

Genocide, Statelessness and Poetic Witness: Rohingya Identity and the Politics of Marginalization

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Abstract

This chapter examines Rohingya poetry as an articulation of marginalized identity shaped by genocide, statelessness and forced displacement. Drawing upon *I Am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond* (Byrne & Doja, 2019), survivor testimonies and trauma studies, the essay analyses how poetic language functions as witness literature. It argues that Rohingya verse negotiates erasure through memory, grief and ethical appeal, transforming collective trauma into resistant self-representation. By situating these poems within discourses of marginalization, exile and post-traumatic subjectivity, the chapter demonstrates how literary expression becomes a site of survival and political visibility.

Keywords: *Rohingya, marginalized identities, genocide, poetry of witness, statelessness*

Introduction

This, then, is all. It's not enough, I know.
At least I 'm still alive, as you may see.
I'm like the man who took a brick to show
How beautiful his house used once to be.

– Bertolt Brecht (347)

The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. . . . the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror, most people will comply but some people will not . . . Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.

– Hannah Arendt (232-33)

The Rohingya Crisis – Disenfranchisement, Genocide and Migration

The Rohingyas are an Islamic people from the Rakhine state of Myanmar whose history has been closely connected to the province of Bengal in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. The Rakhine state, formerly known as Arakan, was a vassal state of the Bengal kingdom during the fifteenth century and that initiated the influx of Muslims, especially Bengali speaking ones, into the Rakhine state. Although Arab traders have been in contact with Myanmar since before 1055, the Muslim influx was further accelerated when the Mughal emperor Shah Suja sought refuge in the Arakan state and several individuals related to Suja's entourage were inducted into the Arakan court and army. The loss of the Arakan army to the Mughals in 1666 extended this process even further. Although the political epicentre of Myanmar soon shifted away from Arakan, the region became politically and economically significant once again during the British colonial rule when Arakan became integrated with the colonial economy of nearby Chittagong (Phayre 1883). This led to not just increase in rice production and exports but also a great influx of migrants. This contributed to an exponential

increase in Muslim population in the Arakan region and in 1931, a quarter of the Arakan population were Muslims (Census 1931). However, in 1962, 14 years after Burmese independence, a military junta took control of Burma and chose to follow a policy of sustained discrimination and persecution against the Rohingyas. The Junta in fact evicted around 250000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh as early as 1978 and continuously portrayed them as foreign nationals. In fact, the Burmese Nationality Law of 1982 officially de-recognised the Rohingyas as Burmese citizens which sparked a process of discontent spanning decades which involved several insurrections, riots and brutal repression, culminating in the genocide and refugee crisis of 2015 which continues till date (Bari 2018).

Although the crisis of the Rohingyas came to international spotlight in 2015, with images of desperate people trapped in captain-less boats off the coasts of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, those attempts at migration were born out of state-sponsored atrocities which had been going on, particularly since 2012, as a result of majoritarian Buddhist nationalism on the one hand and rampant Islamophobia on the other (ISCI 2015). The report of the International State Crime Initiative (ISCI) concluded that

...the Rohingya have been subjected to systematic and widespread violations of human rights, including killings, torture, rape and arbitrary detention; destruction of their homes and villages; land confiscation; forced labour; denial of citizenship; denial of the right to identify themselves as Rohingya; denial of access to healthcare, education and employment; restrictions on freedom of movement, and State-sanctioned campaigns of religious hatred. (ISCI 15)

This led to not only thousands of Rohingyas desperately migrating to various neighbouring countries but thousands more languishing in detention camps in the Rakhine state in deplorable conditions. The 2017 UN report of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) details a variety of physical and sexual assaults to which these Rohingyas were subjected, either by state forces or by armed thugs, often with state protection, who used knives, guns, arsons and beatings to systematically torture and execute Rohingyas under various pretexts. These attacks amount to a systematic genocide directed against the Rohingyas as a result of which around 9000 Rohingyas were killed in 2017 alone (Lee 1). As the situation worsened over the course of the next two years the erstwhile Bangladesh foreign minister Abdul Momen reported that over 24,000 people were killed, 18,000 women raped, and 1,20,000 houses destroyed, 1,15,000 houses were burnt in Myanmar's Rakhine state (Islam 159). The staggering numbers are far too gruesome for human imagination to comprehend with any degree of precision. Among those who survived more than a million took refuge in Bangladesh, either in official refugee colonies or in precarious scattered settlements in and around different places near coastal Bangladesh with more than 150000 refugees coming in the last 18 months according to a UN report published on 11 July, 2025 (UN News 2025). Significantly, life in these refugee camps is often marked by violence, insanitary living conditions, terrible heat, lack of medical care and many other typical pitfalls which create a paradoxical longing for the lushness of their lost home which, however, remains an imperilled place of genocidal devastation. In fact, the Rohingyas living in Bangladeshi refugee camps are often exploited by criminal gangs for drug trafficking, suspected terrorist activities and various other illicit happenings (Khan 98-103). As S.E. Khan remarks

