

Rohingya Narratives: Exploring Refugee Crisis and Identity Formation

Md. Arafat Mostofa*, Masha Al-Airin Khan¹

¹Department of English, North Bengal International University (NBIU), Chowddopai, Rajshahi-6206, Bangladesh

Abstract: The large-scale displacement of more than 1.3 million Rohingya individuals to Bangladesh is a humanitarian disaster that has radically changed how everyone approaches identity formation among stateless people. In this paper, the new ways in which Rohingya refugees form their sense of self and community by using narrative practice that crosses geographical and cultural boundaries are explored. Establishing links with contemporary displacement fiction—i.e., works by Mohsin Hamid, Khaled Hosseini, and Viet Thanh Nguyen and the discourses diaspora, identity, and postcolonialism—this paper illustrates how the narrative becomes a survival strategy for maintaining cultural cohesion in the face of the violent harshness of refugee camp existence. The study demonstrates that Rohingya groups build complex patterns of identity that operate beyond the traditional frameworks of citizenship, and these identity patterns spin transnational webs of identity which conflict with dominant diaspora paradigms. Examining oral testimony, digital communication, written texts, interviews and witnessed cultural practices within Bangladesh's refugee camps, this paper argues that diaspora groups rebuild their own collective identity actively through cross-border narrative exchange. This paper also highlights the process of developing new paradigms to understand home, belonging, and cultural continuity in cases of permanent displacement.

Keywords: *Rohingya; Identity; Refugee; Narratives; Displacement*

Introduction: Organized violence and mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims out of Myanmar's Rakhine State have created one of the most intricate displacement predicaments of the century. In order to completely comprehend this crisis, we should identify who the Rohingya are and what makes them be brutally harassed as such. Rohingyas are a Muslim minority group that inhabits the western Rakhine State of Myanmar. Although the presence of the people of Myanmar has a history of several generations in the state, the government of Myanmar has never accepted that they constitute a nationally recognized ethnic group in the country but constitute descendents of immigrant Bengalis of Bangladesh. It is this denial that is the epicenter of years of persecution and brutality. The ethnic Rohingya language, culture and religious practices are differentiated in relation to the neighboring society of Buddhists in Myanmar and Bangladeshis on the opposite side of the border. Their displacement was caused by Myanmar's military junta and subsequent governments, which have increasingly eroded Rohingya rights since the 1970s. Most of the Rohingyas were made stateless when the conditions of citizenship were established in the Citizenship Law of 1982 that they could not meet. In the course of the decades, they were radically limited as to freedom of movement, marriage, education and employment. Their settlements were imposed with duties at will, put into compulsory labour, and random acts of violence that led to refugees in Bangladesh.

The situation reached the devastating pinnacle in the month of August 2017 during which the Myanmar military initiated what they termed as "Clearance Operations" also known by the world community as Ethnic Cleansing as a reaction to the attack by the Rohingya militants. The retaliation by the military was however excessive and ruthless. In a methodical way villages were burned down by soldiers, police and civilian mobs, mass killings were planned and rampant sexual abuse occurred. These were later declared to represent genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes by the United Nations. In just a matter of months, more than 750,000 Rohingya crossed the borders into Bangladesh, where a vast number of previous victims of oppression had fled. The reasons that Bangladesh accommodates such refugees is a mixed motive of humanitarian compassion, religious kinship, and the geopolitical constraints. The economically and socially stretched Government opened the border out of humanitarian reasons. Concerns on religious obligation were caused by the affinity of the Islamic religion between the Rohingya and the Muslim majority in the Bangladesh population which demanded that they offer refuge. There was also sympathy for the Rohingya problem that stemmed from Bangladesh's own challenging experience during the struggle for independence in 1971. The evacuation has never been experienced before and it has changed Cox's Bazar to be the largest refugee camp in the world with over 1.3 million people staying there in a way that is not condoned by the normal ways of humanitarian intervention. The camps are spread amidst rolling hills, a huge makeshift city having families occupying tarpaulin and bamboo shacks, year after years with no chance of going back.

The Rohingya crisis transcends the commonly understood problems of refugees that it compels us to contemplate basic ideas of identity, citizenship and belonging. Nevertheless, it is not a question of numbers but of categoric difference. Rohingya people are not temporary refugees of Myanmar but an erased people whose existence has been erased by their native land. This

Article history:

Received: 09 July 2025

Received in revised form: 31 August 2025

Accepted: 1 October 2025

Available online: 15 December 2025

Corresponding author details: Md. Arafat Mostofa

E-mail address: arafatmostofa2@gmail.com

Tel: +8801773122300

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non-recognition transcends legal citizenship to cultural, historical and ethnic status, thus forming a statelessness which requires alternative theoretical paradigms to understand identity formation in displacement. The institutionalized nature of this obliteration- what the UN has termed genocide- implies that focus must be given to the way communities maintain coherence in the face of existential denial.

