women during the immigration process affect their cultural adaptation to Canada?

Using a qualitative feminist methodology (Jamal et al., 2025), the study examined the lived experiences of 10 South Asian women from primarily Pakistan who had lived in Canada between 2 to 8 years. By making visible the stories of the average person and how they "endure and survive structural obstacles and oppressions" (McLean et al., 2024, p. 1007), this paper highlights the alternative narratives of women's experiences compared to the dominant narratives often portrayed in Western accounts of women from the Global South in individual stories, movies, and media. These alternative narratives or stories are important because it has been the male narrative or androcentric perspective that has dominated the migration literature and influenced immigration policies and settlement practices (Zhu, 2016). A methodological approach that makes immigrant women's narratives visible can also address the postcolonial feminist critique about Western feminist assumptions that all marginalized women's experiences are similar, as individuals navigate linguistic, cultural, and epistemic barriers in their resettlement contexts (Smit et al., 2023; Katz, 2026). For example, immigrant women's experiences can be influenced by social factors related to class, education, and language differences in different ways, even though they share the same cultural, ethnic, and historical backgrounds (Schwartz et al., 2025). This study also provides insights that contradict beliefs that women generally accompany their husbands or male family members (Lutz, 2010) or arrive as a dependent family member (Pessar, 2005). Participants in this study included women immigrating under the economic class and family class categories, respectively. Most importantly, the study findings help us understand how marginalized groups, such as immigrant women from the same home country or region and with different migration

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histories, navigate cultural challenges and structural barriers in the host country. These empirical understandings can be used to propose recommendations to inform changes to policies and practices at different levels of society to reduce systemic inequality experienced by immigrant women. The sections that follow present the literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and implications of the study.

Literature Review

The literature review introduces the dominant migration theories used to explain the adaptation process of immigrants in a new country, followed by a critique of how these theories do not adequately explain and illuminate the experiences of marginalized groups. Thereafter, constructs germane to the study, from postcolonial theories, postcolonial feminist perspectives, and feminist perspectives are examined. It is then argued that linking these constructs to create a postcolonial feminist intersectional framework offers a comprehensive lens to analyze the interrelated systems and factors affecting the adaptation process of immigrant women.

Theories of Migration

The process of how people adapt to the culture of the host country—acculturation—has been theorized by many researchers with different underlying assumptions and evolving interpretations of the process. Gordon's (1964) assimilation theory is based on the premise that change is unidirectional, and the expectation is that when migrants interact with the host culture, they are expected to give up their heritage culture. This unidirectional process of assimilation was critiqued due to its hegemonic positioning of the superior culture (Laubenthal, 2023), which expected newcomers to assimilate or adopt the Anglo-Saxon values and norms at all societal levels and to abandon their heritage culture and values. Ortiz's (1995, 2019) theory of transculturation explains the adaptation process as the creation of a new, distinct cultural phenomena through the exchange and transformation of culture over time when diverse cultures come into contact. This latter theory of mutual exchange replaced the unidirectional theory that explained immigrants' adaptation as adopting mainstream cultural norms and values.

Berry (2005), a Canadian psychologist, expanded on the notion of "acculturation" as the process of cultural and psychological change that results from the contact between cultural groups and their members. He introduced a two-dimensional acculturation model to explain the psychological aspects of acculturation and adaptation strategies in a new country. In Berry's (2005) model, the focus is on two aspects: how much the newcomers want to maintain their cultural heritage (high/low) and how much they want to participate in and adopt the host society culture (high /low). Berry (2017) proposed four acculturation strategies: (a) assimilation (does not keep the heritage culture and adopts the host culture), (b) separation (maintains the heritage culture and avoids the host culture), (c) integration (maintains both the host culture and heritage culture), and (d) marginalization (minimal interest in both the heritage and host culture).

Berry's acculturation model has been critiqued for primarily focusing on demographic measures such as generational status, age at migration, and length of residence to assess immigrants' integration into the host society rather than taking into consideration how different situations and circumstances, such as language competency and family or community dynamics, influence the adaptation process (Panicacci, 2022). Another critique expressed is that the bidimensional model relies on an essentialist (as fixed or uniform) understanding of culture of both

majority and minority groups (Kunst, 2025) and assumes that the psychological processes of acculturation (with minor differences) are the same for all the groups (Bhatia, 2020). The bidirectional acculturation framework therefore does not capture the complexity of immigrants lived experiences and it fails to capture the fluid and intersecting nature of the adaptation experiences of immigrants, especially women from the Global South. The latter limitations call for a reconceptualization of acculturation beyond bidirectionality (Bhatia, 2020; Kunst, 2025; Schwartz et al., 2025).

We therefore draw on selected constructs from postcolonial theories, postcolonial feminist perspectives, and the feminist intersectional theory to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework to examine the resettlement experiences of marginalized women.

Postcolonial Constructs

The term postcolonial refers to both a historical period marked by the end of colonial rule, and a critical framework used to examine the lasting effects of colonialism on societies and relationships between colonizer and colonized (Ambesange, 2016; Karmi & Salar, 2024). Two of the relevant postcolonial theoretical constructs we draw upon for this paper are cultural hybridity and third space.

Cultural Hybridity. The term hybridity has its roots in biology and botany, where it describes the cross-pollination of two species to produce a third, distinct form (Sasse, 2022; Umar & Lawan, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). In the context of language and culture, the concept of hybridity arose in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) in relation to the evolution of languages; hybridity was later used by Bhabha (2012) to explain how a hybrid culture often emerges when immigrants' heritage and host culture interact to give rise to a new form of culture and identity (Bhandari, 2022; Umar & Lawan, 2024). Hybridity is a contested term in the literature, and Voicu (2011, p. 173) suggests that "hybridity involves focusing on 'positioning,' rather than on 'mixing' of cultural forms" and it involves seeing the "relation between the 'centre' and the 'margin'" such as between majority and minority. In this sense, the adaptation of immigrants to a new culture or country is an ongoing process of negotiation between the host and heritage culture (Bhandari, 2022).

Bakhtin (1981) described hybridity as organic and intentional to explain two different processes of cultural adaptation. Organic hybridity occurs through the unconscious incorporation of cultural elements such as language, traditions, and music that develop naturally through "prolonged cultural contact" (Li, 2025, p. 26). Intentional hybridity, on the other hand, occurs when there are conflicting points of view or cultural differences and conscious questioning of dominant narratives or hegemonic discourses, ideologies, and cultural power which may result in changes to cultural perspectives (Li, 2025). Bakhtin's concept of intentional hybridity emphasizes the interplay of diverse voices, perspectives, and cultural influences in a new dialogic space where new meanings are negotiated by listening to and understanding two (or more) cultural perspectives (Sasse, 2022). A person in this dialogic space is also double-voiced—the person communicates one intention through their speech or visual action in the dominant/colonizer culture, while the same words and actions communicate a hidden meaning or intention understood by the colonized community (Voicu, 2011).

