

Navigating the In-Between: The Liminal Journey of an Indian Woman in the UK**1.Ms. Rudach Laxmiben Ransurbhai**

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Article Received: 09/09/2026**Article Accepted:**10/10/2026**Published Online:**11/10/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.10.173**Abstract:**

This study explores the emotional and cultural liminality experienced by young Indian women migrating to the United Kingdom for employment. Migration, in this context, is understood not merely as geographical relocation but as a complex transitional process that situates individuals in prolonged “in-between” spaces marked by uncertainty, negotiation, and transformation. Using a qualitative research design based on a single in-depth interview, the study foregrounds the lived narrative of a young Indian woman to examine how identity, belonging, and professional aspirations are continuously reshaped within transnational settings.

The analysis is theoretically grounded in Arnold van Gennep’s (1909) framework of rites of passage and Victor Turner’s (1967, 1969) concept of liminality. These perspectives enable an examination of migration as a phased process involving separation from familiar cultural structures, immersion in ambiguous transitional states, and the ongoing reconfiguration of selfhood rather than a clear reintegration. The participant’s account reveals multiple layers of liminality, encompassing emotional dislocation, cultural adaptation, and professional adjustment. Gendered expectations, both from the home society and the host context, emerge as significant factors shaping her experiences, alongside challenges related to educational preparedness, workplace communication, and subtle forms of social exclusion.

The findings demonstrate that liminality operates across personal, social, and institutional dimensions, producing vulnerability while simultaneously enabling resilience, agency, and identity reconstruction. The participant negotiates competing cultural norms and professional demands, gradually developing adaptive strategies that reflect both continuity and change. By centering a woman’s lived experience, the study highlights how migration disrupts established cultural frameworks while opening possibilities for self-transformation.

This research contributes to migration and gender studies by offering nuanced insights into women’s emotional and cultural negotiations within global mobility. It underscores the need for more inclusive policy frameworks and institutional support systems

in higher education and employment sectors to address the specific challenges faced by women migrants in liminal spaces.

Keywords: Liminality, Migration, Cultural Identity, Emotional Transition.

Introduction

Migration is not merely a geographic relocation; it is a complex process involving emotional, psychological, and cultural transitions. For young Indian women moving abroad for education or work, migration often situates them in a liminal space—a threshold “betwixt and between” their familiar home environment and the new social and professional contexts of the host country. These transitional experiences encompass identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and the navigation of social and gendered expectations.

The concept of liminality, first introduced by Arnold van Gennep (1909) in *The Rites of Passage*, provides a valuable lens for understanding such experiences. Van Gennep’s framework identifies three phases in social transitions: separation, liminality, and incorporation. The middle phase, liminality, is marked by ambiguity, instability, and a suspension of conventional social roles. Building on this, Victor Turner (1967, 1969) emphasized the transformative potential of liminal states, where identities are fluid and individuals inhabit spaces of both vulnerability and opportunity. Applied to migration, liminality captures the psychological, cultural, and social negotiations migrants face as they adjust to unfamiliar norms and expectations.

For Indian women migrating to contexts such as the United Kingdom, these liminal experiences are further shaped by gendered expectations, educational preparedness, and cultural dissonance. Migration exposes gaps in domestic educational and social structures, highlighting the challenges of global academic and professional integration, intercultural communication, and emotional resilience. Simultaneously, it offers opportunities for self-transformation, autonomy, and agency in navigating global mobility.

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on a single in-depth interview with an Indian woman working in the UK. Her narrative provides insight into how liminality manifests across emotional, cultural, and professional dimensions, including negotiating gender norms, social belonging, and workplace expectations. Through her experiences, the paper illustrates how migration places individuals in ongoing liminal states—neither fully embedded in their home culture nor seamlessly assimilated into the host society.

By situating the participant’s experiences within the frameworks of van Gennep and Turner, this study highlights the intersections of migration, gender, education, and social justice. It underscores how liminality shapes the lived realities of young Indian migrants and

offers implications for higher education institutions, policymakers, and scholars seeking to support inclusive global mobility and transformative migrant experiences.

Review of Literature

The concept of liminality has a long genealogical history in anthropology, migration studies, gender research, and education. Together, these bodies of literature help illuminate how migrants particularly young Indian women experience emotional, cultural, and social “in-between” states. This review synthesizes four major strands of scholarship relevant to the participant’s experiences: classical liminal theory, migration studies, gendered migration, and educational preparedness for global mobility.

