

“We had been just like animals to them”: Life Histories from the Rohingya Diaspora in Wisconsin

Sayema Khatun

Abstract: Trajectory of the Rohingya, a minority Muslim community from Myanmar resettled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, has been explored in this ethnographic research. Using life history method, this study reveals a Rohingya perspective of their experience of disenfranchisement from the country of origin, cycle of violence, mass killing, forced migration, physical and sexual abuse and finally, statelessness and refugee status. Finding of this study reveals the everyday practice and agency of ordinary Rohingya people through which they are making their way of life in the midst of extreme violence in the country of origin and in protracted refugee situation in Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia before life in the USA.

Key words: Rohingya refugee, Statelessness, Diaspora, Persecution, Human rights and Humanitarian agency, Agency of Rohingya, Everyday Practice Tactic and Strategy

Introduction

I remember when a violent “ethnic conflict” erupted in Rakhine state of Myanmar in 2012 causing a great outcry in Bangladesh and concerns for the countries in the region, like many of my fellow anthropology practitioners in Bangladesh, I became personally and intellectually disturbed and grew inquisitive to unveil the making of this “conflict”. Later on, this “conflict” had been recognized as a manifestation of a larger problem of prolonged persecution and called in various terms as “ethnic cleansing”, “silent genocide”, “hidden genocide” by scholars, UN organizations and international media. Fleeing Rohingya, a Muslim minority community of Buddhist dominant Myanmar, desperately pushed through the border of Bangladesh for saving their lives. The government had been clearly and understandably unwilling to accept any more Rohingya refugees as Bangladesh had already been dealing with this problem for more than four decades and sheltered Rohingya refugees, documented and undocumented, in Cox’s Bazar camps and villages. Eventually, the asylum seekers had been forcefully pushed back by the Bangladesh

border guards and army. For a long time, I could not forget the chilling accounts of the 2012 massacre and graphic images of dying children and women in the fleeing boats published in the media.

Five years later, in early 2017, while conducting graduate research, I chose to undertake my project on understanding the Rohingya crisis from an anthropological perspective without knowing the existence of the Rohingya population in the same mid-western city in Wisconsin I am living now. I had been planning a fieldwork travelling back to Bangladesh until, out of the blue, I met a Rohingya family in Friday *jummah* prayer at the mosque and few other Rohingyas who lived in Cox’s Bazar camps, they also looked for me as a Bangla speaking person who partly understood their dialect. I discovered a Rohingya mosque and community center that existed in the city of Milwaukee through them and came into contact with a community organization, some resource persons and secondary literature and thus I began my investigation from Milwaukee.

Before the August 2017 massacre, very few of my colleagues and professors at the graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee had been aware of the magnitude of the Rohingya



Picture 1

Image Source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/indonesia-aceh-wants-myanmar-punished-for-rohingya-abuse/31210>

crisis. This unawareness dramatically shifted after the wide media attention in the US and worldwide after the great influx. Even my neighbors and acquaintances also expressed great concerns about them and felt curious about my research. An increasingly great volume of literature and documentation has been produced all over the media outlets and numerous researches have been carried out by the scholars from diverse disciplinary orientations in a very short period. Numerous reports have been published by all the UN agencies and humanitarian organizations. The great Rohingya genocide and mass exodus of August 2017 to Bangladesh took place

after I had closed my field research and literature review on Rohingya Refugee resettled in Wisconsin in May 2017. Therefore, my ethnographic research does not reflect anything about it. My paper mostly engages with the research conducted before that. Nevertheless, in the writing and editing stage, I have included the basic information of the later catastrophic development of the Rohingya crisis. After August of 2017, the Rohingya issue was all over the places and everybody seemed like working on it. When I went to Bangladesh for my second fieldwork in June-August 2018, some of my colleagues and friends expressed their surprise how instantaneously I had been hooked up with this “hot” issue, sometime assuming the reason as outpouring of huge research fund without knowing my personal financial burden and lack of any grant.

The United States of America is one of the countries where Rohingya refugees are getting resettled.¹ According to the US state department’s estimate provided to WUWM 89.7, Milwaukee public Radio, a local radio station in Wisconsin, 8,000 Rohingya refugees resettled in the US since 2005. The number increased around 2015 when about 2,000 Rohingya people arrived in the US and the highest number were placed in Milwaukee, a mid-western city of the US (see, Figure: 2). After a long perilous journey from Myanmar, by the ordinary boats under-equipped for seafaring through the Bay of Bengal, and legal or illegal uncertain shifting stay in camps in multiple countries like Malaysia, Thailand or Bangladesh, a tiny percentage of Rohingya refugees ended up and got resettled here. They are the top arriving refugee group to Wisconsin. The Rohingya community leaders estimated that more than 2,000 Rohingya were living in Milwaukee. This suggests that it is the largest Rohingya community in the US. The other large Rohingya refugee community lives in Chicago, Illinois and Fort Wayne, Indiana. Under the Trump administration, the general refugee acceptance has been lowest since 1977.²

¹ See, Bedi, Rashvinjeet S. (May27, 2016) 36 Rohingya refugees resettled in the US, The star online, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/05/27/rohingya-resettled-america/>