In migration contexts, intentional hybridity can be used to explain how newcomers negotiate heritage and host cultures. For example, Tarlo (2010) examines how Muslim women in Britain consciously make a choice and use agency to align with the host culture norms about dress (e.g., wearing scarves to cover their heads in ways that align with Western fashion), signifying a

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surface adherence to the dominant cultural norms for dress. However, the scarf has a double meaning for the women and the community, signifying adherence to religious values of modesty. The newcomer immigrant, then, can hold more than one form of cultural identity simultaneously (Moslund, 2024).

Cultural identities are not rigid and are always in flux and constantly negotiated due to constant exposure to multiple perspectives and cultures. The multiple voices and cultures that influence identity formation are not from people and artifacts confined within the borders of one country; cultural identity transformation is transnational—people in communities within a country are exposed to complex, intersecting ideas and cultures from across borders through movement of people (e.g., migration, resettlement, diaspora), and movement of ideas and artifacts (e.g., social media, film, and art; Maitland, 2019).

Third Space. Building upon Bakhtin's notion of cultural hybridity, Bhabha (2012) proposed the notion of Third Space—an in-between space in which individuals reflect on their lived experiences, exercise their agency, and resist hegemonic representation. Bhabha further argued that interactions between colonizing and colonized cultures give rise to a new, hybrid or blended cultural space. This third space is not fully associated with either the colonizer or the colonized culture but instead represents a site of transformation and negotiation (Sasse, 2022) where hybrid cultural identities are formed. For example, when the host country has a normalized hegemonic practice (e.g., in Quebec, public sector employees such as teachers cannot wear religious symbols such as a head covering at work), Bhabha's concept of hybridity "opens up a third space of/for rearticulating negotiation and meaning" (Voicu, 2011, p. 177). Bhabha's notion of third space helps challenge dominant narratives, raises questions about unequal power relations, and supports more comprehensive understandings of how immigrant women navigate their cultural and religious identities during the resettlement process. While Bhabha's concept offers a space for negotiation, critics argue that it is does not fully account for the everyday lived experiences of marginalized individuals or the material inequalities that influence how identities are formed and negotiated in these spaces (Bhandari, 2022; Umar & Lawan, 2024).

Postcolonial Feminist Constructs

Postcolonial feminist writings in the literature emerged in the 1980s from writers in the Global South in places such as Britian's former colonies India, Africa, and the Caribbean. These writers (Mohanty, 2023; Spivak, 1988) sought to provide a counter narrative to dominant Western narratives of women in the Global South (Young, 2020). Two constructs that emerged as consequential for disrupting myths about women from the Global South were subalternity and monolithic portrayals.

Subalternity and Monolithic Portrayals. In postcolonial studies, marginalized groups, often defined by gender and ethnicity, are referred to as subalterns (Rani et al., 2025; Young, 2020). The term subaltern was introduced by Antonio Gramsci (2021) to identify the groups that are excluded from a society's established institutions and denied the means to have a voice in their society. Postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak (1988) used the expression "the subaltern cannot speak" to illustrate the different forms of silencing experienced by colonized women. In South Asian cultures such as India, patriarchal systems create social structures that marginalize women and place them in subordinate roles. Patriarchy manifests in different ways such as through male-

dominated structures defined by traditional gender roles in the family and society (Tonsing & Tonsing, 2019), through cultural customs like arranged marriages and dowries (Bhopal, 2019; Husain, 2019) and through patrilocality, where brides live with the husband's extended family (Hirschman, 2016). During British colonization, patriarchal practices within social customs (e.g., marriages) were reinforced by British colonizers when they codified these social customs into law, giving men legal rights to exercise authority over women (Chitnis & Wright, 2007).

Kerner (2017) expands on other ways in which women from the Global South have been silenced. He does this by expanding the notion of a subaltern as an individual who may have voice and agency, but their concerns and experiences are not taken seriously by Western scholars because of how Western literature represents and portrays them (G. Ahmed, 2021). For example, Spivak (1988) illustrates how the construct Third World Women, used to refer to women from the Global South, conveys the message that they have the same identity, have no voice, and are victims of patriarchal, colonial, or religious oppression. Postcolonial feminist scholars thus challenge the use of constructs in Western and feminist literature that communicate universal assumptions such as portraying women as having monolithic or uniform experiences of oppression. Western literature and Western feminist writings have mediated, distorted, or ignored the voices of women from the Global South and have thus contributed to reinforcing colonial and patriarchal power structures (Bergeron & Marchand, 2019; Kerner, 2017; Spivak, 1988). Hutchings (2019, p. xii) explains how dominant Western perspectives have also contributed to marginalizing women from the Global South; the belief that "voice is the mark of agency and silence is the mark of passivity and subordination" conveys the perception that women from the West have voice and agency, while women and often men from the East do not. The idea of agency as voice and of silence as passivity overlooks the ways silence can serve as a form of resistance (Bergeron & Marchand, 2019; Hutchings, 2019). Postcolonial feminist scholars therefore emphasize the importance of recognizing diverse, context-specific forms of agency and rejecting the tendency to interpret all women's experiences of oppression as the same (Bhandari, 2022; Rani et al., 2025).

Feminist Constructs

Transnational, anti-racist, feminist scholars such as Jamal et al. (2025) call for South Asian scholarship to be grounded in a critical feminist intersectional approach that foregrounds gender and migration.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality encompasses how gender intersects with various social factors such as race, class, culture, family background, and ethnicity to shape individuals' experiences (Carastathis, 2014; Singh et al., 2021). The construct of intersectionality was a response to the overlapping forms of oppression faced by marginalized women, particularly through race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) used this construct to explain how racism and sexism intersect to create unique challenges for Black women in the United States. She categorizes intersectionality as structural, political, and representational to illustrate how various forms of inequality intersect with gender to shape the lived experiences of marginalized women of color (G. Ahmed, 2021). The structural intersectionality lens is used to examine how social structures such as not speaking the host country language or institutional barriers (e.g., laws and policies) marginalize individuals and sustain overlapping forms of oppression. The structural lens brings attention to how racism and sexism affect racialized women in many spheres of life such as healthcare and jobs. Political intersectionality emphasizes how women of color are affected by conflicting political agendas; for example, how laws related to domestic violence and sexual