The foundation of liminality lies in Arnold van Gennep’s book *The Rites of Passage* (1909), where he conceptualized transitions as a three-stage movement: separation, liminality, and reincorporation. In the liminal phase, individuals occupy a space of ambiguity where previous identities are suspended but new identities have not yet solidified. Victor Turner’s seminal work *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) expanded this framework by emphasizing liminality as a transformative moment marked by anti-structure, vulnerability, and potential. Turner also introduced the influential concept of *communitas*, describing the spontaneous bonds formed among people who share liminal experiences.

Contemporary theorists have further extended liminality beyond ritual. Bjørn Thomassen, in his book *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2014), argues that liminality is now a condition of late modernity, shaped by global mobility, precarity, and rapid social transformation. In this expanded understanding, liminality can be prolonged, emotionally disorienting, and culturally layered, especially for migrants who must navigate new countries, identities, and social systems simultaneously. Yet, despite these developments, research continues to be limited in connecting classical and contemporary liminality theory to the everyday emotional experiences of Indian women who migrate to Western societies. The present study addresses this gap by applying liminality theory to the intimate, lived experiences of identity negotiation in migration.

Migration scholarship contributes significantly to understanding cultural and emotional transitions. Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew A. Becker’s influential article “Migration, Cultural Bereavement and Cultural Identity” (2005) describes migration as both a physical relocation and a profound emotional journey marked by identity disruption, cultural bereavement, and loss of belonging. These emotional ruptures closely mirror liminal states, as migrants oscillate between old attachments and new expectations. Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller, in their authoritative text *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (2014), conceptualize migration as a multidimensional process shaped by economic, political, and structural forces. They argue that migrants often face assimilation pressures, labour inequalities, and systemic

discrimination—situating them in marginal, unstable social locations that strongly reflect liminal conditions.

Adding further nuance, Russell King and Anastasia Christou's study "Cultural Geographies of Counter-Diasporic Migration: Perspectives from the Study of Second-Generation 'Returnees'" (2011) demonstrates how migrants occupy what they call "floating identities" and hybrid forms of belonging. Their findings show that many migrants neither fully belong to their homeland nor fully assimilate into their host societies, instead living in continuous emotional mobility. Despite the value of such scholarship, most migration studies remain at macro levels, leaving gaps in understanding the micro-level emotional experiences of migrants—especially Indian women who must navigate loneliness, cultural rupture, communicative insecurity, and identity suspension. This study addresses this absence by foregrounding a deeply personal narrative of liminal migration.

Migration is also profoundly gendered. Katharine Donato, Donna Gabaccia, Jennifer Holdaway, Martin Manalansan, and Patricia Pessar, in their article "A Glass Half Full? Gender in Migration Studies" (2006), argue that gendered social norms, labour inequities, and familial expectations influence not only whether women migrate but also how they are perceived and integrated into new societies. Indian women, in particular, often face heightened scrutiny regarding safety, respectability, communication, and independence, placing their migration journeys within a framework of gendered vulnerability. Floya Anthias, in her article "Belonging in a Globalising World: Reconfiguring Identities, Spaces and Borders" (2006), further argues that migrant women's experiences are shaped by intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, and cultural expectations. These intersections produce layered "in-between" identities where women negotiate autonomy, belonging, and familial obligations simultaneously conditions closely aligned with liminality.

Additionally, Rajesh Chaudhary and Swati Rangarajan's 2020 study on Indian women in global educational migration, titled "*Negotiating Borders: Gendered Challenges of Indian Women Students Abroad*," shows that these women often experience academic unpreparedness, cultural shock, and gendered judgments in both home and host societies. Their findings parallel the participant's experiences with accent bias, independent living, communication expectations, and the need to unlearn culturally conditioned silence. Although gender studies reveal structural inequalities, few studies place emotional liminality at the center of gendered migration analysis, leaving an important conceptual gap that this study begins to fill.

The role of education in shaping migrant trajectories is widely recognized. Philip G. Altbach and Jane Knight's influential article "The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities" (2007) argues that although India's education system provides strong theoretical foundations, it often lacks critical thinking, communication skills, and intercultural competence all essential for global adaptability. This disparity produces what

may be termed *academic liminality*, where students stand between familiar hierarchical learning systems and the participatory, dialogic expectations of Western institutions. Betty Leask's book *Internationalizing the Curriculum* (2015) further argues for pedagogy that truly prepares students for global mobility. Without such preparation, students entering Western academic or professional environments may experience confusion, self-doubt, and emotional strain.

