

# Transnational Counterstories: Autoethnographies of Bangladeshi Women in US Higher Education

Abantika Dhar and Ridita Mizan

**Abstract:** This article shares the transnational counterstories of two Bangladeshi female graduate students in US higher education in a hybrid genre of autobiographical reflection and theoretical discussion. It also employs the theoretical perspectives of critical race theory and transnational feminism to claim the significance of the transnational counterstories related to US higher education, from the voices of underrepresented and marginalized student populations. In this article, the authors, Abantika Dhar and Ridita Mizan, share transnational counterstories related to their developing academic identities, countering the idea of model minorities and representing a (w)holistic version of international students, their needs, struggles, as well as their prospects in higher education.

**Tags:** [CRT](#), [transnational counterstories](#), [transnational feminism](#), [US Higher Education](#), [International Students](#).

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## Introduction

Under the intersectionality of critical race theory (CRT), this paper utilizes counterstory as a method in a hybrid genre of autobiographical reflection and theoretical discussion to share the transnational counterstories of two female Bangladeshi graduate students/PhD graduate writing instructors in higher education. This discussion addresses themes like: balancing coursework and teaching labor, transnational writing and teaching differences, ways of knowledge making in western discourses, adapting to a new culture, self-doubt, underpayment, loneliness, survivor issues of single females in a foreign society, imposter syndrome, and invisible disability. In this paper, the transnational counterstories shared by two Bangladeshi female graduate students also incorporate transnational feminism as a theoretical viewpoint to share the underrepresented Bangladeshi transnational voices of women of color. As noted by Ghabra and Calafell, “In the racist, sexist, and imperialist US imaginary, third-world women are read as ignorant, poor, and subservient. Their stories often remain untold or filtered through hegemonic narratives of needing to be saved. Therefore, work is needed to bridge the gap between US and transnational women of color” (63). Hence, as suggested by Ghabra and Calafell, this work shares the non-hegemonic transnational counterstories of two “so-called” third-world Bangladeshi transnational women graduate students of color in US higher education as a means

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of empowering other marginalized and less represented women of color graduate students/academics to share their stories of struggle and survival.

This paper approaches “critical race counterstory as a rhetorical research methodology and method” inspired from *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* by Aja Y. Martinez (Martinez 2). According to Martinez, “A critical race methodology includes a range of methods such as family history, biography, autoethnography, cuentos, testimonios, and counterstory” (3). Hence, this paper uses autoethnography as a method under the methodology of critical race counterstory to share transnational counterstories based on issues related to transnational academic identities and approaches the following research question in its discussion:

- What is the significance of transnational counterstories in sharing the voices of Bangladeshi women of color in US higher education, discussed through the theoretical perspectives of CRT and Transnational Feminism?

## **Author 1: Abantika Dhar**

### *Bio/Positionality*

I have always lived as a minority in the lenses of conventional social strata. I am a woman from a religious, cultural, and linguistic minority group in Bangladesh. I have learned English as a foreign language. I started my career as an English language teacher in K-12 education in Bangladesh after completing my undergraduate & graduate studies in English Language & Literature. I came to the United States in 2021 to pursue my second master’s in English in the TESOL track. Currently, I am a non-native English speaker enrolled in a PhD degree in English Studies (in the areas of Applied Linguistics and Writing/Rhetorical Studies), as a transnational/international South Asian Bangladeshi graduate student. Also, I have been working as a writing instructor/graduate teaching assistant in the United States since 2021. I identify myself as a linguistic, racial, gender, and cultural minority living in the United States. Focusing on ethnicity, once, I had to fill out a survey questionnaire about racism on campus during my graduate studies in the United States. In that survey, I was required to check my ethnic group from a few options, but unfortunately, I could not find any option matching my actual ethnicity. The closest option matching my ethnicity that I could check was “Asian American,” however, I am not an American. I am a South Asian international/transnational student, to be precise.

In this autoethnographical study, I share the personal narratives/transnational counterstories from my positionality as a multiply marginalized transnational woman of color graduate student in the English departments in US higher education. The counterstories I share are focused on themes related to my own transnational academic identity. My stories revolve around the following themes: experiencing imposter syndrome after being assigned to teach writing to a predominantly native English-speaking student population, despite being a non-native English speaker (NNES) myself; difficulties navigating different writing practices as a Bangladeshi transnational graduate student in the United States; dealing with the feeling of alienation

and loneliness as a transnational minority graduate student; and the pressure of balancing coursework and teaching labor as an international graduate student/teaching assistant.

## **Author 2: Ridita Mizan**

### *Bio/Positionality*

I am an international graduate student, born and brought up in Bangladesh. My parents are first-generation university graduates, which provided me with certain privileges but also came with heightened expectations rooted in racialized, gendered, and ableist social norms. Because of it, my academic journey has been one of constant change and adaptation. During my undergraduate and master's studies in English at the University of Rajshahi, my department transitioned from a British academic system to one influenced by US standards. This shift was both disorienting and thought-provoking, as it made me question the systems shaping my education. For my master's thesis, I explored these ideas by focusing on "The Politics of Identity and Representation in Postcolonial Discourse."