² See for detail, <https://www.wuwm.com/post/milwaukee-likely-has-largest-rohingya-refugee-community-us#stream/0>

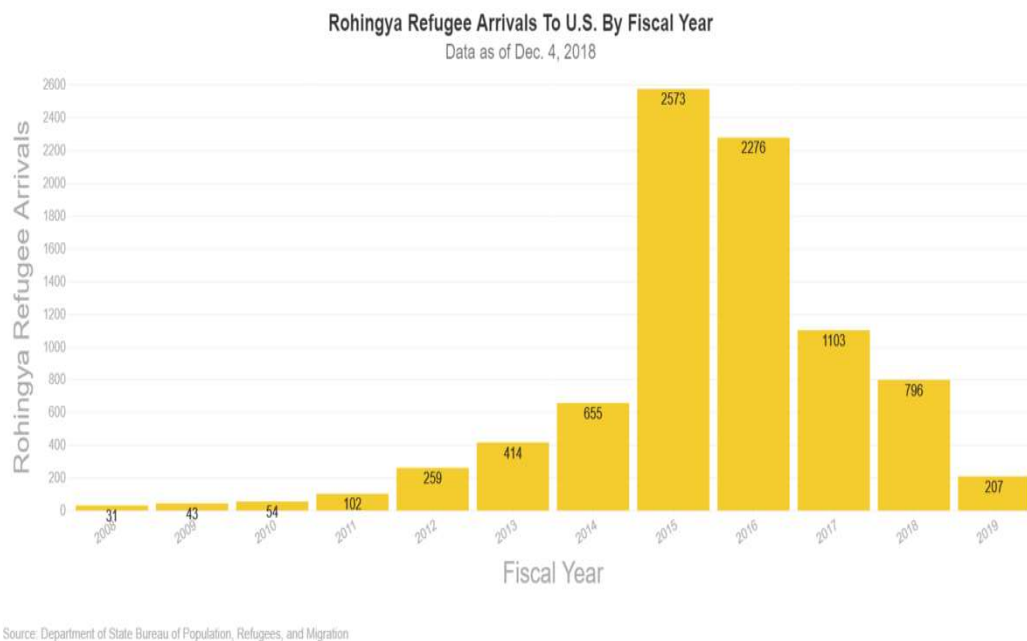


Figure 1

Source: The US Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, 2019

Research Problem

The central question I posed for my research is: What is the Rohingya experience of persecution, statelessness and refugee life and how can we grasp and articulate those in our disciplinary framework?

Having the query in mind, I have explored specifically how the resettled Rohingya refugees in Milwaukee have been navigating their life from Myanmar via Bangladesh, Thailand or Malaysia ending up as a refugee in the US? My aim is to understand their journey through organized violence, atrocity, marginalization and finally, stateless refugee-hood as personal everyday experience from Rohingya perspective with ethnographic insight.

Though a systematic persecution of Rohingyas had been taking place historically from a long period of time and influx to Bangladesh has been started from late 1970s, it was drawn into international attention very recently. Any effective human rights intervention measure has not been adopted to prevent this annihilation by the UN or any other international body so far. The situation of Rohingya has been often described as ‘hidden genocide’, ‘silent ethnic cleansing’, ‘forgotten human rights’, ‘Myanmar’s forgotten people’ and so on, until very recent time. Unlike Palestinian, no representative political organization exists to effectively voice, bargain or negotiate for them.

No powerful charismatic leader exists within the Rohingya group. Neither they have any iconic world leaders, like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela, influential in the global stage to represent or speak for them. Barely any voice has been heard from inside the political or civil society, human rights activists of Myanmar itself, where expatriate Buddhist Burmese scholar Maung Zarni speaks as a unique exception. Lack of significant public intellectual, politician, artist, poet, scientist within the Rohingya community making any global appearance to represent or voice for them is clear. They have been totally left out as nameless faceless anonymous mass for an indefinite period of time before the great humanitarian Joint Response Plan (JRP) has begun in Bangladesh.

The UN, and other international and regional communities failed to take any effective measures to stop mass killing of these people over a long period of time in the first place. In spite of the powerful reporting in the media, they were literally left to die in the boats without life-saving emergency supplies, and on the way to their perilous journey through sea or forests. The alleged Rohingya militant activities have never been strong enough to be considered as significant threat or could be called full-fledged resistance movement organizing themselves as the political organization of Rohingya like other cases in the world. I have found this situation perplexing and absolutely unique. While studying the trajectory of Rohingya journey and analyzing their route through extreme forms of violence, Lacanian French psychoanalyst anthropologist Michel de Certeau's concepts of *strategies* and *tactics*, demonstrated in "The Practice of everyday life" (De Certeau: 1984), appears to me particularly useful. I have attempted to comprehend the agency of these marginal people, nameless, faceless, voiceless everyman and everywoman Rohingya through their strategies and tactics and intended to grasp this unfathomable trauma.³

Who are Rohingyas and what is the background of persecution?