Narrative is one of the survival strategies of Rohingya communities. Lacking legal records, state identity, or even territorial affiliation, the communities use narrative to maintain the sense of collective identity and claim their humanity. These stories extend to older refugees retelling their life before displacement to young people producing digital media that is read and watched all around the world, to communal leaders building histories of persecution and resistance.

Theoretical Framework: The traditional theory of diaspora, elaborated by theorists like Robin Cohen and Khachig Tölölyan, revolves around the community that keeps in touch with established homelands via shared memory, cultural affiliation, and accepted belonging. The classical examples, such as the Jewish, the Armenian, and the Greek, are the population groups that have a set of cultural, economic, and even political discourse relationships with their homeland, which formally acknowledge their presence in history. As Cohen notes, these diasporic communities maintain “a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements” [1]. These groups can also resort to established discourses of belonging and formal recognition of their origins even in situations of forced migration.

Conventional diaspora theory falls short when applied to the Rohingya situation. Their case demands a more nuanced theoretical framework. Stuart Hall provides valuable insights through his innovative reconceptualization of diasporic identity. He defines it as a process of “becoming” rather than a static state of “being” [2]. However, the Rohingya experience challenges even these fundamental diaspora assumptions. Myanmar officially denies both their existence and their territorial rights, creating a unique predicament that existing theories struggle to address.

The Rohingya can be called a disputed diaspora: a displaced group whose status of the homeland is essentially denied by the sending state. In contrast to the conventional forms of diaspora communities, which preserve intricate ties with their motherlands, the Rohingya have to build identity under the condition of systemic exclusion of their peoplehood and their own land. This brings about distinctive identity issues that run beyond normal diasporic experiences.

The theory of the “diaspora space” by Avtar Brah is especially applicable to this situation because it understands the idea of diaspora not as the displaced communities alone, but as the community of receivers that has their identities reformulated by the presence of stateless people [3]. The case of Bangladesh-Rohingya refugee demonstrates how the diaspora space is engaged in reconstituting identity of both the refugees and host communities, which traditionally diaspora theory has failed to attend. These realities call for a different analytical approach, particularly one focused on narrative identity. The “narrative identity” by Paul Ricoeur serves as a helpful source of information about the ways in which communities uphold cultural continuity in society amid systematic destruction [4]. To organizations where existential dangers of cultural extinction exist, narrative identity is an even more important tool since it offers one of the limited means to maintain a cultural continuum in the face of organized displacement and erasure.

It is in this context that we can speak of so-called testimonial narratives, that is, narrative practices that operate as a document, resistance, and cultural preservation. Such stories generate community coherence via collective experiencing of mutual experience and present survival, producing narrative continuity between past trauma and the future hope. The difference between the “landscape of action” and the “landscape of consciousness” as described by Jerome Bruner helps to see how Rohingya accounts are functioning at several levels [5]. The landscape of action is comprised of external persecution, displacement, and life in the refugee camp whereas internal preservation of culture, community building, and identity reconstruction are the ones that fall under the landscape of consciousness. This two-story format allows communities to meet short-term survival demands and also long-term cultural persistence by means of intricate narrative telling activities.

The “contested diaspora” theory is another theory that must involve the postcolonial frameworks of displacement and cultural erasure. The research on “exile consciousness” of Edward Said offers crucial explanations of how displacement gives rise to new critical consciousness and cultural production [6]. The direction taken by Said elucidates the psychological and emotional aspects of losing the homeland and how exile creates unique views that bypass the conventional limits. Yet the Rohingya issue requires that we apply the Saidian model to include those groups whose experience is better described as not a classical exile by a known homeland, but as an active rejection of their peoplehood.

Bhabha’s ideas of “hybridity” and so-called “third space” can be applied to investigate the processes of identity formation among Rohingya in terms of cultural contact and negotiation [7]. In Bangladesh, refugee camps are the third spaces where Rohingya culture clashes with the Bangladeshi society and international humanitarian systems and creates new types of hybrid identities. This proves that displacement as a result of trauma can lead to new cultural formations and new negotiations of identities that are beyond the traditional ethnic and national boundaries.

These conceptual models expose how the Rohingya feels cannot be categorized within the traditional scholarly frameworks but must be conceptualized in new ways that take into consideration the existence of populations living at the periphery of visibility and acknowledgement. This is because the overlap of contested diaspora theory with postcolonial exile and hybridity narratives offers the conceptual framework through which stateless peoples build meaning and identity in opposition to systematic destruction projects.