Later, I pursued a second master's degree in England and studied issues of identity, home, and belonging. While this experience broadened my perspectives, it also revealed how deeply colonial and neocolonial systems influence education globally. In 2021, I began my Ph.D. in the United States to further engage with the educational systems that have shaped Bangladesh's academic practices. Studying and living in the US has been both rewarding and challenging. As a neurodivergent woman of color with other invisible disabilities, I often find myself navigating transitional spaces. This involves constantly questioning my ways of thinking, unlearning the "normals" and trying to adapt to functional ones as best as I can.<sup>1</sup> It has been unsettling at times but also has worked as an opportunity for personal growth and self-discovery. Through my counterstories presented in this paper, I reflect on my experiences as a Bangladeshi woman in US higher education. My stories highlight my struggles with colonial legacies, systemic challenges, and personal growth. It is part of a larger conversation about the resilience and strength of international students navigating transnational academic spaces.

## **Transnational Counterstories: Developing Academic Identities**

### *A.1 Dealing with Imposter Syndrome: Abantika Dhar*

According to Mullangi and Jagsi, "Imposter syndrome is a psychological term that refers to a pattern of behavior wherein people (even those with adequate external evidence of success) doubt their abilities and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud" (403). When I started my second master's in the United States, I often dealt with imposter syndrome in my initial days of working as a writing instructor/Teaching Assistant (TA) in the English department. I used to have the feeling that I was not good enough to teach a

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<sup>1</sup> I am pursuing my PhD at a university which is located in the city called "Normal." I have explored the irony in an upcoming publication titled "Unlearning Normal."

majority of the native English-speaking white student population, despite being a non-native English speaker (NNES) myself. I was also conscious of my non-native English accent and, sometimes, my difficulty in understanding instantly what some of my students were saying. I often had to ask my students to repeat twice so that I could understand something they were saying, as it was my first experience interacting with North American non-academic/informal speakers of English from the Midwestern part of the United States. I had never interacted with any North American native English speaker (NES) earlier. The only kind of American English I had exposure to was via media, news channels, academic language teaching materials, or written discourse, which were quite different from the regular North American spoken English used by 18-year-old freshman college students in the Midwest. Though currently, I am a third-year doctoral student and have been teaching college students for about four years in the United States, I still feel that I am not good enough to be teaching students who are mostly native English speakers. Though I believe that the notion of the native and non-native dichotomy of English is problematic and flawed, I still use the terms in this article to analyze my experiences of being a non-native English-speaking teacher in US higher education.

Additionally, such an experience regarding being conscious and anxious about one's own transnational NNES teaching identity is not something that I have only experienced in isolation. Other international Asian and South Asian TAs have also experienced degrading comments on their accents from students in end-of-semester course evaluation reports and on RateMyProfessors.com, which is a "commercial website designed to allow students in the US to provide anonymous feedback about instructors with the intention of allowing students to figure out who's a great professor and who's one [they] might want to avoid" (Subtirelu 38). Nicholas Close Subtirelu's study is focused on the discussion about NNES teachers often being subjected to criticism based on their accent on RateMyProfessors.com, which "can be understood as manifestations of a broader project of social exclusion operating, in part, through the ideological construction of the NNES as incomprehensible Other" (35). Correspondingly, the development of such insecurity about my own NNES accent might stem from my preconceived notion regarding the idea that NES teachers from the USA or UK would be better suited to teach any college-level writing course with a majority of white monolingual English-speaking student population, in comparison to an NNES teacher like me from Bangladesh. And such perception about NES being better English teachers than NNES can be called native speakerism. According to Brooke R. Schreiber "the image of an ideal speaker of English remains that of a White, monolingual person from the United States or the United Kingdom," regardless of their language proficiency is called native speakerism (1116). Furthermore, Su Yin Khor et al.'s study also emphasizes multilingual teacher identities and institutional ecology in the English Departments in US higher education. One of the co-authors in this autoethnographic narrative-based study is Mijan, a Bangladeshi transnational writing educator, who came to the United States to pursue his doctoral studies. While sharing his experience of teaching First Year Writing (FYW), Mijan notes that the internalized discourse of his accented English and "the native and non-native dichotomy left an indelible print on [his] English teacher psyche," which made "the responsibility of teaching writing to the native English-speaking students...a very daunting and intimidating task" (52). In such situations, the intersectionality in CRT can be an influential approach to investigating and comprehending the effect of native speakerism on Bangladeshi transnational identities in US higher education; one of the

most prominent tenets of CRT is the “Centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color” (Martinez 10). The intersectionality in CRT has the potential to be an efficacious theoretical perspective to deduce how marginalized and transnational underrepresented graduate student populations, such as Bangladeshi women of color academics, survive in US higher education. Similarly, Rebecca Dingo et al. discuss the relevancy of the transnational feminist rhetorical method as a strategy emphasizing women’s educational and linguistic experiences, among others (181). Hence, the issue of native speakerism faced by transnational women of color in academia can be discussed informed by and associated with the theoretical ground of transnational feminism.

## A.2 *Walking Along with Imposter Syndrome: Ridita Mizan*

In Fall 2021, during my first semester in US academia, I enrolled in a seminar course on Native American literature. This subject was entirely new to me, as my previous coursework in American literature had never included Native American texts. Reflecting on this gap, I now wonder whether integrating Native American literature into American literature courses could provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of anticolonial and decolonial perspectives. However, I also recognize the risks of tokenization, reducing Indigenous peoples to a “special” category within the curriculum. As a postcolonial academic, my focus has been on exploring ways to challenge and decolonize systems that perpetuate colonial legacies. Yet, engaging with Native American literature exposed the limitations of my own understanding. My thinking has been shaped by colonial and neocolonial frameworks that define standards and values in contexts like Bangladesh, which continues to operate as a “remote colony” (Tuck & Yang 36). The seminar was a critical starting point for my journey in the U.S., helping me confront my limited knowledge of Indigenous sovereignty and land fluency (Tuck & Yang 30). It also provided a lens to examine “settler moves to innocence” and the ongoing effects of coloniality in the context of Turtle Island (Tuck & Yang 22).