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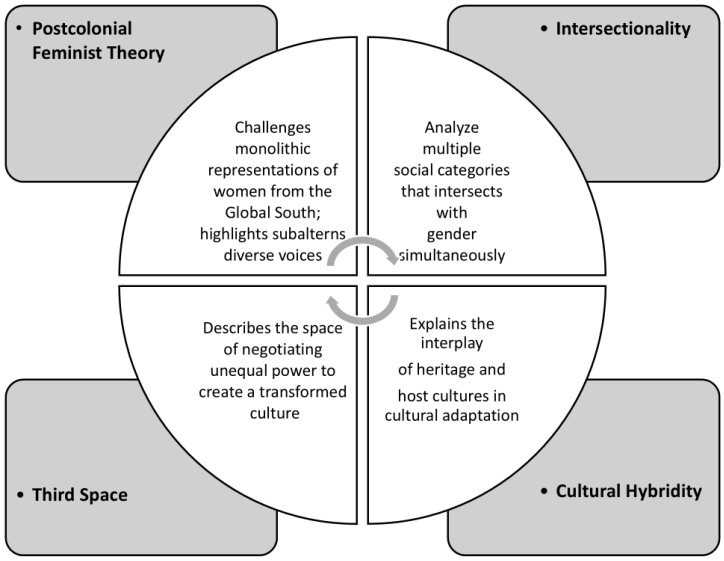
abuse, typically shaped by the race and gender of the dominant group (men and white women), are enacted and cause oppression and inequities. Representational intersectionality highlights how cultural representations such as media, literature, and popular discourse that perpetuate dominant Eurocentric views, can lead to the oppressive treatment of racialized individuals. For example, racialized women, especially women from the Global South are portrayed as either exotic, overly aggressive, or passive and lacking agency (Gandhi, 2019; Tyagi, 2014; Young, 2020). These portrayals influence how women are viewed and treated in society.

Together, these three dimensions of intersectionality offer a framework to understand how overlapping oppressive systems intersect and affect the lives of marginalized people. As Singh et al. (2021) note, intersectionality provides insight into the complex experiences of diverse populations and highlights the importance of attending to multiple perspectives. Singh et al. (2021) also elaborate that intersectionality acknowledges that individuals within the same group may occupy different social positions, which lead to different interpersonal experiences, including moments of tension. Using a feminist intersectional perspective, therefore, disrupts the monolithic portrayal of marginalized women. It directs attention to gender relations and how gender intersects with multiple factors such as age, class, race, and ethnicity to shape or reproduce social inequalities (Izaguirre et al., 2025)

A Postcolonial Feminist Intersectional Framework

Since Berry's four-fold acculturation framework fails to recognize the fluid and multi-faceted nature of adaptation into the host culture and how immigrant women draw from both their heritage and the host culture to resolve internal conflicts (Zhao, 2024), the constructs discussed in the literature review above are connected in a framework that can illuminate the complexities of the adaptation process of immigrant women. Postcolonial constructs of cultural hybridity and third space, the postcolonial feminist perspectives of subalternity and non-monolithic representations of women, and the feminist intersectionality perspective are illustrated in Figure 1. This Postcolonial Feminist, Intersectional Framework explains cultural adaptation of women in the host country through the construct of cultural hybridity—the adaptation process is characterized by gender intersecting with multiple social and cultural structures or systems, and hierarchical power relations across borders within a third space. In the third space, subaltern women choose to articulate new forms of cultural meaning and cultural identities through an ongoing process of collaboration, contestation, and negotiation. The integration of postcolonial and postcolonial feminist theory constructs with an intersectional perspective thereby offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing interrelated systems of power and oppression (Cheung, 2014; Piccinelli et al., 2025). Using this integrated framework enables subalterns' authentic stories to become visible. In this study, the Postcolonial Feminist Intersectional Framework illuminates immigrant women's experiences of adaptation in relation to the complex interplay of class, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, patriarchy, and gender within mainstream Western societies.

Figure 1
A Postcolonial Feminist Intersectional Framework



Note: The theoretical framework in Figure 1 illustrates an integrated model with postcolonial constructs cultural hybridity and third space, postcolonial feminist constructs, and a feminist intersectionality perspective to illuminate the immigration and adaptation experiences of immigrant women from the Global South.

Methodology and Methods

Qualitative Feminist Research

Lim (2025) argues that qualitative research is a suitable approach for capturing social phenomena that involve the experiences and perspectives of participants. However, using a general qualitative approach may not necessarily elucidate the nuances and in-depth perspectives of marginalized women. Early feminist research often overlooked the experiences of women of color from the Global South, as white feminism tended to claim a universal perspective on women's lives (Singh et al., 2021). Jamal et al. (2025) therefore advocates for South Asian scholarship that adopts a critical feminist intersectional approach with a focus on gender and migration. This qualitative study, conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation (G. Ahmed, 2021), used feminist research approaches, particularly in-depth interviews, and intersectionality as an analytical tool (Collins, 2019). Postcolonial constructs were also used to examine how social and cultural structures, characterized by hierarchical power relations and unequal forms of privilege, shape the resettlement experiences of women from the Global South.

A postcolonial feminist approach is particularly appropriate for this study. First, a critical feminist lens enables the examination of the intersectional marginalization of immigrant women from postcolonial countries, highlighting how gender, race, class, language, and ethnicity intersect, and how women exercise agency to resist oppression. Second, the postcolonial framework situates the experiences of immigrant women from the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan and India) within their

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historical and colonial contexts. This approach guides the analysis and interpretation, ensuring that participants' experiences are understood within both structural and historical frameworks.

Reflexivity and Researcher's Insider-Outsider Position

In qualitative research, a researcher's beliefs about knowledge influence how a study is conducted, especially when studying their own ethnic community (Park, 2025). Reflexivity is therefore important, as it encourages researchers to continuously reflect on their role and influence throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). A key challenge during such research is maintaining appropriate distance, as becoming too close to the community may lead researchers to project their own experiences onto participants or to overlook important patterns because they appear familiar (Park, 2025). To address this concern, the first author engaged in reflexivity through ongoing critical reflection (Park, 2025) on how her perspectives shaped decisions made during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Recognizing biases helped the first author to prioritize women's voices and experiences when analyzing and presenting the data.

Occupying both insider and outsider positions enabled the first author to balance rapport and analytical distance. As an insider, the first author shared the South Asian immigrant identity and the immigration experiences as a spousal wife, which assisted in building trust with participants. As an outsider, she was able to step back and critically analyze the data and not let her experiences influence her interpretation of findings. Within the third space, the researcher (the first author) co-constructed a hybrid identity with participants, for example by learning about the cultural practices of a Jain woman from Rajasthan and by relating to women who had immigrated under the economic class category.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment of participants commenced after the University Research Ethics Board (REB) granted permission to conduct the study. Criteria for recruitment were that all participants:

- should be residing in Canada between 2–8 years
- must be over 18 years of age
- must be from Pakistan and /or India.