The Rohingya case, therefore, encourages researchers to create more accommodating theoretical frameworks to explain the experience of erased populations and go beyond the traditional models of diaspora to address the nuances of challenged belonging, narrative resistance, and formation of hybrid identities in the context of state denial and erasure of cultures.

This is a synthesis of theoretical frameworks or approaches that bring together a contested diaspora theory, postcolonial analysis, and narrative identity that give a complete account of stateless identity construction. The combination can be analysed in terms of the way in which literary expressions of displacement can shed light on lived processes of erasure as well as exposing general displacement motifs and specific difficulties of systematic denial. The frame links the narrative identity theory as formulated by Ricoeur and the ideas of hybridity and exile consciousness as formulated by Bhabha to the psychological and political aspects of the Rohingya identity formation. Such a multi-theoretical training is indispensable due to the impossibility of referring to a single theoretical approach in the context of state-sponsored erasure and a state-permanent displacement of identity construction.

Methodology: The paper uses a comparative literary-ethnographic methodology, which combines documented refugee experience with literary modes of displacement. The study is based on three primary data sets that include secondary ethnographic research in Rohingya refugee camps in 2017-2023, digital content analysis of Rohingya-created social media narratives and comparative literary analysis of contemporary displacement fiction.

The ethnographic component relies on documented interviews and observations from studies by Uddin (2020), Ibrahim (2021) [20], and the Forced Migration Review's special issues on Rohingya displacement (2018-2022). The scope of digital narrative analysis is restricted to publicly available information on Rohingya advocacy groups, YouTube testimonials and Facebook community pages and analyzes it in the context of identity construction. Literary analysis in the three seminal novels of displacement: *Exit West* by Hamid, *Sea Prayer* by Hosseini and *The Refugees* by Nguyen, is made comparative with documented Rohingya experiences and conducted to find out general and specific aspects of forced migration identity formations.

This approach acknowledges its limitation of not using original fieldwork but relies on existing ethnographic data in an attempt to examine how narrative practice functions in different displaced populations. The comparative strategy allows for the identification of both shared displacement experiences and the unique challenges within stateless groups.

Literature and Displacement: A Comparative Approach

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*: Magical Borders and Real Boundaries: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* offers a compelling lens for exploring how displacement shapes both individual identity and collective belonging. The magical doors moving around the refugees in the novel represent metaphors of how displacement creates new forms of transnational existence that are faster than the established forms of border axioms. A universal paradigm of displacement, going beyond the spatial to the temporal and cultural change is proposed by Hamid, when he says that "we are all migrants over time" [8]. The juxtaposition of the doors in the delirious world of Hamid with the brutality of the reality of crossing the border as a Rohingya shows both the fantasy and trauma of forced migration. Hamid's migrants are going through the "doors of magic" whereas Rohingya refugees made dangerous voyages across the unfriendly territories and were facing violence, exploitation and loss of lives [8]. But what the two experiences share is the utmost reinvention of identity that cannot take place except in displacement, and the creation of new forms of belonging that brings fragments of multiple worlds to connect. Hamid articulates something painful: "that when we migrate, we kill out of our lives who we left behind" [8]. His words expose how redefining one's identity involves a kind of total violence, something all refugees face, in fiction and in life. What Hamid says about displacement-affected intimate relationships is familiar to the practice within the Rohingya community. The narration carried by the book on the need to balance culture preservation with that of acculturation by the refugees is true to the complex identity performances by the Rohingya families as they continue to adhere to their culture and yet embrace the refugee camp reality. The magic doors symbolize change and possibility. They show how displacement, though rooted in trauma, can forge new ways of belonging and identity that break free from traditional national and cultural boundaries.

Khaled Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*: Parental Love and Cultural Transmission: In *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini, there is an extremely intimate insight on the personal level that forced displacement has on family connections and on the passing of culture. The pattern of this poem as a word of a father praying to his son enlightens how the love of parents lives under the conditions of extreme danger and uncertainty. The dad's heartbroken realization when he said: "I told you so: I said: hold my hand. Nothing bad will occur" [9]. It is just a matter of words. In the story, a father's profile of tricks shows how pathetic the security of parentage becomes against all the hazards of displacement. Syrian refugee story in Hosseini and Rohingya situation show similar trends of parental sacrifice and the preservation of culture. Similar to the father in *Sea Prayer*, Rohingya parents agonize over the life and the future of their children making the impossible decisions about their well-being and who knows to what extent to risk everything in hopes of security and chance. The agonized cry of the father as he begs Marwan, that he is the precious cargo, the most precious cargo that has ever been, and that you should take care of his cargo as Marwan. The feel of the universal is covered when "I pray the sea knows this is the fear possessed by parents when people are uprooted" [9]. This environmental memory created by the recollections of the father in relation to his homeland before it was ruined similar to the realization of the Rohingya recollections in relation to their environment can be seen in the use of environmental connection produced by memory by Hosseini. The act of burning down of Rohingya villages and farms is more than physical displacement; it includes breaking the linkages to places that form the core of cultural belonging. The theme of religious faith as a means of empowerment in the poem can be related to the ambivalent status of the Islamic identity in the lives of the Rohingya, as both one of the reasons of