Although I performed well in the initial stages of the course, I struggled with the final paper, where I attempted to analyze the ethics of the trickster in Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart*. My ideas felt scattered, and this difficulty was compounded by visible and invisible health challenges. I was unable to complete the course in the end. I initially tried to move past this experience, focusing on completing my other coursework. But it lingered, prompting me to revisit my understanding of colonialism, which I realized was shaped by a “confused mental model” (Anupam 32). In Fall 2023, I decided to enroll in additional courses in Rhetoric, focused on the themes of space, place, and decoloniality. Although these courses were not required for my degree, I still enrolled in them in order to develop a deeper understanding of colonialism. Looking back, this decision was pivotal for my pedagogical development, as it allowed me to critically examine my own assumptions and to contextualize, consolidate, and refine my understanding of decolonization (Tuck & Yang 35).

Coming from Bangladesh, my conceptual frameworks were shaped by different historical and cultural contexts. I initially tried to understand the ethics of the trickster through Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry and the idea of *partial presence*. According to Bhabha,

It is from this area, between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess of slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence. By ‘partial’ I mean both ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual’. It is as if the very emergence of the ‘colonial’ is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace. (*Of Mimicry and Man* 415-416)

Bhabha conceptualizes mimicry as the process by which colonized subjects imitate the culture, behavior, manners, and values of the colonizing power, resulting in an imitation that makes the colonized partially present. This mimicry, characterized by ambivalence, contains elements of both resemblance and menace, reflecting a flawed colonial mimesis that disrupts colonial authority and undermines the dominance of colonial discourse (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 86). This ambivalence can be seen as an attempt to see beyond the Eastern/Western binaries and reconcile the epistemological and ontological cultural differences. I have been trying to understand this hybridity through an ethic of pluralism (Sen). The issue of Indigenous Sovereignty, however, challenged this view for me; it became conceptually impossible to imagine myself as anything more than a footnote or an asterisk who can be “a body count that [does] account for Indigenous politics, educational concerns, and epistemologies” (Tuck & Yang 23). For me, it meant not just feeling like an imposter but being structurally positioned as one. The racialization process imposed through the upward mobility agenda of the colonial-capitalist higher education system is relevant here. Macaulay, in British India proposal to create a class of individuals “Indian in blood and color but English in taste and intellect” (Macaulay, qtd. in Cutts 825). It highlights how colonial education systems are designed to produce educated subjects within local populations. This legacy persisted in Bangladesh during my student years, where educational standards and worldviews continued to reflect imperial and colonial influences. An example of this can be seen in the historical pass mark of 33% in many South Asian institutions, a legacy of the British examination system (Karim and Hossain 64). I began my undergraduate studies in 2007, the same year my department transitioned to a U.S.-based grading system, and I witnessed firsthand the confusion and adjustment challenges that followed. While under the British system an “A” grade began at 60%, the USstandard typically requires 80% for the same distinction. This stark difference in evaluative benchmarks continues to affect perceptions of academic performance and reinforces systemic inequities inherited from colonial models of education.

These ideological conditioning shaped more than my academic benchmarks; they shaped how I learned to inhabit academia itself. I had long internalized the belief that visibility required conformity and that competence was performance. As a neurodivergent woman of color, I masked my differences to survive within systems that recognized only specific kinds of merit. I initially understood Bhabha’s concept of mimicry as a functional resistance strategy, but I later began to recognize it as a form of masking, a coping mechanism shaped by trauma, i.e., fawning, and an enforced proximity to the dominant ideal that rendered me legible, but never enough. Thus, my struggle to understand the ethics of the trickster reflects the broader

tension between my cultural conditioning and the frameworks I encountered. As Gonzalo Lamana notes, colonial perspectives often assume that Indigenous people “did not know that they did not know,” while Indigenous thinkers reverse this narrative to expose the colonizers’ ignorance (Lamana 66). Similarly, I realized that my own readings of Native trickery were limited by colonial and racialized assumptions. My understanding of mimicry, whiteness, and patriarchal norms often led me to mask my thinking in ways that aligned with external expectations rather than my own values. This realization intensified in the US context, where my presence, enabled by the global knowledge economy’s promise of learning and mobility, positioned me by default within settler colonial logics. It became structurally impossible not to be an imposter and to experience myself as such. My readings on Indigenous sovereignty forced a reckoning as the pluralist ethics I had inherited from certain liberal postcolonial frameworks could not account for the epistemic responsibilities that come with being on stolen land as an international student. I was not just misreading the trickster; I was misreading the terms of relationality altogether. Over time, I came to understand that my experiences with imposter syndrome were not merely psychological. They reflected the inauthenticity imposed by internalized norms. I had been living as an imposter, masking my true self to conform to standards that were inconsistent with my worldview. Through further study, including critical race theory and rhetorical thinking, I began to unpack these internalized biases and see how my actions were shaped by the colonial and racialized frameworks I had absorbed. This counterstory has allowed me to document my evolving understanding of mimicry, trauma, and the terms of relationality. It has been a process of unlearning and relearning, helping me move beyond masking and internalized norms toward a more authentic way of being. My journey underscores the importance of critically examining the frameworks that shape our thinking and the need for inclusive, decolonial approaches in education.

