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The Rohingya Crisis: A Cross-Border Analysis of Habiburrahman's *First, They Erased Our Name*

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Abstract

Habiburrahman's *First, They Erased Our Name* reflects the Rohingya crisis which has been one of the glaring crucial issues of the contemporary world. Historically, Rohingya are a native minority Muslims of Arakan State, West Myanmar. However, during the 1980s, due to the rise of autocratic rule under U Ne Win in Myanmar, Rohingya community was persecuted suspending their political rights. And they were cracked down into a state of non-citizens not listed in 135 recognized ethnic groups. The Rohingya crisis is characterized by sectarian violence between the Rohingya Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist communities. The tyrannical move of Myanmar authorities against Rohingya turns them into severe restrictions on their freedom of movement and extreme barriers to accessing basic humanitarian assistance. In addition, Rohingya people have been scattered into several parts of the world from 1982 onwards deserving stateless status living in between natural life Zoe and political life Bios. Theoretically, this paper will analyze the real plights of Rohingya immigrants through the theoretical lenses of Foucault's ideas on power dynamics and biopolitics Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity and resistance and Agamben in relation to Arendt's right to have right. It further offers a different solution in fostering understanding and empathy, offering a scholarly contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding displacement, identity, and resistance.

Keywords: Refugee Immigrants, Humanitarian Crisis, Stateless Plights, Biopolitics, Hybridity

Introduction

The Rohingya crisis has been a serious and complex issue that has been the contested subject of contemporary research and analysis.

According to a policy ‘Brief’ by the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS), the Rohingya crisis is a result of a long-standing history of discrimination and persecution against the Rohingya community in Myanmar. It has emerged as a pressing issue on the global stage, demanding a nuanced understanding of its complexities and implications. This cross-border analysis endeavours to delve into the heart of this humanitarian crisis through the lens of literature, specifically exploring the multifaceted dimensions embedded in Habiburrahman’s narrative, *First, They Erased Our Name*. This literary undertaking seeks to unravel the intricate layers of the Rohingya experience, offering a comprehensive examination that goes beyond the surface of geopolitical discussions.

The analysis employs the expression of thinkers such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, whose postcolonial theories contribute to the power dynamics, cultural hybridity, and resistance embedded in the Rohingya narrative. The study also examines how the medium of storytelling contributes to the articulation of the Rohingya people’s cross-border identity.

The **findings** of this analysis reveal the profound impact of erasure, displacement, and marginalization on the Rohingya community. Intertwining theoretical frameworks and the lived experiences depicted in Habiburrahman’s work contributes to a deeper comprehension of the Rohingya Crisis. It also shows the specific poignant realities faced by the Rohingya people in their homeland (Habiburrahman, 2019). In conclusion, this cross-border analysis serves as a valuable exploration of the Rohingya Crisis through the lens of literature. It emphasizes the significance of narratives in fostering understanding and empathy, offering a scholarly contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding displacement, identity, and resistance. *First, They Erased Our Name* is described through the multifaceted narrative of the Rohingya crisis, unravelling the intricate layers of displacement, and identity. In the same way, the issue of Rohingya is represented in many books and articles differently. In “In Search of a Rohingya Digital Diaspora: Virtual Togetherness, Collective Identities and Political Mobilisation”, Anas Ansar & Abu Faisal Md. Khaled provides a comprehensive analysis of the Rohingya crisis from a political and collective perspective. The article examines the historical and political context

of the crisis, the role of social media in shaping the narrative, and the challenges faced by the Rohingya community in terms of identity, citizenship, and human rights. It also highlights the importance of collective action and international cooperation to address the crisis. Ansar and Khaled point out:

Frequently called the most persecuted minority in the world, the Rohingyas have suffered systematic violence and oppression in Myanmar since the 1970s. Today, the vast majority of the nearly three million Rohingyas are in exile, escaping state-sponsored human rights violations and persecution in the Rakhine state of Myanmar—a place they call home. (2023)

This shows the historical and political context of the crisis, the role of social media in shaping the narrative, and the challenges faced by the Rohingya community in terms of identity, citizenship, and human rights. It also highlights the importance of collective action and international cooperation to address the crisis. In another article “The Rohingya Refugees: A Conceptual Framework of their Psychosocial Adversities, Cultural Idioms of Distress and Social Suffering” by Nivedita Sudheer and Debanjan Banerjee explores the psychosocial adversities, cultural idioms of distress, and social suffering experienced by the Rohingya refugees. The article provides a conceptual framework for understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of the crisis, including the impact of trauma, displacement, and loss on the mental health and well-being of the Rohingya community. It also highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and context-specific interventions to address the psychosocial needs of the Rohingya refugees.