A small minority of Myanmar population, 4% are Muslim and most of the Muslims are identified as Rohingyas. They are an ethno-

³ In spite of some evident activities of militant groups like Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) as reported in newspapers, allegedly having "training camps" in Bangladesh, there is not much evidence of making any significant threat to Myanmar or Bangladesh. (Bhattacharya, 2001: p.96)

linguistic and religious minority people and have been documented to be the inhabitants of the northern part of Rakhine state (previously Arakan) in current day Myanmar since eighth century by various authors. Rakhine state lies along Myanmar's western coastline, and borders the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, and India. Being ethnically and religiously distinct from the Buddhist Burmese and having close resemblance with the Bengali in Neighboring Bangladesh sharing linguistic, religious and cultural similarity, both the Government and Buddhist society claims them as “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh”. Notwithstanding, there are many scholarly researches refuting the Myanmar's accusation of Rohingya as “Bengali of Bangladesh” tracing Rohingya history back as early as the eighth to twelfth century (Ibrahim, 2018; Bahar, 2010). Rohingya often claim themselves to be the descendants of Arab traders and other groups living in the region for generations.



Map 1: Myanmar (Previously Burma) indicating Rohingya areas

Source: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/rohingya-01252011162535.html>

Rohingya have been subjected to a long history of systematic abuse, including forced labor, forced relocation, massive internal displacement and large exoduses since 1942. Under the 50 years of military regime (1962-2011) they have gradually been disenfranchised from citizenship rights and had been facing state-organized violence, extermination and internal displacement and forced migration.

Some scholars have been pointing out that Burmese government has fueled the communal tension between Rohingya and Buddhist

Burmese as a means of diverting the disposition of the population away from the government (Lambrecht, 1995:3). The Myanmar Government, supported by Buddhist monks, deployed military forces against minority Rohingya Muslims to push them out of the country. The repetitive breakouts of violence and human rights abuse of the Rohingya by the military-led Government with the collaboration of the majority Burmese Buddhist in recent decades has become a never-ending fate for them.

The Burmese military's *Naga Min* (King Dragon) campaign had been particularly characterized by disturbing abuses that prompted exodus of more than 200,000 refugees into Bangladesh in 1978 (ibid; 1995). A key feature of the campaign-narrative manufactured by the military, ethnic extremists, Buddhist fundamentalists and the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, is that the 'Rohingyas are not Burmese, rather, illegal Bengalis migrants and henceforth, they do not have right to live in Myanmar. Bangladesh Government was forced to request assistance from the United Nations in order to deal with this influx of refugees and help to set up 13 refugee camps along the border (Pittaway 2008, p. 87) and start negotiation for repatriation.

Through a long historical denial by the Government and Buddhist nationalist, it was finally established as a legal claim by the 'Myanmar Citizenship Law 1982'. "The denial of citizenship rights, denial of freedom of movement, eviction campaigns, forced labor, expulsion from their lands and property, violence and physical torture contributed to the making of the Rohingya stateless and refugees" (Ahmed: 2014, p. XIV). They had been evicted from their village and forced to live in camps until the military junta pushed them out of the border.

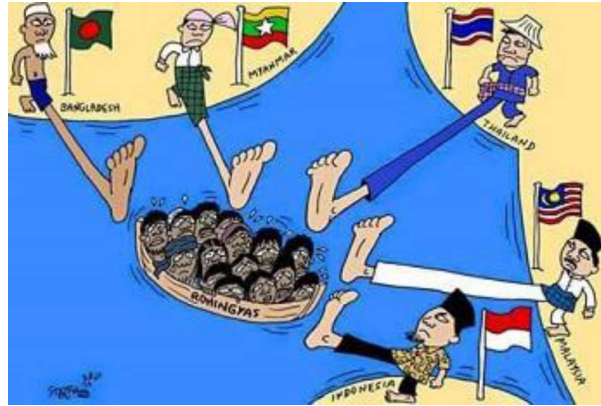
The Rohingya are denied recognition as an ethnic group or 'national race' by the regime. On this basis, they are deprived of citizenship rights in the country of their birth, their land was confiscated, and faced severe limitations on many aspects of an ordinary life, such as getting birth registration and passport, attending school, freedom of movement, marriage, having children, buying and selling property, work, running business, vote and joining in military or participating in election and politics. They face arbitrary arrest and detention, forced labor, physical and sexual abuse, a situation that had been particularly acute since 2012 when some Rohingya men allegedly

raped a Buddhist woman. They suffer routine discrimination by Buddhist group, according to Human Rights Watch, with the knowledge and complicity of the country's authorities. It is often regarded as genocide and ethnic cleansing by different authors (Ibrahim: 2016). Their population has been reduced to 2 million out of 4 million now.

The Union Citizenship Act was passed shortly after Myanmar's independence from British in 1948, defining the ethnicities that could gain citizenship excluding the Rohingya. However, the act did allow the families living in Myanmar for at least two generations to apply for identity cards. Initially, they were given identification or citizenship under the generational provision (International Human Rights Clinic Report at Yale Law School, 2015). Finally, the Burma Citizenship Law 1982 denied to recognize the Rohingya among the 135 nationals of Burma (Ibrahim, 2018; p. 7-10; US Committee for Refugees, 1995; p. 13). They were even excluded from the 2014 census and were classified as 'illegal immigrants from Bangladesh'.

