

Stars and Circles
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Everything in my life, the fine details and the robust connections, always comes back to my roots, colors of bright green and red emerging from the corners of a place dense with hardships, blending into a figure empowered by her culture. These colored roots take the form of a small country named Bangladesh. My Bengali pride stretches out 8,471 miles, regardless of my family's move to the United States when I was only two years old, regardless of hardly getting the chance to know my grandparents, regardless of not being able to immerse myself in the origins of my identity.

Despite a constant instilling of Bangladeshi values, I am also influenced by my immediate surroundings, a Southern American neighborhood in which I have lived my entire life. Potholes dipping into cracked tar and towering Mississippi magnolias replace narrow, muddy streets and looming mango trees. Rhythmic taps of soulful Blues music drown out harsh bangs of fast-paced tabla drums. My piano teacher's Southern drawl challenges the musical dynamic of my Ma's and Baba's voices. Churches located on every Columbus corner replace the few Hindu temples of Bangladesh. The Walmart that Ma has worked at for eleven years contrasts with the open-air markets of the Sunamganj district, and the crispy smell of catfish takes place of the spicy, mustard-infused curry of my country's fishing villages. Yet, regardless of the sometimes overpowering Southern culture, I have retained the very essence of myself, my Bengali heritage.

Aside from these differences, there is much that both of my homes share, like their sweltering rays of heat and fist-sized mosquitos that I attract. Both areas are well-known for their conservative, traditional, and, at times, oppressive values. I see this when my parents talk of the

most recent terror killing of an innocent Bengali Hindu priest, or when I look at the stars and stripes crisscrossing the Confederate flag of my state, still commemorating years of oppression. I wonder how regions laced with such narrow-minded values could have shaped someone like me, someone with interests in liberal politics, someone with multiracial friends, someone who listens to discussions of *The Scarlet Letter* and calculus theorems and, most importantly, to others.

Ma always talks about the life that my parents left behind, the sacrifices that they made so that my sisters and I could be raised in the land of freedom, so that we could attain the American Dream. When she gets teary-eyed, I can tell she's thinking of the family members she hasn't seen in years. Sometimes I wonder, had I grown up with them, had I lived in Bangladesh all my life, how would I have turned out? Has the American Dream been worth it? In moments such as these, I become grateful for the life I have; I realize my own narrow-mindedness when I don't see past the shortcomings of my cultures. Both countries have shaped me to be hospitable and compassionate, to have integrity and to value my education.

My roots have allowed me to grow in my strengths and capabilities. I can place careful strokes to form intricate henna designs, I peel green Granny Smiths and bake a Southern apple pie, I curve my fingers to key the tunes of Sonatina in A minor, I let words flow from my pen to form an AP Chemistry response or my own poetry, I slot print squares of glass with titanium dioxide in order to create solar cells. Once a timid "Indian" girl, an outsider in both her cultures, a girl with religious and social differences, I am now a passionate woman devoted to expanding her views. The stars and circles found in my countries' flags have blended, and I am fortunate.