Invitation letters to participate in the study were posted on bulletin boards at various South Asian community centers, an Immigration Working Centre (IWS), and Language Instructors for Newcomers program (LINC) in Southwestern Ontario (G. Ahmed, 2021). The LINC program and IWS program were purposefully selected to recruit recently arrived immigrant women. Since the study focus was on female immigrants' experiences from the Global South and of South Asian ethnicity, all participants who volunteered, including from India, were included in the study. Religion was not a criterion.

Purposive sampling is recommended when the research goal is to gain detailed insights and improve analytical or cross-population generalizability (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Participants were intentionally selected based on the researcher's understanding of the study topic and clearly defined inclusion criteria. By selecting participants who shared specific characteristics related to the research questions, the study ensured the sample was appropriate and aligned with the research objectives. This focused selection strengthened the depth and validity of the findings. Ten participants who volunteered, and met the recruitment criteria, were selected to participate in the study.

The demographic characteristics of six participants, immigrating under the Economic Class (EC) category to Canada, are shown in Table 1. In this category, acceptance to Canada is calculated on a point system based on factors such as English language ability, education level, age, and work experience. Five participants were from Pakistan and one from a western state in India.

Table 1
Demographic Data of Participants in the Economy Class Immigration Category (EC) (G. Ahmed, 2021)

	Immigrant women participants	Religion	Country of origin	Age (years)	No. of years in Canada
1	Ammara	Islam	Pakistan	42	6
2	Nana	Islam	Pakistan	44	3
3	Sara	Islam	Pakistan	41	2
4	Aarfa	Islam	Pakistan	44	6
5	Faria	Islam	India	30	2

Table 2 shows the demographics of four participants who arrived under the Family Class (FC) category (adult residents or citizens in Canada sponsor close family members, such as spouses and children)—three from small cities in Pakistan, and one from a northern state in India.

Table 2
Demographic data of participants in the Family Class Immigration Category (FC)(G. Ahmed, 2021)

	Immigrant women participants	Religion	Country of origin	Age (years)	No. of years in Canada
7	Noor	Islam	Pakistan	26	2
8	Samr	Islam	Pakistan	42	7
9	Seema	Islam	Pakistan	41	3
10	Pooja	Jainism	India	41	2

Ethical Protocol and Confidentiality

A key principle of qualitative and feminist research is following ethical guidelines that protect participants' identities and minimizes potential risks (Lim, 2025). An informed consent letter was sent to each participant to explain the purpose of the study, the research process and the terms of participation (G. Ahmed, 2021). They were also informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences (G. Ahmed, 2021). Unequal power relationships between the researcher and participants were minimized through processes such as regular communication. The latter helped to establish trust with participants. Pseudonyms were used to maintain participants' anonymity.

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Semi-Structured Interviews

Within feminist research, qualitative interviews are regarded as a valuable tool for capturing the lived experiences of participants (Roberts, 2020). An in-depth interview method was used to obtain rich, detailed insights from participants through use of semi-structured questions (G. Ahmed, 2021). This method, as Park (2025) notes, is useful for examining ethnic minority communities encountering cultural challenges in the host society "as it involves a profound process of mutual understanding and reciprocity" (p. 41). Roberts (2020) and Naz et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of conducting a thorough literature review when creating semi-structured interview questions, as it helps researchers understand the topic, develop relevant questions, and ensures the interview is grounded in existing research. Using a semi-structured interview also lets the researcher explore new topics that come up during the conversation and provides the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Naz et al., 2022; Roberts, 2020).

The interviews were guided by two sets of questions The first set of questions were related to demographics that asked participants to share their family background, and where they lived before coming to Canada (G. Ahmed, 2021). This helped build trust with the participants and provided their historical and current context. The second set of questions included flexible-worded, semi-structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Naz et al., 2022) that were related to immigration and resettlement challenges and gender roles in both the home and host country. Since the first author is fluent in Hindi and Urdu, interviews were conducted in both languages, although some participants chose to speak in English. A few participants requested phone interviews, as they felt this format provided greater privacy and anonymity. Farooq and de Villiers (2017) argue that phone interviews can help shy participants feel more at ease and speak more openly. They also recommend a short pre-interview phone call to build trust and explain the interview process. The first author therefore conducted a brief pre-interview phone call to explain the interview procedures and establish trust with participants. This strategy can also support equity and inclusion by making participation more accessible to diverse participants (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Interviews were audio-recorded and were 30 to 50 minutes long.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is a multifaceted process. We applied Braun and Clarke's (2021, p. 57) deductive thematic analysis that "allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences". The first step began with careful reading of all participants' interview transcripts, with annotated notes made to identify patterns. Patterns were then compared with the relevant literature to develop an initial understanding of the data. The second step involved coding the data. NVivo (Version 12) was used to organize and manage the data, including interview transcripts, researcher memos, and notes on categories developed during coding. In qualitative research, a "code" is a word or short phrase that captures the key attribute of a segment of text or visual data (Caulfield, 2023). More than 50 initial codes were generated through an open coding strategy (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). After completing open coding, the researcher grouped similar codes together. This stage, known as axial coding, involves identifying relationships among open codes by organizing them into categories and subcategories. The third step involved identifying themes by grouping together similar subcategories to form broader patterns and relationships. The fourth step was to review the themes to ensure they were clear, meaningful, and addressed the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For example, several

participants spoke about family, which was coded as family support and contributed to the sub-theme, family kinship structure. Since we used an intersectionality lens, we grouped codes to create intersecting sub-themes to address a major theme, Structural and Representational Barriers, that was derived from the research question. Table 3 shows all the codes derived from participant data to create intersecting sub-themes for the broad theme, *Structural and Representational Barriers.*

Table 3

Process of Coding into Intersecting Sub-themes for Structural and Representational Barriers