Ever since the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the military junta has taken over the control of the Government of Myanmar in 1988, it has been designated by the Human Rights monitoring organizations as the worst abusers of human rights in the world. Throughout the regime, serious human rights abuses continued in Myanmar that remained as a direct causal link in the continued flow of refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh and all over the world.

Being victim of severe human rights abuses committed by the Myanmar army (*Tatmadaw*) and security force (*Lone Htein*) waves of mass exodus of Rohingya has been continuing for decades. According to the US Committee for Refugees (USCR), from late 1991 through mid-1992, an estimated 250,000-300,000 Rohingya refugees fled into Bangladesh for asylum. Following the successive influxes to flee persecution by both the past military and current democratic regime in 1978, 1991, 1992, 2012, 2015 and 2016 worldwide Rohingya diaspora outnumbered the ones living inside Myanmar.



Picture 2

Image source: <http://www.rohingya.se/2015/05/call-for-asean-to-find-solution-for-stranded-rohingya/>

A great majority of Rohingyas live in Bangladesh (about 11, 00,000) whilst 8,00,000 in Myanmar and 7,00,000 in other countries that includes Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates and the United states as either classified as refugees or illegal immigrants. They have been variously categorized as 'refugee', 'illegal immigrant', 'forced migrated', 'forcibly displaced', 'boat people of Asia', 'asylum seeker' at different times and occasions.



Map 2: The route of Rohingya Exodus

Source: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/smugglers-and-security-forces-prey-on-rohingya-asias-new-boat-people.html/attachment/4-rohingya-exodus-map>

A majority of Rohingyas now live in Bangladesh (estimated 11,00,000) whilst estimated 7,00,000 in other countries include Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, Europe and the USA as either refugees, asylum seekers or illegal migrants. Before the crackdown, at the start of 2017, the Rohingya population in Myanmar had been accounted to be around one million (BBC report, Jan 16, 2018). After the crackdown, by December 2017, an estimated 625,000 Rohingya from Rakhine, Myanmar, had crossed the border into Bangladesh after the August 2017 crackdown creating the world's largest 'refugee' camps in Cox' Bazar. The UNHCR described this situation as the “world's fastest growing refugee crisis”.

Conceptual framework

Stateless people are, paradoxically, born out of modern state as the 'other' of the imagined community of nation-self. This identity emerged within the working system of state itself, as Hannah Arendt argued in her article 'The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man' (Arendt in Goodale, 2009: pp. 32-57). She was cautious about the universal acceptance of the supremacy of the will of the nation over all legal and “abstract” institutions that it could have been developed toward a fatal direction. Following the essence of Arendt's prediction, I argue that the rise of stateless and potential stateless people in the context of South Asia, in this case Rohingya, manifests the Benedict Andersonian modular effect⁴ of European nation states over the post-colonial modern states (Anderson: 1983). However, the imagined community of nation-state, never imagined the stateless community within or without. Through the working system of nation-states, that only the nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions, that persons of different nationalities would not be treated equally within the nation-state, and thus, state has turned out to be the instrument of the nations, instead of instrument of law (Arendt, *ibid*: p.37).

She has identified the emergence of two victim groups within the system, the stateless and the minorities, whose sufferings exceeded

⁴ Anderson argued that, once model of nation state has been established in Europe, rest of the world are able to follow the model and rise of nation states outside Europe emerged as a modular effect of the original nation states in Europe (Anderson : 1983, in Chatterjee, Partha: 1993)

the other exploited groups (*e.g.* dispossessed middle classes, unemployed, small rentiers, pensioners). They had been deprived of social status, the possibility to work, right to hold property, even though they had lost the rights, previously thought of and even defined as inalienable Rights of Man. The arrival of the stateless people brings to an end of the illusion of establishing the Rights of Man (upon which national constitution have been founded), that even if there were other nationalities within their borders they needed no additional law for them. The prolonged civil wars and conflicts within European states had produced a massive refugee population who “once had left their homeland they remained homeless, once left their states became stateless; once had been deprived of their human rights were rightless, the scum of the earth (*ibid*: p.32-33-38).

Denationalization of Rohingya and production of this stateless population, I maintain, has become the product of the inherent inconsistency of modern post-colonial nation-state bearing modular effect of the western idea of state and sovereignty. Statelessness is, fundamentally, a problem created by the state and the outcome of the notion of state-security ignoring the wellbeing and security of individuals and community of the states. They represent one of the ‘fragments of nation-state’ coined by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 1993). Rohingya, like the post-war Europe’s stateless and minorities, neither have any government to represent, nor any legal structure to protect them, and therefore, have been forced to live under conditions of absolute lawlessness. This sounds like the sheer manifestation of Arendt’s prediction:

“The danger is that a global, universally interrelated civilization may produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages” (*ibid*: p. 55).