### *B.1 Developing Transnational/Translingual Writing Identity: Abantika Dhar*

I have learned English as a Second/Foreign language in Bangladesh. I have the experience of writing in English in different academic and transnational spaces. As a second language speaker and writer in English, my translingual writing identity is an inherent part of my writing practices across borders. English, and mostly British English, is a mandatory subject for all Bengali medium students (I was also a Bengali medium student from K-12) in Bangladesh since the beginning of their education at kindergarten levels, maybe due to the country’s long history of being colonized by the British empire. I basically learned to write English in a very monolithic and standard way, using a limited number of academic genres. However, after coming to the US to pursue my graduate studies, I had to switch the variety of English I used to speak and write from British to American English. In addition, I had limited ideas about genre-based writing and the notion that even academic writing may vary based on different genres. I have also written an article based on my translingual writing identity, titled “The Transition of Writing Researcher Identities: From a Self-Conscious Second Language Writer to a More Confident Graduate Student Writer and Researcher.” In Bangladesh, I mostly wrote in 5 paragraph essay formats. A few other common writing practices I followed were using common phrases at the beginning of different writing tasks and the use of high-end words (advanced English vocabulary) (see Dhar). Additionally, during my undergraduate studies in Bangladesh, I usually wrote literary papers focus-

ing on English literature. After completing my undergraduate studies, I had to prepare for IELTS in order to fulfill the English proficiency test requirement to get admitted to a US graduate school. I moved to the US to pursue my second master's in TESOL at a midwestern university. After completing my second master's, I am now continuing my PhD at another midwestern university. However, due to a lack of genre awareness and monolithic writing practices during my undergraduate studies and for IELTS test preparation, I have struggled with my academic writing in the US. My struggle with academic writing is also because of the writing differences I had experienced in US higher academic spaces and my previous writing practices from Bangladesh (see Dhar).

Sonya M. Alemán and Enrique Alemán Jr. suggest a racial realist viewpoint to “(re)claim the silenced histories and narratives of persons and communities of color to create content that is pedagogical and transformative” (307). Therefore, the translingual writing identities of Bangladeshi graduate students and transnational Bangladeshi women of color can be understood and analyzed to investigate the evolution of their writing practices in different transnational and academic spaces, which would also have effective pedagogical, informative, and research potentiality in the fields of both Applied Linguistics and Writing Studies from a racial realist viewpoint informed by the theory of CRT.

## *B.2 Designing Transnational Teaching Identity: Ridita Mizan*

My research focuses on critical pedagogy and exploring possibilities of decolonizing the field in both postcolonial and settler colonial contexts. In my teaching practice as a graduate assistant, I initially approached this work with a strong belief in the power of mental decolonization as a pathway to liberation. Over time, however, I began to recognize the limitations of that earlier understanding, especially as I encountered the complexities and contradictions within the very metaphors I had relied on to frame teaching and learning across diverse cultural and colonial conditions. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang helped me see that viewing decolonization as *mental colonization* oversimplifies the issue, focusing only on internal transformation while neglecting the structural and material conditions that must also be addressed. They emphasize the importance of asking the deeper question: “What, fundamentally, is colonization?” (Tuck & Yang 20-21). Even after recognizing these limitations, I struggled to move beyond theory, as I lacked the pedagogical tools to translate these insights into practice. This disconnect between theoretical and pedagogical frameworks became especially clear when I began teaching as a graduate instructor.

In my first year of teaching, I tried to introduce decolonial perspectives by including Native American texts in my syllabus. However, I lacked a deep understanding of the settler colonial context of the U.S., which made it difficult to connect these ideas with my students' experiences. This gap, combined with my own background in the Bangladeshi education system, highlighted the challenges I faced in bridging my knowledge with the needs of my students. In Bangladesh, I completed my BA (2007) and MA (2011) in English at the University of Rajshahi, a public university where education was free of cost. However, the system relied on what Paulo Freire calls the ‘banking model’ of education, where students are passive recipients of knowl-

edge. This model, shaped by colonial rule and cultural traditions like the *guru-shishya* system, emphasized memorization and obedience over inquiry (Raina). Access to resources was also a significant challenge. In my city, books and scholarly materials were expensive and difficult to obtain, and internet access was limited. Students relied heavily on professors' lectures, which often served as their primary source of knowledge. Feedback and formative assessments were absent; grades were assigned after exams, and students rarely received individualized guidance. This system left little room for genuine critical thinking or personal growth. As Freire describes this approach, "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire 72). This model shaped my early education, and I didn't question it until I encountered Freire's ideas and began exploring alternative approaches.

My second master's degree in England (2016) introduced me to the idea of feedback in assessments, allowing for discussions about my progress. However, upon coming to the USA, I encountered a completely different educational landscape. The terms, concepts, and practices were unfamiliar to me, and I had to reorient myself even though I was supposedly familiar with the grading system. Edward Said writes,

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. Having said that, however, one should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses its strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation. (226)

This has been true for me; I was unaware of rubrics and their components, as they were not used or shared in Bangladesh or England. Terms like "assignment sheet" and "prompt" were also new to me, and I never had formal guidance for approaching reading and writing. Occasionally we were offered informal instructions, but that has been the extent to it regarding "prompts." Concepts such as ungrading, contract grading, and labor-based grading were entirely new, and I am continuing to educate myself and experiment with these approaches. I received support, guidance, and direction from my classes and the ISU Writing Program. While I was happy to find effective methods and approaches for teaching and learning, I continued to question if the classroom space within a settler colonial nation-state could be used to engage with decolonial thinking in genuine terms, rather than merely as a metaphor.