Sub-category/sub-themes	Code	Participants' Quotes (G. Ahmed, 2021)
Family kinship structure and cultural role expectations	– Family system – Cultural obligations	Pooja: "*Family problem*, *bari family thee* [it's large family], kids were small. Actually, at first my kids were small, so I didn't want to come, *then my in-laws also did not want me to leave with children and wanted us to stay with them"* (G. Ahmed, 2021, p 192).
Canadian expectations for childcare and family kinship structure	– Family support – Leaving children at home	Seema: "Here we have to do all the work by ourselves … and we don't have servants or maid here who can *take care of our children*. Over there [back home] we have a *family system*, like all my family live in the same neighborhood. ... Here you don't see this. This is a big responsibility. You *must take them* [children] with you everywhere, and you can't go alone" (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 123). Aarfa: "You don't have that *support system* here. My mother's house was very close to mine in Pakistan. … Whenever you want to *leave your kids*, you can leave them at your parents' house. You can't have this over here" (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 96).
Childcare services and cultural role expectations	– Affordable daycare – Women's role as mother and caregiver – Limited job opportunities – Childcare – Men as caregiver	Faria: "I was *not going to be able to work over there* [India] because of *the culture* and because of lots of things. I *wouldn't be able to work* and that is not something I was okay with. The main thing was that we must change our lifestyle … like me *being a housewife* and not doing anything. Looking after the house and the kids was obviously worthwhile, but it was not done on my terms. I don't mind being housewife, but I did mind being under someone else" (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 209). Faria: "I have small kids; the biggest challenge I have that *I wanted to work* but at the same time I couldn't because I was looking at *childcare* which are really ***expensive*** here. Also, impossible to get into any *childcare place* because everywhere is *full*. So that is the problem, that I still am facing it actually. That is why I wasn't able to continue to work." (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 193). Kareema: "When you are brought up in Pakistan, you are *expected by the culture* … that *family is first, then is your career*. When I rethink it since I have been here [Canada], and I see that it doesn't need to be [like] all the time that I have to think about myself in order to survive. We see *men are also taking care of the children* …[our] preconception has been broken, seeing men and the women taking the other

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		role. *I have taken more financial role*, which I never did in Pakistan" (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 210)
Employment and education credentials	Non-recognition of credentials	Aarfa: "I think I will describe my experience as painful and stressful. Another thing was *that our education and credential from back home is not recognized*. You are nothing. You have to start from zero or from scratch. It was very painful for me that I have so much experience, research experience and it was not acceptable here. I was in much of a stress because of this" (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 192)
Heritage culture and religious practices versus Canadian norms and social practices	– Western ways of women dressing – Cultural norms and values	Pooja: "Culture also different; especially for kids. For example, here everything is very open; especially *how women dresses here compared to how women dress in India*; especially where I come from. In India we don't see openness" (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 195). Ammara: "It changed a little bit. ... Children question that in Pakistan it was like that, here women are like this. I mean that here women are more liberal. *Back home women wear the scarf/hijab*, and they *don't mingle with men that are not related to them, don't shake hands with men"* (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 195).

Strategies to Enhance Validity and Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed the construct, trustworthiness, to assess qualitative studies. Trustworthiness includes ensuring the research is credible (authentic with accurate reporting of the findings), transferable (applicable to other contexts), and confirmable (i.e., unbiased) so that other researchers can apply them (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; S. K. Ahmed, 2024).

To reduce researcher bias, the first author kept detailed analytic notes to explain why specific phrases were selected or excluded and conducted inter-rater comparisons and discussions with the second author. Memo writing, as highlighted by Thornberg and Charmaz (2014), further supported the analysis by linking emerging insights to relevant theoretical concepts and issues raised during the interviews. This approach also encouraged the first author to critically reflect on their assumptions and their potential effect on the process of coding and interpretation of the data. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants when clarification was needed, and transcripts were then sent out to participants for member-checking. S. K. Ahmed (2024) describes some essential strategies that can establish trustworthiness. In line with this, the first author took several steps as described in Table 4 to maintain trustworthiness including data from multiple sources (interviews, follow-up interviews, and researcher notes and memos), member checking, peer review, maximum variation in sample, thick description, and reflexivity (as discussed in the previous section).

Table 4

Strategies to Enhance Trustworthiness of the Research Findings

Criteria and Strategies (S. K. Ahmed, 2024; Guba, 1981)	Description of Specific Strategies in Study
Credibility:	
Multiple sources of data Member checks Peer review	Semi-structured interviews: "Researcher notes during the interviews/listening to the interview recordings several times and making notes and memos" (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 77) Follow-up interviews. Participants read the interview transcript for accuracy. Co-author reviewed data and interpretation and made comments.
Transferability:	
Maximum variation Thick description	Purposeful selection of 10 participants from the immigration categories: *Family class and Economy class* (G. Ahmed, 2021). Described participants detailed lived experiences (G. Ahmed, 2021)
Confirmability:	
Reflexivity	Reported researcher's position in the study, assumptions related to topic, and steps to reduce biases during the data collection and interpretation process.

Findings

This section presents the thematic finding in response to the research question: How did the challenges experienced by South Asian women during the immigration process affect their cultural adaptation to Canada? A postcolonial feminist intersectional lens was used to provide insights and understand the challenges experienced by these immigrant women participants. The findings identify intersecting structural and representational barriers that influenced women's agency during the migration and adaptation process in Canada. The section also provides the authentic stories of how South Asian women negotiated their identities within a third space to construct fluid cultural hybrid identities.

Structural and Representational Barriers and Agency

The data show that in their first year in Canada, all participants experienced challenges that influenced their adaptation and agency—the capacity and power to make choices—to meet their goals and aspirations in the new country. Excerpts from the narratives of the South Asian women participants are used to illustrate the different ways women from the same region and ethnic group experienced cultural adaptation. The following structural and representational barriers emerged and intersected with gender: family kinship structure, cultural role expectations, Canadian expectations for childcare, childcare services, employment and education credentials, heritage cultural and religious beliefs and practices, and Canadian social norms and practices.

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Family Kinship Structure and Cultural Role Expectations. Seven out of 10 participants described living with extended family in their heritage country. The structure of the South Asian family is based on kinship, where the bride lives with the husband's family and takes on the role of caregiver to all members of the family (Bhopal, 2019). Family kinship structure and cultural role expectations were reported by some participants as factors that restricted them from joining their husbands in Canada during the initial immigration process. For example, Seema stayed behind in Pakistan because her husband wanted her to take care of his mother. Pooja, who was from Rajasthan, India, and practices Jainism, also stayed in India for more than a decade with her two children before joining her husband because she took care of all members of the family, and her in-laws also did not want her and the children to move far away. Pooja described her situation (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 192) as,

> At first my kids were small, so I didn't want to come, then my in-laws also did not want me to leave with children and wanted us to stay with them. (Pooja, Transcript).

Another participant (Samr) described how the family kinship structure created barriers during her adaptation in Canada. Her husband had sponsored her and his parents, and they lived together in a joint family home. Samr's movements outside the home were restricted by her mother-in-law, who expected Samr to take on all the domestic responsibilities in the household. As a result, Samr was not allowed to attend English language (ESL) classes or take driving lessons. These expectations, based on heritage cultural norms for a daughter-in-law, restricted her opportunities outside the home. It was about six years after immigration that Samr gained enough confidence to enroll in an ESL program. In the case of Samr, it took her a long time and through contact with other women, to create a third space within the context of a dominant and hierarchical family kinship structure. In this space she was able to challenge the cultural role expectation to be the housewife and assert her agency to learn English and drive, skills that supported her adaptation into Canadian society. This example also shows how family structural barriers for South Asian women are not limited to the period before migration but continue to affect their lives after settling in Canada.