Ken MacLean in his article “The Rohingya Crisis and the Practices of Erasure” examines the practices of erasure that have been used to marginalize and exclude the Rohingya community from Myanmar’s political and social landscape. The article provides a critical analysis of the historical and political context of the crisis, including the role of the military, the government, and the Buddhist nationalist movement in perpetuating violence and discrimination against the Rohingya. It also highlights the importance of recognizing the agency and resilience of the Rohingya community in the face of adversity. Likewise, Md Nurul Momem’s book *The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Implications for Regional Security* examines the security issues

and worries from three angles: local livelihood, political rivalry, and potential radicalization risks resulting from the Rohingya people's statelessness. It draws attention to the present circumstances, which call for specific steps from regional governments, and it underscores the need for "political will and measures to be initiated to successfully handle security implications" (615-629). *The Rohingya Crisis: Human Rights Issues, Policy Concerns and Burden Sharing*, a research study, also discusses the many facets of Rohingya life in Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Nepal, and other Southeast Asian nations as well as in the West. Additionally, the piece offers a thorough examination of the issue, taking into account its historical contexts in resolving the crisis and highlights the role of legal avenues such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in holding the Myanmar authorities accountable for human rights violations.

Another article on Rohingya crisis, "The Rohingya Crisis and Questions of Accountability" by Adam Simpson & Nicholas Farrelly explores the legal and political dimensions of the Rohingya crisis, including the role of international law and human rights norms in addressing the crisis. The article provides a critical analysis of the challenges and limitations of accountability mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in holding the Myanmar authorities accountable for human rights violations. It also highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of the crisis, including the issue of citizenship and the need for political reform in Myanmar.

While all of these related reviews provide valuable insights into the Rohingya crisis, they differ in their focus and scope. For example, Anas Ansar & Abu Faisal Md. Khaled examines the crisis of political and collective identity perspective, while Nivedita Sudheer and Debanjan Banerjee focus on the psychosocial adversities experienced by the Rohingya refugees. Ken MacLean provides a critical analysis of the practices of erasure that have been used to marginalize the Rohingya community, while Adam Simpson and Nicholas Farrelly examine the legal and political dimensions of the crisis. None of the studies have an understanding of the Rohingya crisis from a cross-border perspective. Critics have long grappled with the challenge of encapsulating the depth and gravity of the Rohingya Crisis, and this

literary exploration will add a new perspective to the ongoing research on Rohingya crisis.

This paper will emphasize on the ontological, epistemological and axiological approach through the theoretical lenses of Agamben in relation to Arendt's theories on the right to have rights, and Foucault's Biopolitics as the major theories. Additionally, such a theoretical frame will focus on a close reading of the novel *First, They Erased Our Name*. Employing these major theoretical tools, representation of major characters and their dehumanized position will be analyzed to reveal the true picture of immigrants and refugees of contemporary society and how such social scenario causes a humanitarian crisis. The main objective of the study is to uncover the realistic suffering accounts of immigrants and refugees in their daily basis life through the narrative, *First, They Erased Our Name* and the fictional representation of the characters. This study is done to analyze the displaced position of Rohingya immigrants and their pain through the representation of the major characters of the novel and to explore the humanitarian crisis due to the stateless position of Rohingya immigrants and its devastating impact on real refugees' lives. "The Rohingya are refused even the most basic human dignity" (Habiburahman 47). More to it, this study also aims at offering a solution for Rohingya refugees and immigrants in the world through the right implication of the concept the equal liberty and ideas of absolute hospitality to all immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Agamben in his book, *We Refugees*, explores the complex connection between citizenship, rights, and the elusive nature of humanity. He claims that "Rights, that is, are attributable to man only in the degree to which he is immediately vanishing presupposing (indeed, he must never appear simply as a man) of the citizen" (Agamben 117). For him, the rights are not assigned only based on a person's general human identity (or "simply as man"). Rather, it is connected to the citizen's status or legal and political frameworks. This claim of Agamben is supported by critic Arendt in her book, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, with the concept of inalienable rights. Arendt reflects on the rights:

The rights of man, after all, had been defined as "inalienable" because they were supposed to be independent of all government; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their government and had

to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them. (Arendt 291-92).