The unfolding ground realities of violence in the camps, supplemented by religious, political, and criminal interests, have intensified tensions between the host community and Rohingya... the intra- and inter-community violence and tensions create a fertile ground for non-state actors to exploit ...the exploitation of Rohingya identity by various stakeholders can potentially lead to security instability in the camps with long-term possibilities of tensions between the host community and the Rohingyas. (103-104)

The Rohingyas' Poetry of Witness

In the preface to the monumental anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, the editor Carolyn Forché explains the logic behind her choice of poems and poets in the following terms:

I decided to limit the poets in the anthology to those for whom the social had been irrevocably invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract. The writers I have chosen are those for whom the normative premises of the nation-state have failed. They have not been afforded the legal or physical protections that the modern state is supposed to lend to its citizens nor have they been able to enjoy the solidarity that the concept of the nation is supposed to provide. (Forché 45)

These are precisely the same concerns which are reflected in the poetic anthology *I am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond*, edited by James Byrne and Shehzar Doja which includes various poems and translated songs by the Rohingya, especially as a result of a creative writing workshop they had organised in the refugee colonies of Cox's Bazaar in 2019. Following Forché's paradigm, these poems

bear “the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination” brought about by experiences of “exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination” (Forche 29-30).

The one element which is most common in these poems is obviously an attestation of the inhuman violence and torture to which they have been submitted at the hands of the Tatmadaw or the Burmese army following decades of entrenched, systemic persecution. At the root of such sustained inhumanity is the ethnic vilification of the Rohingya who have been robbed off of their history, culture, language and basic citizenship rights through a series of atrocities. This is evident from the opening poem, “That’s me, a Rohingya”, by Mayyu Ali in which the speaker, a Rohingya, addresses a fictional Buddhist Burmese individual to highlight by contrast how Rohingyas have had to live as a nomad, an alien, a pauper or a rape victim in the face of sustained oppression and how they have been denied basic access to education, healthcare, livelihoods and security. Emphasising the fragility and hopelessness of their condition, the speaker ruefully asserts

Even when I watch the sunrise
I am not living like you are
Without the fertility of hope I live
Just like a sandcastle. (25)

This sense of “otherness” is something that many Rohingyas have had to imbibe from their birth. Thida Shania’s “First Day At School” makes this agonizingly obvious as the child speaker is confronted with the declaration “This chair is not for a kalar”. The speaker reflects

That day, the lesson was
Discrimination (not curriculum),
The illnesses of the heart. (28)

Such instances of discrimination and bullying would of course intensify to countless instances of assault, torture, arson, assassination and eviction. Therefore, in poem after poem one witnesses the anguished cries of multiple speakers struggling to articulate the harrowing violence they have had to witness and endure. Therefore while Yar Tin laments how “The blood-scented oxygen inhaled/Made my skin limp and lifeless” (29), Pacifist Farooq mockingly states that “In Arakan they kill and bury you/Under the treasure of human rights” (32), RO Pacifist describes his life in Myanmar as

a hell, blooded
with terror sounds,
explosions –
ash of villages burnt down,
over decades. (36)

Such images of fire, bullets or death by drowning keep punctuating these poems as the authors reflect on the trauma that Rohingyas have had to collectively withstand as they were persecuted by the Burmese army or local Buddhist Burmese population or the ways in which they died while fleeing their villages by road or sea or the trauma of witnessing the murder of one’s closest kin. In Yasmin Ullah’s poem “Birth” the speaker acts as the collective voice of these traumatised Rohingyas and states

I was born among rows of dead infants
burned alive, thrown into fire
drowned in water

fallen into the river
to escape the punishment
of crimes they didn't commit. (50)

These lines serve to underscore the utter senselessness with which the Rohingyas have been targeted for decades and have been subjected to most brutal forms of violence. One poem by Mayyu Ali mimics the voice of a mother who has had to watch her husband and son being burnt to death and yet considers herself fortunate and states:

At least I didn't have to see the corpses like
others did,
Nor did I have to bury them.
They're kind killers. (44)

Such piercing oxymoron makes us aware of the extent of disorientation and mental disfigurement which the survivors have had to cope with. Quite naturally therefore in their poems either we see recurrent cries of "Save me/ Save me/Save me" (45) or there are anguished, unanswered questions - "Tell me what we are guilty of!" (59) - which keep voicing a thirst for some rational explanation in a world ravaged by meaningless violence devouring Rohingyas of all ages. All that remains is a pathetic recognition of the destruction of their homeland and an ensanguined catalogue of irreparable losses without the possibility of any restitution, manifested through the refrain "My Arakan/torn to pieces" (46).

Of course such humanitarian crises have been particularly horrid for women and children who have been subjected to unimaginable physical and mental torture. Alongside references to mothers watching their children being killed there are also in these poems repeated references

to women being gangraped and subjected to barbaric violence. In one such poem the speaker recounts,

The last one said
I am not going to use my penis on you
Instead he used his knife.

They set me alight and left us for dead. (44)

The impact of such dehumanizing violence has also birthed hundreds of orphans whose infernal childhood plunges them into a world of bewildered vulnerability. While one such orphaned speaker asks

Why do I remain	who could love
in this	me-like my
world?	mother? (34)

Another speaker keeps asking “Dad, why won’t you come back?... Dad why don’t you talk to me?... Dad why can’t you hug me?” (35)

Such poetic articulations are entirely in keeping with the various testimonies of Rohingya survivors which vividly capture the extreme inhumanities which they had to suffer. Along with the recurrent references to “*Desh vagi diche/gram tuli diche*” (they’ve broken our land and evicted our village) we find harrowing details of orchestrated violence:

Burma government wanted to establish a military base in Labadok, right there where we were living...The very next day, they set fire on one side of the village, and from another side they attacked the village people. Family after family were evicted. The whole Labadok village was destroyed. Many ... many people were killed, some died out of hunger on their way to find a shelter. Some got their children missing ... old people died ... and family members got missing. (Farzana 98)

This testimony from one Md. Ismail Hussain is only one of countless such other experiences. Whether it is Momtaj Khatun talking about her brother being killed by the ‘Mogs’ who “literally cut him into pieces” (Farzana 106) or Jobeda Begum talking about how her daughter committed suicide after being raped by Rakhine men (Farzana 104-105), the experiences of manifold oppression their memories attest to find their equivalents in the poetic articulations of *I am A Rohingya*. As RO. B.M. Hairu writes

The Arakan turned into genocide
Non-stop raping and murdering
Some were thrown screaming into the fire.
The world outside was too quiet to hear. (59)

This sense of all-encompassing destruction is something that repeatedly appears in Rohingya poems, as evident from the following lines by Yasmin Ullah

Blood swims through my veins,
the agony of women
shapes me into a living body –
women who, in very attack, every massacre,
were reaped, their souls assaulted – (50)

The fact is that such memories of injustices continue to haunt the lives of the Rohingyas whose vulnerability continues to be shaped by these infernal pasts. This is evident from the recollections of Nur Begam:

My neighbor, one lady short in height and fat ... another lady from same village and I, we [three of them] went to collect firewood from the nearby jangle. There some Mog men chased us. They had knives with them. I and another lady managed to escape as we ran towards

the jangle for our life. But that short lady she could not make it. The Mog (Rakhine) men, three of them raped her there. They stabbed her many times, (silence) ... and left her like that. Oh ... re! boro julum [severe oppression] ... on females! (Farzana 107)

No wonder then that Rohingya poems testify to a sense of unfathomable generational trauma, particularly those suffered by the women –

bleeding internally, excessively from
their gang rapes
their tortures
their throats slit,
their flesh sliced,
hours before fleeing (51)

In many cases, such experiences create a scarred consciousness akin to the victims of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As Dr. Rowan explains in his discussion of PTSD,

Such individuals experience a damaged sense of self, chronic guilt and shame, feelings of ineffectiveness, and a chronic sense of despair and helplessness...Survivors are ‘disconnected from the present’ and continue to react to life experiences as if they were anticipating, experiencing, or responding to the earlier trauma. (Rowan 30)