persecution in Myanmar and one of the reasons of its building of subnational communities and preservation of the cultural heritage in Bangladesh.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees: Intergenerational Trauma and Identity*: Using the sophisticated wisdom, Viet Thanh Nguyen in *The Refugees* offers the idea of how displacement impacts several generations and the consequences of the refugee experiences in the long term. The emphasis provided in the collection of Vietnamese refugees in America provides teachable comparisons with that of the Rohingya, as well as illuminating the particular difficulties of diverse displaced groups. The work by Nguyen on the transmission of intergenerational trauma can provide some ideas about how the crisis involving the Rohingya group could influence not only the victims themselves but also their children and grandchildren. Through silence, memory, and cultural practice, the traumas have been shown to pass between generations of people, generating so-called inherited displacement. Nguyen puts this intergenerational overload in the remarks by the narrator who says, “My American adolescence was saturated with stories of woe such as this, and all evidence of what my mother maintained, that we did not belong here” [10]. Elements in the collection regarding the commodification and politicization of refugee experience are relatable to experiences that the Rohingya had during international humanitarian coverage. The highly technical truth Nguyen reveals to us that “in a nation where everything was measured in terms of possessions, we did not have anything but our stories to take shelter in was a thoughtful understanding of the way in which stories turn out to be the greatest asset along with the biggest weakness in the lives of the refugee groups” [10]. The Rohingya experience exemplifies this point. Systematic efforts to deny their existence have gone so far as to rob them of the ability to claim their own narrative. The chilling word-image of the garments that ghosts left behind best describes “the refugee life which exists, yet does not exist; remains material, yet is not recognized” [10]. These “repressed narratives” are decentralized narratives to the dominant history as main narratives combining such explorations in several stories which allow the reader to understand how displaced people recover their histories and their stories through the creation and survival of stories and memory.

Narrative Strategies Across Displacement Contexts: The comparative analysis spotlights how displaced communities deploy similar narrative strategies when adapting them to specific circumstances of statelessness. Hamid's universal statement that “we are all migrants over time” [8] provides a philosophical background for understanding displacement as a natural state of humanity, yet the Rohingya experience validates how state denial transforms this migration into existential negation.

The concept of mobile heritage emerges as the center of both literary and documented refugee life. Nguyen's refugees “bear stories to tell their children, as if to present them with evidence of a time and place they will not understand” [10], while ethnographic fieldwork illustrates Rohingya families holding onto culture through altered ritual practice in refugee camps [11]. Both of these illustrate how narrative comes to be the primary means of cultural continuity in the loss of physical artifacts and spaces.

Hosseini's *Sea Prayer* illuminates the parental theme of forced displacement so strongly correlated with recorded Rohingya testimony. The father's tormented promise—“Nothing bad will happen”—captures the impossible burden for safeguarding in Rohingya parents' 2018 camp interviews [12]. Ethnographic and literary accounts both describe the breakdown of traditional family protection roles in displacement and the heightened necessity of cultural transmission.

Contested belonging as a subject returns differently in each situation but with analogous narrative forms. Hamid's doors of hope and change are countered by Rohingya digital narratives of survival and acknowledgment. Both, however, employ what Spivak refers to as “strategic essentialism” [13]—adopting uncomplicated identity categories briefly as a political tactic and means to global recognition.

Identity Formation in Stateless Conditions

Memory as Cultural Infrastructure: The state-sponsored, systematic dehumanization of the Rohingya by the government of Myanmar is an illustration of the “choiceless singularity” of human identity that Sen outlines as the basic reason why the world becomes much flammable [14]. The cleavage of identity into reducing parts in this approach has a literary counterpart in Nguyen commenting that “the identity of refugees is turned into a commodity: in a nation where all was sold, we were not our own” [10]. Rohingya experience opposes this model of “singularist identity” by preserving what Sen advocates as multiplicity-religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities that do not align in any straight manner [14].

Memory functions as the primary infrastructure for cultural continuity among displaced Rohingya communities. In contrast to Hamid, whose migrants walk through enchanted doors to the world of new opportunities, Rohingya refugees have to bring with them all the cultural equipment in their memory. It is reported that older Rohingya are living libraries and they store historical narratives, religious teachings and cultural practices using oral transmission as evidenced in the 2021 camp interviews by Ibrahim. This captures what Nguyen observes: stories serve as both “the most valuable resource and the biggest liability to refugee communities” [10]. Refugees depend on these narratives to preserve their cultural identity, yet the same stories risk being forgotten or erased over time.