Denationalization of Rohingya has become constitutionalized by the totalitarian politics and henceforth, made possible for the government to persecute a whole community capturing, manipulating and using the state apparatus with the support of the strand of a violent Buddhist sect, Burmese Theravada Buddhist monasteries and the profound influence of extremist Islamophobic monks. Emergence of modern Myanmar as essentially Buddhist state, decolonization, militarization and its transition to democracy grounded on the imagination of a spectrum of “essential others” in opposition to the

Buddhist-military oligarchy, where Rohingya have been pushed to the extreme end. The intensity of this viciousness has reached to its highest magnitude throughout Myanmar's transition to democracy. Consequently, the Rohingya people have been forced toward a destiny of the unidentifiable paupers without money, property, passport and nationality- the "inalienable Rights of Man ". Rohingyas totally lost their right to have rights.

It has become self-evident that the elements of Myanmar's national constitution do not comply with the Declaration of Human Rights, and therefore, national sovereignty and universal human right comes to a conflict. The constitutional inability to guarantee human rights to those who had lost nationally guaranteed rights made it possible to prosecute these people by the Government itself (*ibid*: p.34). Rohingyas have been prosecuted in a similar way, being singled out as 'scum of the earth' in the first place, as Jews or Trotskyites had been in Europe. Mass denationalization of the wholesale population forced them out of their villages, their country, arriving as refugees to the unwilling host countries, nevertheless, remains 'un-deportable', as there is no country on the earth in which they can enjoy the rights to residence. As the situation developed, repatriation could not be a preferable option for them, since they have become strangers without any right in their "own homeland" (*ibid*: p. 38). This description exactly fits with the host country's dilemma in voluntary Repatriation of Rohingya.

Foucault introduced the concept of bio-power to explain "Thanatopolitics", by which he means the mobilization of entire populations "for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life's necessity" (Foucault, 1990; 137). To account for the constitution of modern racism and genocidal eugenics he had recourse to the paradigm of sovereignty. Agamben hypothesized that bio-power is really a power over "bare life" that finds its origin not in life itself, but in the sovereignty of law (Agamben, 1998). Engaging with the work of Akhil Gupta following Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, I view this industrial scale death and indefinitely death-like life of Rohingya population as "Thanatopolitics" and find Agamben's idea of bare life as a useful analytical tool (Gupta, 2012; p. 6). Agamben suggests that exclusion is the basis of violence in the states of exception. The holocaust, for example, was possible for exclusion of the Jews from the German state and mainstream culture (Agamben, 2005). And thus, it reduced them into the bare life. As Didier Fassin

(Fassin, 2005) pointed out that political life of citizens in the polis whether it is in the refugee camps in contemporary France or Nazi Germany, was built on the exclusions practiced through the construction of bare life in the refugee camps. Rohingya people have become excluded from the legal citizenship and Myanmar mainstream society and culture at the first place and then as registered and unregistered refugees, they find them again excluded from human rights in the host countries, as Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, India and others.

To understand the agency of the state of Bangladesh enacted upon everyday life of citizen and non-citizen alike, I adopt Akhil Gupta's ethnographic intervention that enable us to see how "killing made possible" by state policies and practices rather than merely "allowed to die" or "exposed to death" (Gupta, 2012). The sheer visibility of persecution of Rohingya sharply contrasts with the invisibility of mass scale of death of Indian poor described by Gupta. However, the viral visual evidence all over the media and texts could not prevent the Rohingyas from extermination anyway. State bureaucracy as the machines for social reproduction of indifference and how the bureaucratic response to violence intensify social suffering has been revealed in his study.

In this backdrop of such power-scripts of nation states, I am tempted to ask myself, what is Rohingya people doing in response? What does their response look like? What is the nature of the Rohingya agency in this extreme situation without having a strong organized political resistance movement? From the Rohingya perspective, the unarmed victims respond to these power scripts everyday with ordinary everyday practice. For understanding their everyday practice facing sheer violence, I follow De Certeau's framework of "Practice of everyday life" (De Certeau: 1984) as my underpinning conceptual framework.

De Certeau argued that, power script of the social order can only continue and perpetuate through the action of the users or social actors. It is an important claim for my investigation that the agency of the social actors maintain and reproduce the social order. Practice is immensely important for De Certeau to understand the working of a social order, he emphasized on the user of a system this way: "We must first analyze its manipulation by the users who are not its maker (De Certeau: 1984, p.XIII). ... Everyday life invents itself by poaching

in countless ways on the property of others (p. XII). ... We must first analyze its manipulation by the users who are not its maker (XIII). The ‘ways of operating’ constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users re-appropriate the space organized by the techniques of socio-cultural production.” (De Certeau: 1984, p. XIV). In absence of visible organized resistance, what is the De Certeauan innumerable practices of persecuted Rohingya look like when operating through sheer vulnerability throughout their life? I wanted to make sense from their life experience.