While a report from 2020 had already talked about approximately a third of Rohingya refugees suffering from depression (Hussain 105) J.D. Kinzie, in his chapter on “PTSD in Traumatized Refugees” in the anthology, *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical and Cultural Perspectives* edited by Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad, states

Being a refugee almost automatically means multiple losses: the loss of family members through death or separation, but also the loss of the wider social network of extended family or village. ... This often results in a loss of income and vocation, and many refugees need governmental assistance. This unfamiliar dependence can lead to a loss of self-respect and respect within the community. Finally, the refugee experiences a loss of country, culture, and familiar social institutions. Given these multiple losses, it is not surprising that PTSD is usually associated with depression. In fact, they almost always coexist. The most frequent diagnosis of refugees in our clinic is "PTSD-depression complex." (198)

This is evident from some of the Rohingya poems as well where memories of arson, murder and violence are often triggered by everyday objects of the present that drag the refugees back into the vortex of the traumatic past. Therefore Ahtaram Shine desperately cries

I'm trying to free myself
from the terror of torture.
I want to erase my mind. (62).

In the same vein Pacifist Farooq refers to the "Heart's Burning Smell" and how "The burning smell just keeps on spreading" (65). Perhaps the most telling representation of this recurrent trauma is the poem Broken Mirror which deserves to be quoted in full:

I wake up to the speaking mirror.
To the tragedy, the scare
Of the hitting bullet.

*

I cannot dare to look

at the mirror, looking
at the mirror, looking back

*

The bullet flew towards my head.
I ducked down and ran.
The bullet smashes the mirror,
Shards scatter over the floor.
(Breathe –)

*

Today I see the mirror
In the taxi window
In the barbers shop. (66)

Yet, despite this inundation of traumatic memories, one of the things which keep inspiring the speakers in these poems is the devotion to a lost motherland, a lost sense of belonging, a home which is infernally distant and yet forever beckoning. Therefore, even as Yar Tin laments the multidimensional oppression meted out to the Rohingya in Myammar, the speaker still keeps recalling that “the land is fertile and the soil rich” – a clause that functions as a refrain in the poem, if only to highlight by contrast the miseries heaped on the Rohingyas. In fact, in some of the poems, this memory of a peaceful, fertile Myanmar, in the lap of nature, even acts as a foil to the refugee camps because of the claustrophobic heat and the lack of basic amenities, which were once available in Myanmar.

In Cox’s Bazaar, no trees, no home, no stream
Not like our golden Arakan.
In our golden land, the trees give shade,
In Cox’s Bazaar, tarpaulin offers heat. (48)

The typical nostalgia of an exile here conjures this image of a golden Arakan which is remarkably similar to the image of a golden Bengal or *Sonar Bangla* which is commonplace in both West Bengal and Bangladesh. However, the speakers themselves are also conscious of the fragility of these imaginary homelands of their yearnings and admit to the deliberate delusions of the heart:

I keep missing a place barely know
Home-untouched
families I can never return to
how I long
for their
hugs. (68)

Significantly, unlike the self-serving solipsism which often emerges from uncritical nostalgic yearning, the nostalgia and homing desire of the Rohingyas is always addressed to an unknown other who might be responsive and empathetic to their plight, as opposed to the betrayal and barbarism that they generally experienced at the hands of the Buddhists in Myanmar.

I wish you knew
through even one or two
pictures
so you would
at least be able
to relate
and may be...only may be,
you would cherish this place-
as much – as I do (68-69).

Therefore, even in Thida Shania's poem "Save Me", which reads very much like a personal plea for rescue, the personal pronoun refuses to stay confined within the confines of selfhood and instead becomes affiliated with a universal sense of suffering associated with people in other places and other times, people of other nationalities and ethnicities

No matter who he or she is,
young, old,
Palestinian, Yemeni,
Syrian, Kashmiri,
or even a Rohingya
Save me
Save me
Save me (45)

Conclusion

Thus, the poems of the Rohingyas, despite confronting diabolical dehumanization, continue to articulate a universal humanism based on an ethic of care which remained so starkly absent from their own experiences in Myanmar for decades. Therefore, much like Darwish's speaker in Gaza, who continues to cultivate hope from the gunmouth of time, in the shadow of ruined apple orchards, despite cataloguing all the consummate negation they have had to face, RO B.M. Hairu still asserts

All is well,
At the limit of my eye is the sky,
I shall stretch out my hope all the way;
Along a path paved with lives,
I will forge ahead. (61)

Perhaps such conviction can serve as the keynote of incantations of sanity for our torn times.

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