Individuals are born with these inalienable rights, which means they cannot be taken away or given up. For her, these inalienable rights become problematic when in real-world scenarios, the individuals might not get any authority or institution willing to step in and guarantee or protect these fundamental rights. In this context, as any other Rohingya does, Habib also rhetorically feels the same in the narrative when he declares, "Why am I not treated the same as my friends? Why am I . . . confined within the perimeter of our village . . . sense of injustice gnaws at me." (21). It presents the Rohingya are the victims of the state's exclusion and mistreatment. Therefore, to enjoy inalienable rights a person must be within the political space of a government.

The Rohingya are not considered complete human beings rather they have to face life-threatening complexities to survive in Myanmar. The protagonist Habib narrates "Those who refused to leave their home were slaughtered or arrested and tortured. The extremists looted whatever they could. Hundreds of Rohingya were left dead. Thousands were imprisoned. Maybe more who knows? Who will ever care? Who will record the truth of such horrors?" (Habiburahman 9). Rohingya lose everything when they are out of political space. They are not safe and their death is normal and even not recorded because they are not sovereign citizen subjects of the state. In Myanmar the case of Rohingya the question of life and death becomes very crucial because they lose the right to have rights in a totalitarian state.

After the unfair moves of Win, Rohingya lost every citizen's right as they have not been included as citizens. As the narrator states:

I never knew my grandfather, who used to live with my grandmother and father in nearby Arakan state, before our family were chased away by men from the dominant tribe, the Rakhines. Or maybe it was the Burmese soldiers. I can't remember anymore. Whichever it was my grandfather was arrested and tortured to death. Grandma often cries when she talks about him the rest of the family went into hiding while they waited for the manhunt to end. (27)

These sorrowful words of Habib reflect the traumatic history of his family concerning the murder of his grandfather. It was the initial plight that the authority strategically excluded them from their political rights

According to Foucault, biopolitics involves the study of how governments and states control the biological body of human beings or citizens—not just individuals, but also populations as a whole. As mentioned by researchers Gudmand-Hoyer and Lopdrup Hjorth, in their review article on *The Birth of Biopolitics*:

In 1978, Foucault conceptualizes the governmental target of the population as a new collective focus of biopolitics, representing a political object insofar as the population is that on which and towards which the acts of government are directed, but also a, political subject insofar as it is the population that is called upon to conduct itself in a particular way. (Gudmand-Hoyer and Lopdrup Hjorth 106)

Moreover, in biopolitics, Foucault's idea of the population as a "political object" and a "political subject" illustrates the move away from the control and management of individual populations and toward the regulation and management of entire populations. The narrative claims, "the history of the genocide and massacre tells the suffering and the hardships that the Muslim refugees have to face" (Habiburahman 3). This includes not just how the government acts about the population, but also how the population actively participates in society and behaves within the limitations imposed by the governing power.

In the modern context, migrant cosmopolitanism has the power and right to battle for their rights to find justice in the political discourse. The refugees in the narrative claim, "But making something happen meant drawing attention. Being visible . . . He gathers a courage and steps outside with the confidence" (Habiburahman 136). This can be related to the concept of Balibar's Citizen Subject and Equality, Levinas's ethics of face, and Derrida's cosmopolitanism regarding the existing crisis of refugees.

In Myanmar, the educational institute doesn't easily welcome the students in the classrooms as they are deprived of fundamental rights. In the narrative, the Rohingya situation is intensified by the Buddhist Rakhine students who forcefully harass the Muslim students, "Goodbye, ten per cent . . . another derogatory term, . . . not worthy of respect, of no value" (Habiburahman 64). Similarly,

Derrida's idea of unconditional hospitality is thought-provoking and pushes us to reconsider hospitality from a deeper and wider angle. The unconditional law of hospitality encourages a more humane and inclusive approach to welcome those who arrive seeking shelter and asylum by provoking thought about the moral obligations of nations and cities toward those who are displaced. Derrida argues:

The city itself could determine the laws of hospitality, the articles of predetermined law, both plural and restrictive with which they meant to condition the great law of Hospitality- an unconditional law, both singular and universal, which ordered that the borders be open to everyone, to every other, to all who might come, without question or without their even having to identify who they are or whence they came. (Derrida 18)

He challenges the conventional understanding of laws and regulations that govern the relationship between a host and a guest. This notion of cosmopolitanism invites us to think of a kind of hospitality that surpasses protocols and promotes a welcoming and accepting attitude toward people like Rohingya and from all other backgrounds and identities.