Literature on Rohingya

After August 2017, an increasingly great volume of documentation has been produced on the Rohingya crisis all over the media outlets, numerous researches have been carried out by the scholars from diverse disciplinary orientations and numerous reports have been published by all the UN and other humanitarian organizations. But surprisingly, just in the previous year 2016, Washington law school professor Clark B. Lombardi asserted that, it is understatement that Myanmar’s Muslim community is woefully understudied. Lombardi (2016) pointed out the obscurity and serious lack of rigorous scholarship on this community and explained the reasons why this community did not get enough academic attention and the prohibitive attitude toward foreign academics within Myanmar, which has tended to shift since political reform in 2011-15. He laid out some future research areas where the scholars could have paid attention. Therefore, with Lombardi, I also maintain that, there is plenty of room for rigorous academic research and develop scholarship on this area acknowledging and welcoming sudden spike of research projects after August 2017. We cannot even find much serious engagement generally on Myanmar in the volume of anthropological research except Edmund Leach’s the “Political Systems of Highland Burma” (Leach: 1953), let alone Myanmar’s Muslim. As an anthropologist, I was wondering all the time, why Myanmar Muslim community had not drawn any significant attention from a diverse range of disciplines and why I could not find any noteworthy anthropological endeavor so far.

My consultation of literature on the Rohingya crisis revealed that, there are few categories available for this purpose. I have categorized the voluminous literature below as:

1. News and views in mainstream media outlets, social media and blog writing, and professional and independent documentary and visual materials.
2. Reports and documentation by the UN agencies, Human Right and Activist groups
3. Social scientific macro studies, largely from international relations, diplomacy and security perspective often focusing on global migration and humanitarian concerns, i.e. Azeem Ibrahim (2016), Panini (2012), Chowdhury Abrar (1995, 2000, 2012, 2014, 2016)) Imtiaz Ahmed (2010/2014), Thomas K Ragland (1994), Mathieson, David Scott (2009) and others.
4. Emerging studies in Ethnographic Research (Nasir Uddin: 2012) including my present research for qualitative understanding through empirical data.

I have to narrow down the volume of literature published within 2017 and in accordance with the relevance for my research problem and ethnographic inquiry.

UNHCR, the US Committee for Refugees (USCR), Refugee International, Amnesty International, and Human Right Watch have documented severe and systemic abuses of the refugees by the camp officials, the police, and the local populace; beating, torture, health issues, and deprivation of food and shelter have been at the forefront of these concerns. The active presence of various international agencies as UN bodies, foreign consulates, their documentation, and recommendations plays an intervening role in shaping the debate and policy formulation sought for voluntary, dignified and safe repatriation.

US Committee for Refugees (USCR), for example, reporting on the safety and welfare of the refugees during their stay (June-August 1994) in Bangladesh, expressed their concern for forced push-back or refoulement (Lambrecht, 1995). The major concerns raised by this committee were safety and welfare of the refugees throughout their stay in Bangladesh in the first place, observing the principle of voluntary repatriation, and the safety of the returnees. Among their recommendations they stated “The Bangladesh government should continue to provide asylum to the Rohingya refugees depending on a verifiable improvement in the human rights situation in Myanmar. It

should also ensure that camp officials do not coerce the refugees to volunteer to repatriate” (Lambrecht, 1995; p. 22).

There is a scope and necessity to have this process under ethnographic investigation for greater and deeper understanding of the production of this human condition. The scholarly researches from diverse disciplinary perspectives on persecution and genocide of Rohingya people have shed lights on the history and development of marginalization of Rohingya people, identity politics, Buddhist nationalist hegemony, militarization and crisis of emerging democracy in Myanmar. Swapna Bhattacharya in her article *Rohingya of Myanmar: The identity, crisis and its implication for Myanmar, Bangladesh and India* (2001) reviewed the three phases of Rohingya crisis in 1977-78, 1991-93 and 1997-99 analyzing the security concern for India and Bangladesh. Discussing the dynamics of repatriation, rehabilitation and resettlement process and negotiations of Bangladesh with Myanmar, UN organizations and international organizations and regional governments, she analyzed the regional peace process.⁵

Eileen Pittaway (2008) in her research titled *The Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: A Failure of International Protection regime* used a data collection technique called storyboarding consulting 120 refugees to understand what life is like in the camps from their perspective. Examining the three accepted durable solutions proposed by UNHCR of voluntary repatriation, integration in the host country and third country resettlement she approached the inadequacy of them for the complexity of the problem. Nevertheless, she endorsed the UNHCR's strategies as realistic and potentially achievable and sought the support of the international community, donor countries, international NGOs, the Bangladeshi government and civil society for success of these strategies.

The Plight of the stateless Rohingyas (Ahmed: 2010, 2014) edited by Imtaiz Ahmed is a compilation of several researches including 15 case studies focused on security and policy issues appreciating Government's role and response from the international community and intended to provide policy driven solution. They called on for comprehensive national policy or strategy, strengthen bi-lateral

⁵ See for detail, Bhattacharya, Swapna (Chakraborti) *Rohingya of Myanmar: The Identity Crisis and Its Implications for Myanmar, Bangladesh and India* in Azam, K. (2001). *Ethnicity, identity, and the state in South Asia*. New Delhi: South Asian, pp. 86-123.

multilateral diplomacy, engaging with regional associations as SAARC and ASEAN more, encouraging third country resettlement, exploring opportunity for voluntary repatriation and so on. They argued for CSOs and NGO involvement for finding solutions.