The collective memory infrastructure works with institutionalized functions: traditional narratives are preserved by traditional narrators, who keep the history of a religion; community organizers who record local experiences. The system produces what

Jung refers to as “collective unconscious associations” that go beyond personal experience [15] to make psychological associations that hold up against even systematic efforts at erasure.

The transmission of intergenerational memory is especially complicated in the case of refugees, when the youth has to create a cultural identity using mediated narratives instead of experience. This activity reflects the conflict of the protagonist in Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer*, in which the father is frantically trying to keep the memory of the homeland alive to his child: “I told you about the men and women that came before you” [9]. In a similar fashion, Rohingya parents in Cox’s Bazar camps put effort to pass along cultural knowledge, but tailor activities to the restrictions of refugee camps.

The Challenge of Refugee Categorization: Labeling the Rohingya as refugees presents a unique problem for their identity. The term defines them by their status as displaced people, not by their cultural background or ethnic history. This legal classification brings international protection, but it simultaneously limits how the Rohingya can express their identity and advance their political aspirations as a community. The conflict between refugee identity and cultural identity becomes even more pronounced since refugee status presupposes return to the homes at some point in the future, whereas Myanmar consistently subjects the Rohingya to the denial of their very existence. This is a condition in which legal groupings and cultural existence act essentially in opposition. In spite of these shortcomings, other categories of identities come into existence. The identity of a Muslim associates Rohingya with the rest of the Muslim community worldwide and offers them spiritual means as well as support systems. Regional affiliation to the peoples of South Asia provides possible linkage with the natives without the problematic issue of country of origin. The construction of Rohingya as an ethnic political identity, but not just a type of refugee, is thus of critical value as a response to a systematic form of erasure. This social identification process consists in the definitions of historical claims to lands, cultural uniqueness, and political rights which are not bound to the boundaries of refugeehood.

Generational Differences in Identity Construction: The effects of displacement for several generations of Rohingya groups initiate intricate dynamics within cultural transmission and identity making. Older generations who have spent the bulk of their life living inside Myanmar and then been forcibly displaced are more likely to be custodians of conventional culture, whereas younger generations born in conditions of displacement must establish their identity in different terms. This intergenerational rift generates distinctive forms of cultural hybridity that can be analyzed with reference to first and second-generation experiences.

First-generation hybridity takes place among displaced elderly people, despite being cultural custodians, who inherently transform their traditional practices to adapt to the constraints of refugee life. It is characterized by selective retention—maintaining critical aspects of culture and pragmatically adapting rituals, social structure, and daily practices to adapt to camp conditions. This generation’s hybrid identity is a mirror of what Homi Bhabha has called the “unhomely” situation [7], wherein familiar cultural practices are made unfamiliar in new situations to create spaces of cultural negotiation and modification.

Second-generation hybridity is more apparent among children and young people who have spent large parts of their lives in refugee camps. Such youth are subject to specific challenges towards the formation of secure cultural identities due to the constraints imposed by restricted access to formal schooling, movement and economic contribution restrictions, and limited autonomy over future chance—more creative and dynamic. Their hybridity is accompanied with linguistic innovation which is a combination of two or more languages. Cultural celebrations blend three or four traditional and modern elements together. New forms of electronic communication use technology to maintain cultural identity while simultaneously transforming it.

Rohingya hybridity diverges from Bhabha’s theory in highlighting key differences in agency and context. Bhabha’s formulation of hybridity occurs within postcolonial encounter when cultural mixture occurs within complex power negotiations between colonized and colonizer, leaning toward subversive mimicry that challenges dominant cultural hegemony. Rohingya hybridity emerges in circumstances of statelessness and survival, where cultural adjustment occurs primarily for protective and preservational purposes rather than as resistance. Rohingya hybridity struggles to maintain cultural continuity under severe spatial and temporal restrictions, While Bhabha’s hybridity functions in the “third space” [7] of cultural translation with potential to subvert fixed identities.

The tension between cultural change and cultural continuity reflects complicated intergenerational bargains. Older generations lean toward cultural continuity by holding onto traditional and customary ways of being through efforts to maintain originality, whereas younger generations want innovation and change as prerequisites for survival. These intergenerational bargains create contested issues around authenticity, survival, and cultural continuity wherein the very process of cultural transmission becomes a form of creative translation that both maintains and transforms Rohingya identity from one generation to the next of displacement.