Canadian Expectations for Childcare and Family Kinship Structure. Two participants discussed the differences in childcare expectations between Canada and Pakistan. They explained that in Canada, the expectation was that parents are fully responsible for their children and cannot leave them unattended. In Pakistan, childcare was described as more flexible and supported by extended family members who provided regular childcare support. Seema, for example explained the differences in childcare support in her native country compared to Canada. According to Seema (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 123):

> We don't have servants or maid here who can take care of our children. Over there [back home] we have a family system, like all my family live in the same neighborhood. … Here you don't see this. This is a big responsibility. You must take them [children] with you everywhere, and you can't go alone. (Seema Transcript)

Another participant also expressed missing her parents who provided a support system when she was in Pakistan. Aarfa explained, "You don't have that support system here. My mother's house was very close to mine in Pakistan. … Whenever you want to leave your kids, you can leave them at your parents' house. You can't have this over here" (Aarfa, Transcript).

For most of the participants, childcare expectations in Canada and the lack of a family support system for childcare acted as structural barriers during the resettlement process in Canada.

Childcare Services and Cultural Role Expectations. Several participants with young children spoke about limited access to affordable daycare services and how that limited access restricted their opportunities to find jobs and to work outside the home. Childcare programs play an essential role in supporting immigrant women transition to life in Canada (Fakhari et al., 2025). In our study, Faria, with a business degree, was from an urban city in India. In 2016, she emigrated to Canada under the economic class with her husband and two children for improved job opportunities and for a better future for her children (G. Ahmed, 2021). Another reason that she gave for moving to Canada was to create distance between herself and her in-laws and extended family members to prevent their interference in her life. Faria described her pre-immigration situation (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 209) as:

> I was not going to be able to work over there [India] because of the culture and because of lots of things. I wouldn't be able to work and that is not something I was okay with. The main thing was that we must change our lifestyle … like me being a housewife and not doing anything. Looking after the house and the kids was obviously worthwhile, but it was not done on my terms. I don't mind being housewife, but I did mind being under someone else. (Faria, Transcript)

However, Faria was unable to fulfil her aspiration to work on a permanent basis after immigrating to Canada. Faria explained (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 193) that:

> I have small kids. The biggest challenge I have is that I wanted to work, but at the same time I couldn't, because I was looking at childcare, which are expensive here. Also, it is impossible to get into any childcare place because everywhere is full. So that is the problem that I still am facing. That is why I couldn't continue to work. I just worked for a 3-month period. Childcare is the problem that I still couldn't sort it out. I think that is the biggest challenge I faced. (Faria, Transcript)

Faria's adaptation process was characterized by internal conflicts between her heritage cultural role expectation to be the primary caregiver at home and her understanding of western perspectives of women making their own decisions about working. Upon her arrival in Canada, she created a hybrid cultural identity where she maintained her heritage beliefs about the role of women being caregivers and ascribed to western beliefs about her agency to choose to work. However, lack of affordable day care and long waitlists restricted her access to and her agency to pursue her goal of working. Fakhari et al. (2025) noted that limited funding for childcare programs at settlement agencies contributed to insufficient "organizational capacity" (p. 88) to provide childcare services for families in need.

Kareema, from an urban city in Pakistan, also arrived under the same immigration category (EC) as Faria, with a similar educational background and a young child. Kareema, however, had a different pre-immigration experience with respect to pursuing career goals. Although she was raised in a joint family with aunts, uncles, and grandparents, Kareema had experience working for international companies in her home country and was referred to as a "thinker of the family" (G. Ahmed, 2021). She was therefore the principal applicant during the immigration process. Nevertheless, Kareema's pre-immigration experiences were affected by cultural role expectations of how women are expected to put the family first and not contribute financially to the household. According to Kareema (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 211),

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> When you are brought up in Pakistan, you are expected by the culture … that family is first, then is your career. When I rethink it since I have been here [Canada], and I see that it doesn't need to be [like that] all the time, that I have to think about myself in order to survive. We see men are also taking care of the children … [our] preconception has been broken, seeing men and the women taking the other role. I have taken more financial role, which I never did in Pakistan. (Kareema, Transcript)

In comparison to Faria, Kareema negotiated the need for childcare support to enable her to pursue her career goals through cultural adaptation in a different way because of her unique situation. She engaged internally and externally to negotiate intersecting tensions— that women put their family first and men were the financial providers. Kareema created a third space where she reflected on her heritage beliefs about the role of women and men in the home and invited her husband into this space to develop a new hybrid identity; she exercised her agency and took on more of the financial provider role while her husband took on more of the caregiver role in the family.

Employment and Education Credentials. Besides childcare support, the non-recognition of foreign educational credentials was identified by participants as a significant barrier to finding work during their first 2 years in Canada and this barrier affected their well-being and identity during the cultural adaptation process. Women in the study described this period as highly stressful, particularly those who had immigrated under the economic class category and needed employment for financial support. For example, Kareema and Aarfa found that their qualifications were not recognized upon arrival, which limited their employment opportunities and created additional emotional stress. Aarfa, who had been an Assistant Professor at a university in Pakistan prior to migration, described the emotional impact of this experience (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 192),

> Another thing was that our education and credentials from back home are not recognized. You are nothing. You have to start from zero or from scratch. It was very painful for me that I have so much experience, research experience, and it was not acceptable here. I was stressed because of this. (Aarfa Transcript)

Aarfa's cultural adaptation, in the first years of resettlement, was affected by the Foreign Credential Recognition Program (FCRP; Government of Canada, 2023), a complex, systemic structure that can be challenging for newcomers to navigate. This system therefore exerted power through non-recognition of credentials. The FCRP process and outcome undermined her identity of being an educated, respected professional, made her question her sense of self, and marginalized her access to the workplace. Lack of recognition of education credentials also reinforces patriarchal beliefs of women having an inferior status than men.

Although Aarfa's PhD credentials were eventually recognized, she was unable to secure an academic position and had to change careers. Her cultural adaptation in this context was characterized by constant negotiation of internal factors (e.g., belief in one's abilities) and external factors (e.g., credential structure that acted as obstacle). The fact that she completed a Canadian certification program in psychotherapy and later obtained employment as a psychotherapist indicates that she developed resilience and created a hybrid identity that drew on her prior education from her home country and different opportunities in Canada to establish a different career. Although not applicable to Aarfa, the non-recognition of foreign credentials often forces

immigrants to take low-paying or manual jobs, which increases their risk of economic and social marginalization (Karki, 2026).

Heritage Cultural and Religious Beliefs and Practices and Canadian Norms and Social Practices. Heritage cultural and religious beliefs and practices also intersected with Canadian norms and social practices and affected participants' cultural adaptation and identify formation as illustrated in the following accounts.