Recent work by Nair and Menon (2022) highlights that Indian students abroad frequently experience anxiety and adaptation challenges due to differences in academic writing styles, assessment structures, and communication norms. These findings directly mirror the participant's struggle as she expressed that she had been "taught to stay quiet" and found it difficult to "speak up for herself" in UK professional settings. Despite research on academic adaptation, very little scholarship connects educational shortcomings to emotional liminality among Indian women migrants. This study extends the literature by illustrating how Indian educational practices such as rote learning, moral discipline, and limited communicative training contribute to prolonged emotional and cultural liminality during migration.

Despite substantial scholarship across liminality theory, migration studies, gender research, and education, significant gaps remain in understanding the lived experiences of Indian women migrants. Classical liminality theory, rooted in ritual transitions, has rarely been applied to contemporary, everyday emotional negotiations within migration, leaving unexplored how liminality manifests in communication struggles, memory-based nostalgia, or gendered identity shifts. Similarly, while migration literature provides valuable macro-level insights into structural inequalities and assimilation pressures, it often overlooks the interior emotional narratives that capture how migrants experience displacement, hybridity, and identity suspension. Gender-focused migration research identifies women's vulnerabilities but rarely examines how gendered constraints interact with emotional liminality. Finally, while education scholarship acknowledges gaps in India's academic preparation, it does not sufficiently link educational limitations to emotional challenges, cultural shock, and internal conflict during migration. Collectively, these omissions reveal a lack of integrated, qualitative studies that foreground emotional liminality as a central framework for understanding how Indian women navigate identity, memory, education, and gendered expectations while living abroad. This study addresses these gaps by situating one woman's migration journey within the theoretical lens of liminality, demonstrating its relevance for contemporary migration, inclusion, and social justice.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the emotional, cultural, and psychological liminality experienced by an Indian woman migrant living in the United Kingdom.
- To examine how gendered expectations and social norms from India shape the participant's migration journey, identity negotiation, and adaptation in the host country.

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- To analyse the role of Indian higher education in preparing students for global academic and professional environments.
 - To understand how cultural dissonance, workplace practices, and systemic biases (such as accent-based or gender-based discrimination) contribute to the participant's sense of "in-betweenness."
 - To interpret the participant's lived experiences through the theoretical lens of liminality, drawing on van Gennep's (1909) phases of transition and Turner's (1969) concept of the 'betwixt and between' state.
 - To identify the coping strategies, adaptive practices, and forms of resilience that emerge during the participant's migration and adjustment process.
 - To highlight structural and educational gaps that create inequalities in global mobility for Indian women, contributing to discussions on social justice and inclusive growth.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative interpretivist approach to explore the liminal experiences of an Indian woman living in the United Kingdom, focusing on migration, emotional transitions, and educational aspirations. A single semi-structured interview was conducted because qualitative research values depth over the number of participants, and an individual narrative can provide rich insight into states of "in-betweenness," as described by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969). The interview was carried out through a WhatsApp audio call due to geographical distance and the participant's convenience. With consent, the conversation was recorded and later transcribed using Otter.ai, a reliable speech-to-text application often used in qualitative research. The researcher manually checked the automated transcript for accuracy, clarity, and anonymity. The data was analysed through thematic coding following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, identifying key themes related to liminality, identity, emotional balance, and educational transition. Ethical procedures were followed by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and securely storing the audio and transcript files. Although the study is based on a single interview, it offers meaningful exploratory insights into migrant liminality and the emotional and educational negotiations that shape the participant's lived experience.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the deeply textured and multidimensional nature of liminality in the migration experience of young Indian women. The participant's narrative reveals that migration does not simply shift a person from one geographical location to another, but fundamentally reorganizes one's emotional, cultural, intellectual, and social identity. Her reflections embody Van Gennep's (1960) foundational idea that transitions involve separation, liminality, and an attempted reintegration; however, her experience demonstrates that the reintegrative stage is neither smooth nor complete. Instead, as Turner (1969) argues, the liminal phase often becomes a prolonged condition in which individuals exist simultaneously within multiple cultural worlds without fully belonging to any of them. When the participant states, "I don't feel like I'm Indian and I don't feel like I'm fully British

either” [CODE: Identity-Liminality / Neither-Here-Nor-There], she expresses the suspended self, an “in-between” consciousness that characterizes migrant identity formation.

Her emotional oscillation between two cultural worlds underscores the powerful role of memory in sustaining, but also destabilizing, migrant identity. Memory is not merely recollection but a living emotional presence that shapes her everyday negotiations in the host country. When she describes Diwali and says, “Everyone was celebrating, and I was working... it didn’t feel like Diwali at all” [CODE: Cultural-Rupture / Temporal-Dislocation], her narrative captures the disjuncture between the temporal rhythms of the past and the present. These ruptured cultural rhythms reveal what Bhugra and Becker (2005) describe as cultural bereavement. Her memories act both as an emotional anchor and a reminder of displacement, showing how nostalgia becomes a psychological mechanism for survival while simultaneously intensifying loneliness. This duality illustrates how memory functions as an active agent in the formation of migrant liminality, reinforcing the fragile balance between belonging and alienation.