In addition to its effect on their legal status which forces them to relocate. "Due to the greater number of Muslim victims, the origin of the violence has been generally attributed to widely spread Rakhine xenophobia. Discussions on Rohingya identity and the historical background have been altogether eschewed" (Leider 3). For Leider, Rohingya identity is not a fixed category but rather fluid as a remaking process. So, they have multiple identities in different parts of the world.

Correspondingly, scholars focus on the suffering based on the everyday lifestyle of Rohingya caused by the limited resources and its adverse consequences "Although an extended humanitarian response in a variable scale has been initiated, Rohingyas are suffering from limitations of resources and coordination is required for proper implementation of emerging opportunities and planning" (Karin *at el* 15). For them, Rohingya suffer from the risk of the lack of basic needs. Another critic M.R.I. Rusal raises issues about how Rohingya are deprived of citizenship as scattered masses even in their home country as a basic right. Citizenship is a fundamental right that ensures people have legal protection and the ability to

participate in civic life, therefore its lack of legal acknowledgement has serious ramifications. The Rohingya people struggle to lead safe, stable lives in the absence of citizenship:

In this regard, the nationalist monks, mob, and military have all been part of a larger campaign of eliminating the Rohingya people. Interestingly, the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her non-violent strategy for democracy and human rights, failed to condemn the ongoing persecution (Rusal 3).

According to Rusal, Rohingya are practically eliminated from their historical homeland Arakan, a state in Myanmar. As a result, Rohingya have to suffer this terrible fate deserving severe plights in different places with an identity crisis. In addition, scholar Azeem Ibrahim shows the repressive move of the Myanmar military to crack down on the Rohingya Muslim ethnic group to drive them across the border into Bangladesh as a deserted mass. This entails looking into how the military crackdown and forced migration relate to human rights standards and international law.

As researched by critic Azeem Ibrahim, “If this legislation and discrimination was simply a historical legacy of the period of military rule and dictatorship the shift to democracy has worsened the legal position of the Rohingyas and has seen a dramatic escalation in the violence they face” (Ibrahim 52). In his view, Rohingya are dehumanized discriminated and thrown out of the legal space due to the rise of dictatorship in Myanmar.

In the same vein, critic Galache Sardina Carlos discusses anti-Rohingya sentiments connected to crime. Unfairly targeting a particular ethnic or religious group increases the possibility that they would be wrongly linked to criminal activity based more on biased opinions than on solid facts. “The refugee crisis has also contributed to a reduction in the price of drugs, as many desperate Rohingya in the camps have fallen prey to criminal networks trafficking methamphetamine (known as yaba in Burma), produced in Shan State and smuggled to” (Carlos 247). In this situation, the vulnerabilities brought about by the refugee crisis are taken advantage of by criminal networks.

The Rohingya are vulnerable to the influence of these networks because of the dire conditions they live in in the camps. Methamphetamine manufacture and trafficking simply serve to intensify the problems already faced by these communities, introducing an additional layer of complexity to an already challenging circumstance. So as the crisis worsened the situation in Arakan turned into an isolated hub of illegal networking. Muhammad views that the Rohingya are systematically excluded under the leadership of General Win in their native land. “What is needed is political will and diplomatic assertiveness from the UN leadership to bring the Security Council to a consensus to solve the humanitarian crisis and existential threat that the Rohingya are facing” (Muhammad 68). As for him, Rohingya are denied rights to public services the civil rights, including the right to vote. The persecution of Rohingya has multiplied and they have faced violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, extortion, restriction of movement, confiscation of property, forced labour, and other abuse in an organized way. Indeed, the Myanmar government refuses to accept the human sensibility of the Rohingya.