Ammara, who lived her life according to "Muslim standards of reserve, restraint, and modesty required of pious Muslim women" (Mahmood, 2006, pp. 51–52) explained, "back home, women wear the scarf/hijab, and they don't mingle with men who are not related to them. We don't shake hands with men." After moving to Canada, Ammara tried to refrain from the Western practice of shaking hands with men, but she also taught her children that in some contexts in society they would need to change their behaviors (such as shaking the hands of men) to meet Canadian social expectations. In this example, we see how the heritage cultural belief that women show modesty and respect by not touching men is different from the Western norm that shaking hands is a sign of politeness and respect. Ammara negotiated this tension during the adaptation process by making the intentional choice to develop a fluid, hybrid identity that was situational. She maintained her heritage religious practice (not shaking hands with men) in most situations and would adopt the Western handshake, if necessary, in a specific situation.

Another tension that Ammara experienced during the adaptation process in Canada was whether to retain the traditional scarf or hijab and the long coat (Abaya) she wore in Pakistan or wear Western clothes. Ammara negotiated this tension by choosing to modify her dress; she created a hybrid identity by wearing modest Western clothing (adopting some aspects of Western culture) and a headscarf (retaining some aspects of her heritage culture to show modesty). While her Western dress signified a degree of adoption of the host country norms, the modest clothing and a headscarf signified the hidden intention of maintaining her cultural and religious values—in this way she was double-voiced (Bakhtin, 1981). Another participant, Pooja, who migrated from Rajasthan, India, and is a Hindu, experienced similar tensions around heritage cultural beliefs and Western societal beliefs. Pooja described how women in Rajasthan often covered their faces with a veil. Pooja was expected to always wear a veil and explained (G. Ahmed, 2021, p. 113),

> Actually, when you are living at home with your in laws, you have to put a ghoonghat, don't talk to any men, as well with women who are older than you [elder women]. Always covered, and with the ghonghat. (Pooja, Transcript)

The practice of "Ghoonghat" where married, Hindu women use the end of the sari or a veil to cover the face up to the chin, or just covering the head, signifies respect and deference to elders (Abraham, 2017). After moving to Canada, Pooja negotiated this tension and created a hybrid identity by adopting the Western norm that it is acceptable for women's heads to be uncovered (she chose not to wear the veil) and retaining Hindu modesty expectations of married women (she adopted modest Western style clothing). Pooja made this intentional choice to reduce feelings of being different and to blend into mainstream Canadian society.

The above examples of how these South Asian immigrant women negotiated their intersecting heritage cultural and religious practices and Western cultural norms and practices indicate the adaptation process as a unique and individual process with the creation of different hybrid identities in different situations or contexts.

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Discussion

This qualitative study (G. Ahmed, 2021) used a feminist methodology to explore the pre-migration and adaptation experiences of 10 South Asian immigrant women in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. A postcolonial feminist intersectional framework (illustrated in Figure 1) was used to examine how intersecting structural, cultural, and social factors intersected with gender and affected women participants' cultural adaption in the host country. The findings illustrate how structural and representational barriers (Crenshaw, 1991; Singh et al., 2021) intersected in women's lives, creating challenges and different forms of marginalization. The findings also show how these intersecting barriers hindered women's agencies and limited their opportunities based on the individual situation of the women. The main intersecting influences/barriers that emerged in this study included family kinship structures such as extended family, Canadian expectations for childcare, cultural role expectations of women as primary caregivers, lack of affordable childcare services, non-recognition of education credentials, and heritage and host country's cultural and social beliefs, norms, and practices. For example, participants reported that lack of extended family to help care for children, cultural gender role expectations such as women being housewives and caregivers, and limited access to affordable childcare prevented them from going out to work or attending training programs to upgrade their language and job skills. Our findings support the findings of Phan et al. (2015) on how interrelated factors associated with family (e.g., gender role expectations, extended family support, cost of childcare) negatively impacted women's adaptation experiences in Canada. The non-recognition of heritage country education credentials emerged as a significant structural barrier that hindered employment and economic prospects of these South Asian immigrant women and is similar to findings reported by other recent studies in Canada (e.g., Amoako et al., 2024; Karki, 2026). As well, cultural role expectations and family responsibilities, often reinforced through the practice of patrilocality (Hirschman, 2016), prevented some participants from migrating and delayed family reunification. Our findings reinforce the contention that the South Asian kinship structures can present challenges in the immigration process as noted by Bhopal (2019).

While the barriers identified in this study are based on South Asian women's adaptation experiences, similar structural and representation barriers have been reported among women of other nationalities and ethnicities migrating to Canada and other western countries. For example, Ansion and Merali (2018) reported on the important role of the extended family for childcare during the adaptation process of Latino immigrants to Canada; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2022) highlighted the role of extended families and beliefs about the father's role for child rearing in relation to African immigrant women in Canada; and Hamada and Wakamatsu (2025) identified Japanese cultural beliefs about men as primary earners and women as homemakers and non-recognition of educational qualifications as barriers to Japanese women and men during resettlement in Australia. The latter studies indicate women immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Japan, having traditional family gender role expectations, experienced similar challenges as the immigrant women participants from South Asia. Together, the latter studies' findings strengthen the need for policies and programs to minimize structural and representational barriers during immigration. For example, revised education credentialing policies and services such as affordable childcare programs are needed to facilitate immigrant women's access to training and work. The implementation of formal or informal social programs can also inform immigrant women about the cultural, social, and gender conflicts (e.g., women taking on the role of financial provider) caused by conflicting heritage and host culture expectations and practices.

In this paper, we also challenged the assumption of the traditional acculturation model that suggests that immigrant groups experience adaptation in similar and predictable ways—for example, that the adaptation process of immigrants follows the prescribed four stages of the acculturation model (Berry, 2005, 2017). We proposed the use of a Postcolonial Feminist Intersectional Framework to better understand the adaptation process of women from the Global South. Our findings reinforce the argument that the traditional acculturation model does not adequately explain the individual, fluid, and context-dependent nature of immigrant women's adaptation experiences. As illustrated by the findings, the adaptation process is influenced by intersecting structural and representational factors/barriers from both the host and heritage cultures. By applying Homi Bhabha's (2012) concept of cultural hybridity and Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) idea of "double voice," we provided insights into how participants constructed hybrid identities as they navigated and balanced competing cultural beliefs and practices. The analysis shows how two participants in the study who had worn veils in their home countries negotiated their circumstances in different ways. These women immigrants chose to intentionally make modifications to external practices such as dressing differently in public (e.g., wearing modest Western clothing and wearing a headscarf) to blend in but still align with their cultural beliefs and values. In essence they created a hybrid identity within Bhabha's "third space," where aspects of both the heritage and host society culture are modified to preserve the core values that shape who they are. Similar to the results of Tarlo's (2010) study of Muslim women in Britain, the two women immigrants in Canada, a Muslim and a Hindu, were double voiced—the use of Western style dress showed a surface adoption of Western norms; wearing modest clothes and a headscarf expressed their intent to adhere to their religious and cultural beliefs. Our study findings also reinforce the view that wearing a hijab or a veil does not indicate subservience or subjugation (Khan, 2022).