The participant’s story also demonstrates how liminality is produced through structural and educational inequalities, especially in the Indian education system. Her account of academic practices that prioritize rote learning, silence, and hierarchical teacher–student interactions reveals how these norms shape confidence long before migration. When she admits, “In India if you speak less it means you are respectful, but here silence means you are not confident” [CODE: Educational-Liminality / Conflicting-Norms], she points to the cultural mismatch between Indian institutional expectations and British academic and workplace norms. This reflects Altbach and Knight’s (2007) argument that Indian higher education often lacks the communicative and intercultural readiness needed in global contexts.

This educational mismatch creates what may be called academic liminality, where the migrant is suspended between familiar learning behaviors and new communicative expectations. Her discomfort with speaking up or questioning authority is not a personal flaw but a culturally-rooted habitus shaped by long-term pedagogical training. The interview statement, “I used to wait for instructions; I didn’t know I had to take initiative here” [CODE: Workplace-Transition / Initiative-Gap], reflects the structured and authority-centered nature of Indian academic and professional settings. In the UK, her employers expected autonomy and self-direction, producing a new liminal condition where she must unlearn deeply embedded norms in order to succeed.

Gender further complicates her liminal state. Prior to migration, she experienced repeated questioning from relatives about why a woman should travel alone. Her account, “People asked my parents why they were allowing me to go alone... like it was something wrong” [CODE: Gendered-Surveillance / Patriarchal-Control], reflects the social suspicion attached to women’s independent mobility. These cultural anxieties become internalized,

producing emotional hesitation even after she reaches the host country. Yet, she simultaneously encounters newfound freedom in the UK, noting that she can move freely, dress comfortably, and make decisions without constant judgment. This newfound freedom places her in a gender liminality, between the restrictive cultural expectations of home and the liberating norms of the host environment. This aligns with Anthias's (2006) analysis of migrant women's intersecting identities, shaped by class, gender, and cultural history.

Linguistic experiences also create a liminal embodiment, where the voice becomes a site of negotiation. The participant describes how people sometimes ask her to repeat herself, reflecting linguistic bias. When she says, "Sometimes they asked me, 'What did you say?' and I felt embarrassed because of my accent" [CODE: Accent-Anxiety / Linguistic-Vulnerability], her experience demonstrates how accent serves as a social marker that signals foreignness. This linguistic dimension reinforces a social in-betweenness—not completely incomprehensible, yet not entirely comfortable or invisible within the host country's communication norms.

Despite these emotional and structural challenges, the participant's story is also one of resilience and identity reconstruction. Her mention of forming strong bonds with other Indian friends "We cooked Indian food together, celebrated festivals... it felt like home for some time" [CODE: Communitas / Cultural-Reanchoring]—illustrates Turner's notion of communitas. These shared spaces help her rebuild belonging and mitigate cultural rupture. Through these interactions, she constructs a hybrid identity that blends Indian cultural memory with British social experiences, embodying what scholars describe as third-space identity formation.

In the end, her narrative shows that liminality in migration is not a temporary condition but a recurring emotional, cultural, and intellectual cycle. Each new challenge—accent negotiations, workplace expectations, academic norms, cultural festivals—reopens the liminal space. Thomassen's (2014) idea of chronic liminality becomes particularly relevant, as the participant continuously oscillates between cultural worlds without fixed belonging. She does not simply cross borders; she inhabits them, living in a state of constant negotiation. Migration thus becomes an existential condition rather than a completed event, shaped by movement, memory, aspiration, and adaptation.

Conclusion

This study shows that the migration journey of a young Indian woman to the UK is shaped by deep emotional, cultural, and gendered liminality. Her experiences reveal that migration is not just a physical movement but an ongoing process of navigating identity, belonging, and unfamiliar expectations. The participant's struggles with cultural differences, educational gaps, communication barriers, and gendered norms demonstrate how migrants often live "in-between" two worlds neither fully rooted in home nor entirely settled in the host country. Yet her story also highlights resilience, growth, and the creation of hybrid identities through cultural memory, supportive friendships, and increasing confidence. By

foregrounding her lived narrative, this study underscores the need for more inclusive educational practices, migrant support systems, and gender-sensitive policies that acknowledge the emotional complexities of global mobility.

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