Abid Bahar's *Burma's Missing Dots, the emerging face of genocide* (Bahar, 2010) is a compilation of his published articles and a popular Rohingya novel. The articles provided a general historical overview of anti-Muslim racism and xenophobia in Myanmar developed into a genocidal stage, unfortunately lack rigorous analysis. There are rich first-hand journalistic accounts and the documentation by the international agencies and the news media. Chutima Sidasthian's *Rohingya: The Persecution of a People in Southeast Asia* (Sidasathian, 2012) are examples of journalistic research.

Nassir Uddin (2015) provides a pioneer ethnographic account on the plight of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladeshi camps. His research population was registered and unregistered Rohingyas cohabiting with local Bengalis in two villages in Teknaf and Ukhia district and Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps and Taal and Leda makeshift camps living during his 10 months fieldwork in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012. He analyzed how the host society dealt with them both through institutional engagement and the informal social interaction. He explored their relation with the formal institutional process of the host state and the informal social interaction with the host society. These camps were among the world's worst ones with frequent reports of rape, corporal punishment by local population. Local host community, in spite of their sympathetic brotherly attitude toward the first wave of refugees, as the flow kept on rise, began to be confrontational for broadly six reasons as, additional pressure on scarce resources, local job market and local environment, Rohingya-Bengali marriage, domestic and international security concerns and criminal offences.

Azeem Ibrahim in his recent book *The Rohingyas, Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (Ibrahim: 2016, 2018) analyzed the Rohingya situation in the context of national and International politics at play within Myanmar through the lens of international relation and security perspective. He argued that, global indifference supported the regime led to genocide. Francis Wade in his *Myanmar's Enemy Within, Buddhist Violence and making of a Muslim 'other'* (2017) provided a comprehensive a historical analysis of the process of making of

Rohingya as ‘other’ that paved the way toward ethnic cleansing on the basis of his research within Myanmar from 2012-16 from an investigative journalistic point of view. The complex dynamics of Muslim-Buddhist relation and development of full spectrum violence inside Myanmar have been revealed in his study.

In spite of the efforts for capturing the Rohingya narratives are being made in journalism and case studies, yet a huge unexplored area are waiting for the scholars in my observation, especially for anthropological investigation. My attempt is going to contribute to bring the blurry and sketchy areas into the frame with anthropological conceptual tools.

Research Method and Fieldwork

I have conducted micro-level ethnographic research on the resettled Rohingya Refugee in Milwaukee, the largest city in Wisconsin, USA. I precisely followed the life history method while collecting empirical data. I have conducted repetitive interview sessions with Rohingya families and community leaders. Duration of my fieldwork was February-April 2017.



Picture 3

Source: <http://urbanmilwaukee.com/2016/04/17/international-institute-helps-refugees-settle-here/>

I have chosen two mosques in Milwaukee to build rapport and connect with the community. One of the mosques was actually the one we used to go to pray as a family on Fridays and also my own religio-community space, and the other one is the Rohingya

community center and the mosque and thus the most important site for this research. The interview sessions were generally scheduled from Friday to Sundays and with few exceptions in the weekdays. I have been able to visit one extended family household.

Being a Muslim woman visiting the mosques with a child helped me to build a quick rapport and a level of trust and required access to the community spaces. My ability to speak Bengali and a dialect used by Rohingya also opened an immediate connection. There was a level of comfort to share their experience living in South-Eastern Bangladesh for my firsthand experience of that area.

My method was largely semi-structured interviews with repetitive sessions. I have two families and four community leaders as my major respondents. But, since my sites were community spaces, there were people around us and made many contributions in our conversation. I have explained them about my research to get consent and had been permitted to record the interviews partly at a later stage of my fieldwork. I have taken short notes and written a field diary after the sessions. I have not tried to video-tape or take pictures to avoid distractions and protect my respondents' privacy and security. All the names used are coded for the sake of confidentiality. The narrations were never in chronological order and most of the time had been sporadic and I have compiled the narration for the sake of coherence and presenting a clear picture.

Few Rohingya people of my research could have communicated in English or broken English. The interviews have been conducted in South-Eastern Bengali dialect, Rohingya language, and English. Often Rohingya community leaders have translated Rohingya language into English or Bengali for me. I have transcribed and translated the interviews to form into life stories told by them. When I have just built a level of confidence and trustworthiness and my respondent families had begun to become comfortable with sharing their personal stories, it was time to wrap up my fieldwork for this term. They had a lot to tell their tale and each in the family had their own version of the stories that I did not have a chance to listen to.

A prolonged, persistent and severely violent process of exodus of Rohingya has been revealed in these narratives from the Rohingya perspective. The major revelation of my study is the trajectory of Rohingya journey of escaping from Myanmar, forced migration to the neighboring countries and finally resettling in the USA. What I have

collected, are the chronicles of sheer marginalization of a minority Muslim community caught up in a unique situation emerged within a post-colonial South-Asian state. In these personal narratives, they told their tales of oppression by the military state, losing citizenship, forced labor, losing lives, forced displacement, forced migration, repatriation, break-down of families and reunification, human trafficking, illegal immigrants’ and illegal workers’ life, sexual abuse, forced marriage, prostitution, and refugee-hood and finally turning up into a worldwide diaspora.