Recently, I have begun to develop a system that makes better sense to me. The Cultural Rhetorics courses that I had taken, particularly the one on space, place, and border, provided invaluable insights for decolonizing the classroom. Along with it, my graduate assistantship with the Center for Integrated Professional Development (CIPD) as part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) team exposed me to additional conceptual and pedagogical tools. Equipped with new pedagogical tools, I began designing more

effective lesson plans and started thinking about decolonization in more specific and actionable ways. This gradually evolved into a rhetorical methodology for engaging with texts from diverse contexts. I am currently refining this approach, drawing inspiration from Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. My aim is to foreground the effects of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizer, and to unpack how it sustains systems of oppression and dehumanization. Through this, I hope to cultivate critical rhetorical consciousness in students and challenge dominant narratives, particularly those rooted in the myth of meritocracy. As a practitioner of English Studies from a neo/postcolonial context now teaching in a settler colonial environment, my goal is to develop a culturally sustainable pedagogical framework that resonates with both my students and myself. I envision this methodology as a scaffold for pursuing decolonization across varied educational settings

### *C.1 Negotiating Alienation, Anxiety & Loneliness: Abantika Dhar*

I have lived my life being multiply marginalized in the transnational spaces of both Bangladesh and the United States. I am a woman from a religious/cultural/linguistic minority group in Bangladesh. Currently, I am a non-native speaker of English enrolled in a PhD program in English Studies as a South Asian international graduate student and a college writing teacher in the United States. I still had the feeling of being 'different & minority' as a Bangladeshi South Asian international graduate student and writing instructor, when I came to the United States for my master's in English. During my second master's in the U.S., most of my cohort members in the English department were white Americans. However, there were three other international graduate teaching assistants (GTA) from Iran, China, and Macedonia who had joined the department with me. Though I had a cordial relationship with all white classmates/colleagues, I was closer to the international GTAs. I used to bond with other international graduate students and GTAs over our shared struggles of adjusting to a new place and culture. However, I would often feel invisible in a room full of my white teaching cohorts, especially when they talked about something related to North American culture, food, music, movies, etc., as I did not have any prior experience or knowledge related to many of those topics. I remember taking a class as a graduate student where the teacher used to provide references to North American pop culture and/or classic movies which I had no clue about. I was often the only student in class who did not get the joke about those references, whereas the rest of the class burst into laughter. The feeling of alienation continued to be prevalent when I started my doctoral studies at another school in the Midwest. Another issue that I have dealt with as an international graduate student along with alienation is loneliness. As Wendan Li and Christopher S. Collins state, "Although international students annually contribute billions of dollars to the US economy, meaningful intercultural interaction between international students, peers, and faculty is often missing at US host campuses. Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and alienation are pervasive among international students at US campuses; these feelings can negatively impact students' ability to engage in academic and social activities" (32). Unlike a lot of people in the United States, South Asians and especially a lot of Bangladeshi people live with their parents even after they become adults in Bangladesh. I always lived with my parents until I came to the United States for my graduate studies. Hence, I would often feel lonely in a foreign land that would sometimes lead to a lack of motivation in doing rigorous academic work

expected from a doctoral level graduate student and teacher.

Accordingly, while discussing the major tenets of CRT, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic elucidate that “No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity” (10). Different international/transnational graduate students come from diverse racial, national, historical, cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds in US higher education. These international students struggle through various psychological and social issues while trying to adapt to a new cultural, social, and education system, which ultimately might affect their academic progress. Hence, under the intersectionality and antiessentialist approach in CRT, various psychological and social struggles of international graduate students, such as Bangladeshi women of color graduate students, should be addressed with apposite intercultural interactions and accommodations to ensure a more welcoming educational/institutional ambiance for their greater academic progression and success.

## *C.2 Rethinking Pedagogy through World Citizenship: Ridita Mizan*

In navigating my existence as an international student within a settler colonial nation-state, the idea of world citizenship offered me a meaningful framework. It provided a way to locate myself ethically and relationally across borders, without needing to align with the elitism of cosmopolitanism, the market logic of globalization, or the individualism of neoliberalism. I approach world citizenship as a critical and relational practice rooted in interconnectedness, responsibility, and an awareness of our shared rights as beings. It allows me to foster solidarity across struggles while remaining attentive to place, history, and power. Based on this understanding and drawing from CRT and transnational feminist perspectives, I began to reorient my teaching approach toward world citizenship education. To make these themes accessible and engaging, I used interdisciplinary materials from pop culture to sports to encourage students to think critically about systems of power. Framing class activities through the lens of critical spatial awareness (Hurley), I guided students to reflect on their own positionality and the ethical implications of knowledge production. I am still refining this work, but I do think through pedagogical praxis, it is possible to promote decolonial thought and enact tangible changes within individuals’ academic and professional communities. To achieve this, I am exploring alternative assessment approaches, such as incorporating experiential assignments that encourage students to engage directly with real-world issues. For example, in one project, students conducted interviews with faculty and librarians to explore research ethics and disciplinary conventions. These conversations helped them identify dominant norms in their fields and propose remediations that center on ethical and inclusive practices. In their final projects, students reimagined specific research conventions to better reflect their own values and commitments, contributing to ongoing decolonial efforts within academia.