As displaced refugees, Rohingya face the humanitarian crisis due to unhospitable treatment in several places of the world. After Myanmar Rohingya come across many places encountering various people. The protagonist, Habib is forced to move from place to place disguising his true identity to continue his life. He travels to a new place with a new identity to avoid abusive treatment, and a hostile environment even from the local government. He often takes the help of his relatives but does not disclose his real identity because if authorities find him with his true Muslim identity he can immediately be persecuted as an illegal person. Habib exposes that “If they find out that we are Rohingya that’s the end of us” (140). Such an expression indicates to state authorities who are ready to end the Rohingya. Authority acts to erase their physical existence wherever possible. This unsafe condition of Rohingya refugees reflects Foucault’s idea of biopolitics because the authorities do not want to see the physical existence of Rohingya in Myanmar in new host countries. Physically Rohingya are likely to be convicted at any time anywhere even without any mistakes.

In addition, it's not easy for Rohingya to meet family members and sit together sharing pain and happiness in a new land. Habib's uncle utters:

I can't keep you here. Stay tonight but tomorrow you will have to leave. The neighbours do not like us living here. If authorities find you here, we will be arrested and imprisoned. Since we left Arakan, we have told everyone that we are from a Muslim ethnic group in Shan state. If they found out that we are Rohingya, that's the end of us. (140)

This situation is extremely heart-reducing in the life of a refugee. They cannot meet even the family members freely. So, it's a convincing example of a humanitarian crisis.

Similarly, the narrative presents that no one is ready to have solidarity with displaced refugees in the world. The central character Habib reaches the rickety bridge that lies between Malaysia and Thailand authorities and he changes his cultural dress *longyi* and wears trousers just to be safe from the corrupted authorities. "Behave like the locals if you want to avoid being noticed. When you're working, watch the other workers and do what they do. Camouflage is your only protection. Stop wearing a *longyi* and wear trousers" (203). So, he has to imitate others whether that is desirable or not to survive in a new land. Changing his traditional attire which is attached to his ancestral legacy reflects the erasing of his true identity.

The Rohingya problem has been a serious humanitarian crisis for decades in the world but it can be solved by adopting some useful theories. Particularly taking the ideas of hospitality, open borders as well as dissensus, we can address the immediate crisis of Rohingya. Habib protagonist of the novel *First, They Erased Our Name* gets warm hospitality in several places during his perilous journey. As Derrida proposes unconditional hospitality "The question of cosmopolitanism or hospitality is also the "question of question" in that "hospitality [must] begin with the unquestioning welcome" (Derrida 29). Habib receives absolute hospitality at Christmas Island. On the Island, the Australian Navy patrol boat ACPB 88 assists refugees in rescuing life providing immediate basic needs. He shares the moment, "The rescue operation begins. The Australian haul us aboard, rape us in towels, give us something to eat and drink, a brief medical check and some warm clothes" (227). It is humanitarian assistance to save the lives of Rohingya. In Habib's life, it is the first

incident of getting support from the authorities treating them with dignity, and respect, and showing humanitarian values.

Conclusion

Thus, the Rohingya Refugee crisis has been a serious central issue in the present world for years. The novel *First, They Erased Our Name* uncovers the true narrative of the Rohingya as stateless from inherited land in Arakan State West Myanmar to several parts of the world due to dictator U Ne Win erasing them from the list of 135 recognized ethnic categories in 1982. The state political crisis caused the entire crisis in the lives of individuals of Rohingya. As a result of the suspension of the citizen rights of Rohingya, they are turned into stateless. In addition, exiled from political space Rohingya people would face a severe humanitarian crisis as illegitimate masses in Myanmar set up precarious journeys to several countries from one part of the globe to the next. Furthermore, Win's assertion against Rohingya excluded from the fundamental civil rights and throw them like Homo Sacer, a sacred figure who can be killed without culpability like a wolf but not sacrificed. The declarations of human rights seem to cease to secure an individual's right to asylum because Rohingya are transformed into neither entirely human nor beast who have been banned from the city and exploited, and tortured wherever they are unfortunate to take shelter as refugees. There would not be an alternative to solving the Rohingya immigrant problem in the 21st century. In order to address the Rohingya crisis the concept of Derrida's cosmopolitanism, Balibar's citizen subject and equality, and Levinas's ethics of face would be implacable. Adopting these solution theories Rohingya issues could be normalized by reestablishing their previous citizen rights in the world.

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