Gender and Identity in Displacement: Gender profoundly influences the manner in which displacement impacts identity formation, and various genders experience varying challenges as well as possibilities for the formation of new forms of belonging within diasporic communities. However, the gendered character of displacement by Rohingya communities is diametrically opposed to dominant diaspora theory, in which migration often amounts to freedom and potential. Displacement to new diasporic sites for Rohingya women and men most often results in violence, hopelessness, and traumatic gendered deconstruction rather than their enabling recreation. Rohingya women frequently get targeted through systematic sexual violence as part of the 2017 military campaign. They have particularly difficult times reconstructing their identities and social roles in these diasporic places.

In contrast to traditional diasporic contexts in which women will have more freedom and more opportunities for self-determination, Rohingya women’s displacement will solidify their vulnerability and limit their agency. Refugee camps that form

diasporic spaces for them become sites of continuous gender-based violence, confined mobility, and economic dependence rather than sites of freedom. Pre-displacement gender roles and expectations need to be renegotiated in contexts of refugee camps, in which spatial organization, economic life, and social organization radically depart from pre-displacement realities. The renegotiations also offer space for women to take up new responsibilities and roles but do so in terms of necessity and survival and not out of empowerment and choice.

The reconstruction of gender relations also generates tension at the household and community levels, as pre-displacement patriarchal structures try to reassert control under the confined and regulated conditions of displacement. This destabilization of conventional family forms by displacement has a specific meaning for gender identity and roles in diasporic contexts. Family breakdown, disappearance of male household members and disruption of established economic routines have driven the overwhelming majority of women into assuming new roles in relation to family provision and organizing their communities. These expanded roles are not accompanied by equivalent extensions of social stature or decision-making capacity, and therefore indicate the ways in which displacement can expand and circumscribe gendered experience in diasporic contexts. Masculine gender identity itself is also basically reconfigured in these new diasporic spaces, since traditional protector and provider roles become impossible within the constraints of refugee camps. Emasculation of Rohingya men, through their inability to protect their families from the violence and their resultant dependency on humanitarian aid, happens in contrast to more typical diasporic masculinities that might pursue new forms of strength and success in the host countries.

Young women also have particular problems in education and socialization because cultural limits on mobility and social contact tend to increase under the refugee situation. The exclusion from proper schooling and the lack of knowledge about possible futures provide a situation in which typical transitions to adulthood are foreclosed. Unlike their counterparts in voluntary diasporic communities, who would be permitted to move between traditional and modern ideas of gender more freely, young Rohingya women are stuck between limiting cultural norms and further limitations generated by displacement, constituting double binds that narrow their potential for identity reconstruction.

Constructing Belonging Across Borders

Transnational Storytelling Networks: The concept of transnational storytelling networks can be used to describe how the groups of Rohingya deliberately establish and maintain transnational networks across national boundaries using narrative strategies that circumvent legal barriers as well as national borders. Transnational storytelling can be understood as a strategic narrative resource that allows preserving culture, as well as developing all of these identities and sustaining the community by the means of this national border-crossing and a citizenship structure. The origin of traditional storytelling lies rooted in geographically demarcated physical locations but transnational storytelling has the power of producing various imaginary communities that can coexist interdependently through the refugee camps in Bangladesh, the settlements of Malaysian diaspora, the advocacy group in the West and in digital environments everywhere in the world. These networks span a number of linked media forums and diverse cultural traditions. Oral narrative is still used as a form of group expression between people of various countries with the application of the classic models of narratives that endure cultural procedures despite geographical isolation. These stories are passed person-to-person via family ties, religious groups, and the activities of communities thereby forming what are described by anthropologists as narrative bridges between sets of people, who are dispersed across multiple venues. The electronic media and digital platforms have transformed these practices because these provide instant communication across the globe and also preserve the experiences that used to be present in a specific place or would have been lost. The transnational processes of these narrative webs are based on the so-called multi-sited ethnography in which the same stories, motifs and symbols of cultural value are present across geographical locations and hence establish a common experience among the Rohingya groups across global locations. The transnational identity transforms individual stories of traumas into common where experimental expressions of relieves and political activations. Such stories are the tools of what literary theorist Gayatri Spivak has perceived as “strategic essentialism” [13]—a temporary inventory of simplified identity categories in the interests of pursuing political ends and the global reception.

These networks extend through a number of linked media platforms and a lot of cultural practices. Oral narration remains a mode of property among various groups of people in the various countries through the popular models of narration that perpetuates the culture among the people even as they are separated by geographical factors. These stories are passed on through relations of kinship, in congregations of religion and in community projects thereby forming narrative bridges in the sense conceptualized by the anthropologists between groups of people distributed in various places. These, eventually, have been transformed with the help of electronic media and electronic as well as digital platforms because it allows people to engage in instant world communication and records the experiences that existed only at a specific location or would have disappeared altogether. Transnational flows in these webs of meaning occur as a result of multi-sited ethnography, where the same motif, stories and symbols of significances occur across geographical locations, therefore, providing communal experience to the various groups of Rohingyas across the world. The transnational nature has transformed personal accounts of traumatic experiences into communal narratives that are therapeutic and politically relevant at the same time. These stories can be considered as means of so-called “strategic essentialism” which literary critic Gayatri Spivak sees as “temporary pilfering” of the simplified identity categories to achieve political objectives and international recognition [13].