My pedagogical approach is informed by critical race theory and transnational feminism, both of which have provided me with insights into the intersectionality of power structures and the global manifestations of coloniality. By integrating these frameworks, I aim to help students move beyond dominant global narratives and advocate for meaningful change within their communities, grounded in their own positionality and their relationship, or lack thereof, with power, privilege, and dominant discourse. Paulo Freire’s work

on critical pedagogy has also played a pivotal role in shaping my thinking. I view his framework as extending beyond mental liberation, offering individuals tools to create safer spaces for themselves and others. From this perspective, I consider human and civil rights–based social justice projects necessary scaffolds for accessing the very concepts of sovereignty and decolonization. Building on these ideas from anti-racist, anti-colonial and decolonial thought, I hope to continue refining and developing pedagogical tools that meaningfully contribute to decolonial efforts to the best of my abilities.

### *D.1 Balancing Coursework & Teaching Labor: Abantika Dhar*

As a PhD student, I needed to complete two years of coursework (9 credit hours per semester), along with teaching two sections of college writing courses for 20 hours per week as part of my graduate assistantship. Though I officially teach 20 hours per week, the teaching labor outside the actual teaching time in class is mostly over 20 hours per week. Preparing teaching lesson plans, corresponding with students outside the classroom time, grading their work, and providing them additional feedback are a few examples of teaching labor that takes a significant amount of time per week. Along with teaching, international graduate students are required to take at least 9 credit hours of course per semester. Though international graduate assistants are allowed to take 6 credit hours of course per semester, that is not a feasible option if someone wants to complete their program on time (as the department does not guarantee assistantship/funding after a certain period). International students also do not have the option to complete their PhD degrees part-time and/or work outside the campus, which eventually makes them financially vulnerable. Not maintaining a certain GPA per semester can also hamper their student status and funding resulting in a possible drop out and deportation.

In the above-mentioned circumstances, balancing between coursework and teaching labor becomes extremely difficult during the regular semester. I often spend seven days per week working both in-person and asynchronously to complete the coursework and teaching duties, leaving limited time for any personal work and socialization. Doctoral students are also expected to attend conferences and publish work to a certain extent before graduation. Again, publishing in English Studies, especially in Applied Linguistics and Writing Studies (my area of research interests), is time-consuming and rigorous at times. After balancing the coursework and teaching labor, I struggle to find the time to work on possible publications, which makes my already-existing imposter syndrome more severe.

According to Delgado and Stefancic, critical race theorists “have written parables, autobiography, and ‘counterstories’ and have investigated the factual background and personalities...” (46). Therefore, it can be inferred that similar counterstories and lived experiences shared by Bangladeshi women of color graduate students in US higher academia can be utilized to comprehend various factual struggles related to balance between course and teaching labor, financial situations, funding requirements, visa status related shortcomings etc., and the effect of such issues on their academic and social development under the intersectionality of CRT.

## *D.2 Navigating Disability & Academic Labor: Ridita Mizan*

Navigating health challenges while adapting to a different culture, managing Ph.D. coursework, and working as a graduate assistant has been an incredibly difficult journey for me. Each semester since Fall 2021 has brought at least one major health issue, compounding the complexity of my experience. I arrived in the USA in July 2021 during the global pandemic. My city was still under lockdown, and my flight had been canceled twice due to worsening COVID-19 conditions in Bangladesh. When I booked a third flight, I was desperate not to miss it, viewing it as my only chance. To avoid further lockdowns or cancellations, I traveled early, a decision that carried significant health and financial consequences. Over two weeks, I had to move my belongings to four different locations before finally reaching my destination. I tried to condense my life into two 23-kg suitcases and a 7-kg carry-on, uncertain when I might return to Bangladesh.

Flying alone across the Atlantic for 22 hours, I pulled my luggage from the belt upon arrival and felt an uneasy strain on my back. Despite being cautious due to a previous injury, the damage was done. Without immediate access to medical assistance (my student health insurance became effective three weeks after my arrival), the pain worsened from tolerable to unbearable. When my classes started on August 9, I was still determined to overcome and continue. Eventually, I was diagnosed with a spinal injury and underwent surgery in October 2021. My parents applied for visas to visit me, but as of 2024, their applications are still pending. While I began to recover from spinal issues, I continued to experience nerve pain. In spring 2022, during my second semester, I contracted COVID-19 for the second time. This brought new challenges, including language processing difficulties and trouble comprehending texts. I initially attributed these issues to stress or COVID-related brain fog. However, I later realized I was experiencing executive dysfunction, which limited my ability to follow multi-step instructions and manage tasks. The shame and guilt about falling behind made matters worse. The harder I tried to keep up, the more I struggled, until I eventually stopped and let things be as they were.

In Fall 2022, I encountered the concept of neurodiversity for the first time. While I knew about neurological conditions, I was not aware of the diversity in how brains can function. I explored the topic hoping to help my students better, but the more I read the more I realized how much of my own experiences are reflected in the narratives and how difficult it has been for me to navigate academic spaces (Nerenberg). I was officially diagnosed as neurodivergent later in 2023. All these unfolded during the time I was learning to teach in a foreign country. I know there were times I couldn't show up in the ways I wanted to, but I remained committed to the learning community as best I could. Despite the difficulty of balancing teaching and personal challenges, I found joy in interacting with the class community. For the first time, I stopped being self-conscious about my identities as my department not only allows but rather encourages discussing and practicing linguistic justice. These experiences profoundly influenced my teaching, learning, and overall academic practices. As I struggled with language processing due to initially undiagnosed invisible conditions, I learned to be patient with myself, which unexpectedly helped me to improve as a teacher as well. Reading about unconditional positive regard, ethics of care, and asset-based pedagogy helped me shift my

perspectives in the right direction (Swarra et al., Kittay, Lopez, Sarangapani). Rather than viewing challenges from a deficit perspective, I began focusing on growth and potential. My experiences have taught me not to judge students or perceive them as lacking but to recognize their unique strengths and support their growth (Dweck). I apply this same approach to life as well, embracing a growth mindset and striving to create inclusive spaces. Living alone in a foreign land while managing health challenges has been isolating, but it has also been a journey of growth and resilience. I have learned the importance of being open and transparent about my struggles. Sharing my story has allowed me to connect with others and build a narrative of hope. The role of a teacher can be isolating, but it does not have to remain that way. By sharing our struggles and supporting one another, we can foster a sense of community and understanding as we navigate life on this floating ball that we call home.