The process of creating an intentional hybrid identity was also observed when Kareema negotiated the tensions between affordable childcare and the cultural role expectation that women did not provide financial support. Kareema negotiated her role and became the primary financial provider while her husband assumed childcare responsibilities. Kareema's story challenges dominant portrayals of women from the Global South as passive or lacking agency (G. Ahmed, 2021). These women are active agents in shaping, resisting, and transforming their identities and experiences. The analysis of cultural adaptation using the constructs of cultural hybridity and third space depicts the fluid nature of identity formation and offers a more nuanced understanding than traditional acculturation models. Our findings reinforce other findings in the literature that South Asian women are not uniformly passive as portrayed by some Western feminist literature (Mohanty, 2023; Spivak, 1988).

The examples discussed in this paper about how women renegotiated cultural roles, addressed childcare challenges, and responded to family expectations in diverse ways in different situations, also demonstrate that adaptation is not a linear or uniform process, but rather an ongoing negotiation shaped by power and agency and situation, similar to the notions of Li (2025) and Sasse (2022). Since these women actively drew on experiences, beliefs, and practices from their home and host countries to navigate tensions and negotiate their roles, our findings contribute to current conceptions of cultural adaptation as transnational—influenced by cultures, ideas, and artifacts across borders (Maitland, 2019). The postcolonial feminist intersectional framework was effective at illuminating this transnational cultural adaptation—how South Asian immigrant women exercised agency to create a hybrid identity in diverse ways that enabled them to develop resilience, confront systems and structures of power that marginalized them from heritage and host country, and intentionally choose how they transformed their identities in the host society. Research

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suggests the development of hybrid identities can support the adaptation process and reduce stress for newcomers in Western contexts (Ward et al., 2018).

Although this study examined South Asian women in Southwestern Ontario, Canada, the findings extend beyond this specific context. The construction of hybrid identities and the negotiation of diverse cultural norms and values are not limited to one group or country as shown by studies in Australia (Hamada & Wakamatsu, 2025) and Britain (Gulzar, 2025). In western migration settings, immigrant women navigate intersecting systems of power, cultural expectations, and social constraints similar to those experienced by participants in this study. The study findings thus reflect broader global patterns while highlighting the context-sensitive nature of the process, providing globally relevant understandings of migration and adaptation.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

Implications of the Study

The findings have methodological, theoretical, practical, and policy implications:

- The study makes a methodological contribution by presenting a Postcolonial Feminist Intersectional Framework to explore challenges associated with gender and patriarchy experienced by immigrant women from previously colonized countries. This framework enables immigrant women's subjugated voices and experiences to be heard in ways that dispel essentialist portrayals of them as a fixed and uniform cultural group in Western feminist writings (Mohanty, 2023).
- This study illustrates how this comprehensive theoretical framework can be applied to examine the resettlement experiences of marginalized immigrant women in Western host countries, contributing to the postcolonial feminist and migration literature.
- The findings of this study make visible the alternative stories of immigrant women (MacLean et al., 2024) and position them at the forefront in contradiction to the dominant western narratives promulgated through books, mainstream media and artifacts. These alternative stories reinforce postcolonial feminist arguments (Gatt et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2021; Spivak, 1988) that all women, especially of color, do not share the same challenges and marginalizing experiences.
- The study contributes to migration research by examining pre-migration experiences, which are often overlooked, and shows how gender inequalities before migration shape women's adaptation in the host country. It highlights the importance of recognizing differences in class, religion, culture, and family structure when analyzing the adaptation of immigrant women from the Global South.
- The narratives contribute to the existing literature on South Asian immigrant women's adaptation experiences from patriarchal societies to Western contexts (G. Ahmed, 2021).
- These authentic narratives can be incorporated into higher education courses, particularly in feminist studies, migration studies, and graduate programs, to

provide insight into the intersectional nature of women's immigration experiences.

- This research has important policy implications, particularly in areas such as immigration support services, language training, and childcare access. For example, findings suggest that countries should consider women's diverse pre-migration backgrounds and provide pre-immigration supports and services (e.g., pre-arrival resources) to minimize barriers created by structural constraints such as education credential policies. The latter call is reflected in the recent report evaluating the foreign credential program (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2025), which recommends "providing and enhancing support for alternative pathways for licensure, such as fast-tracked recognition for high-demand professions, streamlined processes for provisional licensing, and bridging initiatives for international certifications" (p. 6). By prioritizing immigrants with high-demand professions, this policy still marginalizes immigrants with other professions and work experiences. Additionally, the report noted that regulatory barriers such as different licensing processes and complicated regulations still exist across the different Canadian provinces.

Limitations

The following limitations were identified in the study:

- This is a qualitative study with a small sample size of women immigrants from South Asia. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population of immigrants from India and Pakistan and other populations or contexts (G. Ahmed, 2021).
- The study did not explore transnational experiences in relation to the heritage country and how ties were maintained.
- Conducting some interviews by phone did limit the extent to which rapport was established with participants and may have affected how participants responded to questions. This was mitigated by follow-up interviews and member check of transcripts.

Future Research Directions

Some directions for future research emerged from limitations of the study.

- Most participants were Muslim women from Pakistan. Future studies should include women from different religious, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds and countries in the region such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to better understand diversity within these groups.
- As participants in this study varied in their educational and social backgrounds, future empirical research could focus on women with similar levels of education and social status who immigrated as principal applicants to allow for more focused and meaningful comparisons (G. Ahmed, 2021).
- Considering the global scope of migration, future research should investigate similar questions across diverse national and regional contexts. Comparative studies in both the Global North and Global South could help clarify how

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immigration policies, labor markets, and social systems shape women's adaptation in different ways.

- Lastly, longitudinal and mixed-method studies could be conducted to examine how adaptation and cultural identity evolve over time.

Author Contributions

G.A. designed the study, conducted the interviews, and analyzed the data. K.J.J. provided input during the study design, literature review and interpretation of the data. G.A. created a draft of the full manuscript. K.J.J. reviewed and edited the manuscript and revised the introduction, findings, discussion, and implications sections for the final submission.

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Ethics Statement

Ethics approval was obtained from Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB file # 16-135-Jaipal-Jamani).

Study Context

The data (quotes of participants) analyzed in this paper are drawn from the doctoral dissertation of the first author.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare relevant to the article.

Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in the paper are provided in the paper. Additional data are not available due to university research ethics constraints.

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