Mutual Adaptation and Host Community Relations: Host-refugee interactions between the Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh have since the first displacement, developed complicated tensions of combativity, trustful

community, and accommodatory behaviors. The study of these relationships is important to learn how belonging gets built and challenged in a situation of displacement. In the meaning of belonging, belonging here also portrays a negotiated process, through which refugees and host peoples secure rights to space, resources and social access in common geographical territory. It involves not only the fact that the refugees seek to establish a meaningful relationship with the surrounding environment that they are guests in, but it also involves the attempt of the host communities to either welcome or reject the new presences into their established social life. The unity in early years between Rohingya refugees and the host Bangladesh was frequently explained through religious affiliations, humanitarianism, and sharing of historical sufferings. The unanimous faith in Islam brought people together at first to establish a common ground of identification and understanding. The religious cooperation represented an exchange of anthropologists call the “ummah” consciousness, or Islamic sense of global brotherhood that was not confined to the local ethnic and national affiliations.

There was also a common experience of displacement during the partition, natural disasters and economic difficulties that enabled identification points so that the host societies could understand the sufferings of the refugees through their memories of their own experiences of displacement and loss. This solidarity came in terms of individual support, community support and government programs which housed the refugees in spite of lean resources. Immediate help was offered by mosque networks, local businesses and families, which can be described by sociologists as social capital networks that made beginning integration possible and ensured their survival. Nevertheless this spirit of unity has been tarnished by the duration of the displacement period, competition of resources as well as the cultural variations that have appeared through the dislocation. Local communities have received both advantages and disadvantages caused by hosting refugees, economic prosperity caused by cheaper labor and humanitarian funds, environmental degradation, infrastructure pressure, and low paying wages in local economies.

The negotiation of such relations is associated with complex identity issues of both the host and refugee people. Though, initially, common Islamic identity created a basis of unity, differences between language, cultural practice, and social organization have created areas of strain and misunderstanding that complicate simplified ideas of religious unity. These relations have been shaped by media representation as well as political speech. Some of the politicians and media houses have used the prevailing tension politically through what media theorists termed as crisis framing to depict refugees as a threat to national security, economic stability, and cultural authenticity. Such a discussion usually focuses on competition of resources and cultural incompatibility strengthening narratives of exclusion with a negative influence on belonging. Other political players and discourses in the media have on the other hand sustained the support and integration by posing it to be the case with such “humanitarian framing” of shared humanity, religious duty, and the temporary character of displacement in positioning inclusive visions of belonging that can accommodate refugee presence in the national identity.

Alternative forms of belonging and identity: The term ‘Alternative modes of belonging and identity’ describes the discursive complexity in which displaced populations construct meaningful belonging to communities, identities, place in the context that the more traditional forms of belonging such as citizenship, legal status or territorial attachment are denied them. This framework appreciates that membership works at a number of levels and areas at the same time that sociologists describe as layered membership that provides remuneration in lieu of the lack of formal political identification.

These alternative forms are important to understand not only how stateless persons continue to produce coherent identity and functioning communities despite being systematically excluded by normal membership structures. The Rohingya experience shatters the typical notions of belonging since they usually presuppose some form of adherence to a certain territory, state, or even a nation. The need to belong in the case of statelessness and displacement should be formed through another relationship, which breaks the traditional borders, generating what anthropologist James Clifford terms the “travel cultures” [16], which despite being spread-out in different geographical areas remain a cohesive entity. Belonging to culture is a kind of alternative membership based upon the absence of legal status or territorial attachment. This mode rests on common language, religious practice, cultural practice and collective memory that develop what Benedict Anderson calls imagined community beyond the state. To the Rohingya, cultural belonging offers continuity of identity and community that survives displacement and persecution and acts as what cultural theorists refer to as the portable heritage that displaced populations carry with them. Religious identity expresses one more mode of membership, which connects the Rohingya to transnational communities of Islam, and provides not only moral but also practical support. The ideal of Islamic ummah (world community) proposes model of belongingness, which goes beyond the scope of nation-state boundaries to provide alternative means to prove identity and material security via networks of mosques, religious groups and humanitarian agencies based on religious idea.