## Discussions

### *The Emergence of Bangladeshi Transnational Counterstories under the Intersectionality of CRT*

According to Delgado and Stefancic, the central emphasis of critical race theory (CRT) is to discuss race and racism, focusing on intersectionality to understand the lived experiences of racialized people. Correspondingly, drawing on the issue of comprehending the lived experiences of racialized people, Ryuko Kubota states, “focusing only on a single category creates the problem of homogenizing and essentializing the group members that belongs to that category” (717). Kubota further notes how the antiessentialist perspective in CRT centralizes intersectionality to move beyond the black-white binary and endeavors to acknowledge the ways racism works in the lives of people from diverse backgrounds, giving rise to different specialized racial theories within CRT: LatCrit, AsiaCrit, etc. (717). Moving the discussion about people from diverse ethnic groups forward, Mahmud refers to Bangladeshi Americans as one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States (1). Additionally, the enrollment rate of Bangladeshi students joining educational institutions in the United States is increasingly rapidly.<sup>2</sup> UNESCO data from the 2022/23 academic year reveals that the United States hosted 13,563 Bangladeshi students, establishing Bangladesh as the thirteenth-largest source market for US education (Walker). A significant number of these Bangladeshi students enroll in the graduate level programs. Over the last ten years, the number of Bangladeshi students studying in US institutions has surged by over 300%, rising from 3,314 in 2011-2012 to 13,563 in 2022-2023. This positions Bangladesh as the seventh-largest source of graduate student enrollment in the United States worldwide (US Embassy Dhaka). Therefore, the inclusion of personal narratives of Bangladeshi students into the discussion of CRT would be an important addition, especially of those who are new to the US education system (transnational) and who might be in several vulnerable positions (underpaid, women of color, etc.).

Using personal stories and lived experiences of minority people as methodology and method to analyze hierarchical issues inherent in such marginalization as a form of empowerment can be aligned with

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2 Number of Bangladeshi Students in the United States Reaches All-Time High. <https://bd.usembassy.gov/28812/>

the methodology of counterstorytelling. As stated by Martinez, “Counterstory is methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies” (3). Previous studies (Buenavista et al.; Liu; Kim) have particularly focused on the lived experiences of East Asian and South-East Asian people in higher education in the United States. Based on Asian American Critical Race Theory (AsiaCrit), scholars have studied different issues faced by Asian Americans in USbased institutions (e.g., Buenavista et al.). Scholars in the field of education have also used personal narratives and autoethnographies to discuss the intersection of critical race theory with issues like academic imperialism and Asian Americans in higher education (e.g., Liu; Kim). However, there are distinct socioeconomic and cultural differences between East Asians and South Asians. Focusing on the South Asian American population, Rupam Sharan has incorporated counterstories of Asian Indian students’ stereotypical representation as a “model minority” by focusing on “Asian Indian students in mainstream society and their understanding of Americanization, social inequality, diversity and multiculturalism” (i). Scholars like Daniel G. Solorzano and Tara J. Yosso have also incorporated counter-storytelling as a method in their study to examine racial and gender discrimination experienced by Chicana and Chicano graduate students via the diverse framework of CRT. Hence, similar to the transnational personal narratives we share in this study, transnational counterstorytelling can be a significant method for Bangladeshi graduate students from marginalized backgrounds to share their lived experiences of struggle and resistance in higher academia.

### *Transnational Counterstories Connecting to Transnational Feminism*

Emphasizing feminist research in rhetoric, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch’s book calls for a rhetorical methodology that integrates women’s “lived, embodied experiences” (22). Similarly, the transnational counterstories we share in this article revolve around our lived and embodied experiences of struggle while adjusting to the US higher education system as Bangladeshi transnational female graduate students. According to Dingo et al., Royster and Kirsch’s book also claims the need for a rhetorical approach that employs “women’s experience, voices, knowledge, and language practices that are retrieved and brought into the present” (181). Dingo et al. further focus on Royster and Kirsch’s call for the “transnational turn in feminist rhetorical theory” as one of the significant shifts happening in the field (181). In this regard, Royster and Kirsch also suggest feminist rhetorical scholars “analyze the many vectors—economic, political, religious, cultural, educational—that intersect with rhetorical activities and social change” (37). According to Dingo et al., by analyzing such different economic, political, religious, cultural, educational aspects, feminist rhetorical scholars can “make space for not only the inclusion of women’s voices, experiences, and perspectives but also for drawing attention to the many powerful contexts (local and global) within which rhetorical practices develop” (181). In addition, Dingo et al.’s work signifies transnational feminist rhetorical scholarship as a crucial approach to representing women and other marginalized people (181). In this study, transnational counterstories serve as an appropriate rhetorical method to share our narratives based on our academic and language experiences of struggle and non-linear trajectories of knowledge-making from the perspective of transnational female graduate students in US higher education. Based on transnational counterstories, this

study particularly engages with transnational feminist rhetoric in analyzing the academic aspects of US higher education and developing transnational rhetorical practices. In the counterstories shared in this study, for example: Abantika Dhar discusses her experiences of comprehending and navigating her struggles related to her developing transnational academic translingual identity; and Ridita Mizan shares her experience of transnational academic practices and her knowledge-making process regarding issues like world citizenship and civic engagement. Lastly, this work is significant in representing the voices, narratives, and experiences of underrepresented Bangladeshi women of color in higher education.