Transnational belonging applies because the diaspora networks of Rohingya communities join people in different countries and continents. These networks mediate exchange of resources as well as information transfer, transmission of cultural practices and offer emotional support establishing what scholars of transnational studies call social remittances that consolidate ties between the community members of the same origin beyond the borders. Local belonging, although limited by legal restraints and social conflicts, builds on a daily social communication, economic interactions and cultural exchange based with the host communities. This mode, as often as not, is tumultuous and contested, but nonetheless a meaningful component of the process of adaptation to displacement as it creates what sociologist Aihwa Ong terms “flexible citizenship that works predominantly within the confines of informal social contract, but not within the limits of formal citizenship” [17].

Virtual Communities and Belonging: The possibility of digital technologies to enable the creation of new forms of belonging has become particularly relevant in the context of Rohingya communities which are highly limited in their physical mobility and

the possibility to exercise their political freedom. Digital tools have allowed creating virtual communities who are not confined in the refugee camps or international borders, and therefore form what is described by media scholars as the so-called networked publics, operating outside state influence and temporal boundaries.

Being created by means of social media, online communities can use their multiple functions: maintain relations between relatives and friends dislocated to various places, share real-time information about the situation in refugee camps and host countries; coordinate advocacy with the help of organized campaigns, and store cultural knowledge and practices in digital repositories. The platforms, which are mainly Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, act as what an anthropologist named Daniel Miller refers to as “polymedia environments” [18], such that different modes of communication are assigned various social usages in the same digital ecology.

The digital storytelling has taken a more crucial role in the lives of the younger generations who have been brought up around digital technologies. Digital storytelling, in contrast to the oral storytelling presented in the transnational networks is a form of narrative which incorporates multimedia tales based on smartphone recordings, social media, podcast tapes, and online co-produced documentaries. These digital stories are not merely interviews or testimonial performances, but imagination multimedia works that merge personal testimony with visual images, music, animation and interactivity.

The narratives are prone to combining the tradition of oral narratives and the newer forms of the media, which have led to the hybrid cultural forms as reflective of the transnational aspect of displacement. That is why young Rohingya creators produce what Henry Jenkins, one of the most popular media theorists, defines as “participatory culture” [19], where the sharing of stories is collaborative, remixable, and responsive to the feedback of audiences.

Nevertheless, the digital belonging is constantly threatened by several issues such as a lack of access to technology and internet connection, language problems, and digital literacy levels. These barriers bring about new niches that marginalize even the already marginalized bringing into reality what researchers term as the digital divides that replicate offline disparities in the online systems. The interplay between belonging online and offline is complicated, and interpersonal ties established online may alleviate offline loneliness but also foster unhealthy pre-occupation and false hopes regarding return or resettlement. Digital belonging is therefore either a compensatory mechanism or a possible genesis of further frustrations in the contexts of displacement.

Conclusion: Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the most acute humanitarian crises of our epoch, though, at that, it opens up dimensions of understanding how displaced people can orient themselves in the question of identity in the context of systematic persecution. This paper focuses on both the short-term dimensions of the crisis and the long-term dynamics of the way in which Rohingya refugees find a new way of forming their identities and sense of belonging. This analysis shows that the Rohingya crises are not just a traditional refugee predicament because the situation takes a systematic nature (the state-ordered violence, national citizenship denial as well as the intentional destruction of identity). In this crisis scenario, refugees practice narration as a survival strategy, and oral descriptions, testimonial narrations and digital activism are some of the avenues they undertake to preserve cultural memory, though adjusting to the reality of displacement. As the case of the refugees demonstrates, identity struggles are complicated in such a way that the conventional markers of belonging lost their ground (citizenship, territory, legality) or are being questioned, appropriated, and redefined. The Rohingya refugees develop alternative structures of belonging which exist despite the desire to go back or be resettled; it is an impressive demonstration of resilience still despite the long-lasting displacement and inadequate response by international organizations. The parallels to other displacement accounts demonstrate a set of general refugee themes, as well as a distinctive aspect of the Rohingya crisis, specifically the intractability of permanent statelessness and denialism. This points at gaps in international systems of protection of refugees aimed at temporary displacement situations. The crisis has serious refugee policy and humanitarian implications. The current provision based on immediate need and repayment in the future is not sufficient to meet the complicated nature of identity needs of a population under prolonged displacement. This case of Rohingya shows that the field should be provided with protection frameworks to acknowledge cultural preservation and community development as the critical aspects of refugee support. The online technologies facilitate cross-national networking that enables the refugees to sustain identity across borders as they construct cross-national solidarity. Nevertheless, the crisis offers also the insight in the way host community interaction and long-time displacements introduce new complications to the idea of refugee belonging and integration. It is possible to conclude that the Rohingya refugee crisis ultimately questions the international systems to create more complex methods which have to comprehend the short term humanitarian requirements and long term processes of identity formation. Comprehension of refugee strategies to negotiate the two sets of issues is essential in devising practical workable solutions to responding to the current displacement crises that more often are characterized by extended statelessness and systematic persecution.

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