Additionally, Wendy Hesford and Eileen Schell's work on feminist rhetoric and transnationalism challenges feminist narratives and women's rhetoric only "within the borders of the US or Western Europe" that might produce "institutional hierarchies" (463). Hesford and Schell further advocate the potential of "transgeographical concepts" and "transnational concepts" by centralizing narratives of transnational people from Asia and many other geographical spaces, in benefiting the field composition and rhetoric studies (463). Hesford and Schell's special issue promotes a "remapping of feminist rhetorical scholarship along transnational lines, building on transnational feminist and postcolonial work emerging both outside and inside the academy..." (466). Similar to Hesford and Schell's suggestion, the transnational counterstories shared in this article centralize transnational feminist narratives and women's rhetorics from the voices of female graduate students in academia from outside the borders of US higher education from South Asia/Bangladesh to be specific.

## Implications & Conclusion

According to Liu, "A CRT framework provides a situational context for exploring the impact of race and ethnicity on students' self-image and interactions with others, which is fundamental to better understanding Asian Americans' educational experiences" (5). In addition, "Counter-stories make the study of race so salient and dynamic because they unveil intricate racial nuances embedded in everyday life" (Gillborn; Solórzano and Yosso, qtd. in Matias 3). Transnational and international students from different parts of the world come to the United States for higher studies. These students belong to different races, ethnicities and nationalities. The framework of CRT can be used to investigate the effect of race and ethnicity and nationality on the Asian students' lived experiences in higher education by analyzing their personal narratives and transnational counterstories. However, Liu also notes that "Asian Americans should not be considered as one monolithic group, but rather their educational experiences and outcomes should be disaggregated" (10). Therefore, the educational experiences of South Asian Bangladeshi students should also be discussed with equal significance. The positionalities, lived experiences, and transnational identities of South Asian international students (who are not Americans) in the United States, especially an underrepresented graduate student population from multiply marginalized backgrounds like Bangladeshi transnational women of color, should also be emphasized from the viewpoint of transnational feminism, within the theoretical framework of the intersectionality in CRT.

Moreover, regarding transnational rhetoric, Hesford and Schell note that “A transnational rhetorical perspective, however, strives to address how rhetorical concepts are shaped by cultural, social, and economic interconnectivities and interrelations and cross-border and cross-cultural mobilizations of power, language resources, and people” (465). The transnational counterstories shared in this article also create transnational rhetoric regarding several issues and struggles transnational graduate students might face in the US higher academia, stemming from the cross-cultural interrelations and/or differences in various aspects like power, language resources, discourses, writing conventions, etc. Additionally, Hesford and Schell mention the relevance of feminist rhetoric and transnational policies between domestic and international spaces, affecting women’s lives (468-469). Likewise, this article synthesizes the theories of transnational and feminist rhetorics to discuss how cross-cultural and transnational academic systems/policies affect the academic lives of two marginalized women of color in US higher education through our autoethnographic reflections/counterstories. Similar to this study, other underrepresented and transnational marginalized students from higher academia might also be able to produce more valuable transnational rhetoric based on their autoethnographic personal narrative/counterstories, in the hope of bringing change and individualized accommodations in dealing with important survival issues like adapting to a new academic culture, the struggles of single females in a foreign society, imposter syndrome, and invisible disability.

Furthermore, the Bangladeshi Bengali identity operates at the intersection of ethno-religious, cultural, and national dimensions, raising critical questions about the categorization and understanding of race. This complexity becomes especially salient when considered through the lens of CRT and transnational feminism, as such frameworks provide tools to examine how power, identity, and history interact to destabilize conventional racial categories. As Ranjoo Seodu Herr (2014) notes, “Transnational feminists by and large consider nation-states and nationalism as detrimental to feminist causes, whereas Third World feminists are relatively neutral to, and at times even approving of, nation-states and nationalism” (3). The Bangladeshi context underscores the need for such nuance. The Radcliffe Line, a border hastily drawn during the partition of India in 1947, exemplifies the violent reconfiguration of identities along ethno-religious and national lines. As Akhilesh Pillalamarri observes, “The basic principle underlying the border, and the decision to partition India itself, was the two-nation theory,” which assumed an irreconcilable division between Hindus and Muslims. However, this framework failed to account for the complexities of identities such as Bengali Muslims, who were suddenly split between East Bengal (modern Bangladesh) and West Bengal (India).

The Bangladeshi Bengali identity provides fertile ground for research that bridges CRT and transnational feminism. Such scholarship could 1) investigate how colonial policies and the partition of Bengal institutionalized divisions within Bengali identity; 2) analyze how language and nationalism intersect to produce unique forms of identities in Bangladesh; and 3) challenge universalist approaches to race and feminism by highlighting the specificity of Bangladeshi experiences. By incorporating these perspectives, scholars can contribute to a richer understanding of how identities like Bangladeshi Bengali disrupt and expand traditional notions of race. This work aligns with Herr’s call for “inclusive and democratic feminisms that accommodate diverse and multiple feminist perspectives of Third World women on the ground” (4), fostering a deeper

engagement with the complexities of identity in a globalized world.

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