Rohingya in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Wisconsin is receiving an increasingly rising number of refugees getting resettled from various countries affected by violence, conflict and religious or political persecution as Myanmar, Afghanistan, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Syria.⁶ The US State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration coordinates the whole process through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and determined where the refugees should be placed and provide services for settling in the country. Voluntary agencies as Church World Service, International Rescue Committee, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, World Relief Corporation, Lutheran Immigration and Refugees Services, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops etc. work with government agencies for the services required for the refugees.⁷

⁶ See for detail, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/life/food/2019/02/21/milwaukee-refugee-chefs-share-cultures-tables-across-borders-dinners/2881001002/> Kristine M. Kierzek, Special to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 5:58 a.m. CT Feb. 21, 2019 |

⁷ See for more information, Voluntary Agencies, Office of Refugee Settlement, July 17, 2012, <http://web.archive.org/web/20170121055156/https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/voluntary-agencies>.

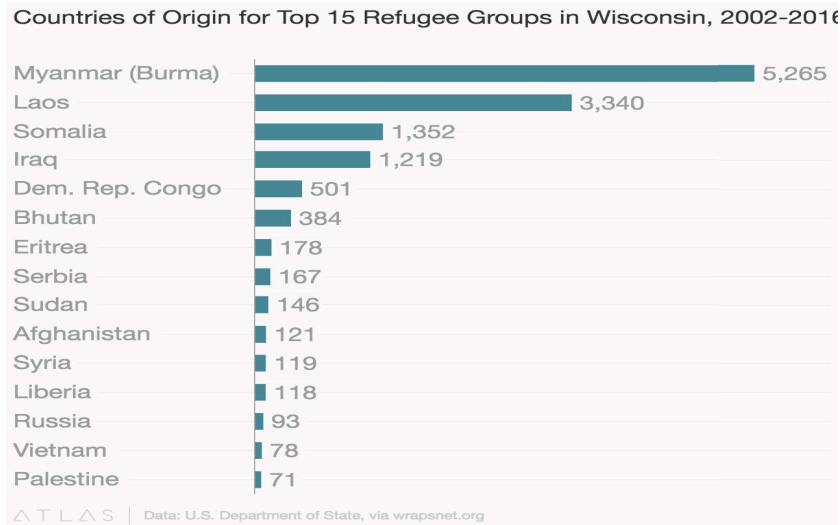


Figure 2

Image Source: <https://www.wiscontext.org/refugee-resettlement-wisconsin-numbers>

About 600 hundred Burmese minority Muslim Rohingya families has resettled in Milwaukee through mediation and supervision of UNHCR over last 15 years. Through UNHCR's initiative and Obama's government policy toward rehabilitate Rohingya a substantial number of Rohingya have received refugee status in the USA. The USA has accepted to grant refugee status for 20,000 Rohingya in 2010. About 600 Burmese Muslim families have arrived in Milwaukee until now. Among them 500 families are Rohingya.

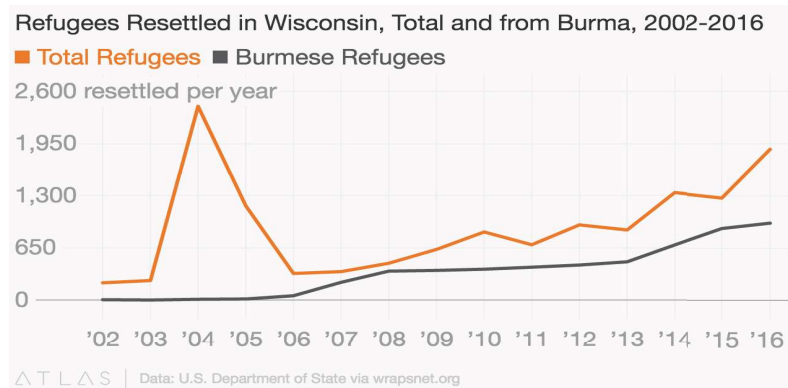


Figure 3

Image source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/charts/B1NG8SaIe>

Most of the Rohingya families of Milwaukee live in the South side and the vicinity of Oklahoma Avenue where they established a Community center and mosque, Rohingya American Society and Mosque. They have built Rohingya community center, mosque and American Rohingya Association in Milwaukee (ARA) to conduct

multi-purpose activities.⁸ Anuwar Kasim was one of about 2,000 Rohingya people who arrived in the U.S. 2015. “Every country where we go we are treated like animals, like a sub-humans,”



Picture 4

Source: <https://www.wuwm.com/post/milwaukee-likely-has-largest-rohingya-refugee-community-us#stream/0>

Anuwar said to Milwaukee radio station, “In Myanmar, where I was born, I was not considered a citizen. In Bangladesh, only clothes, no documentation. In Malaysia, life is a little bit better but still people harass you, authorities threaten you.”⁹ Other than the government assistance, there are local churches, refugee rehabilitation agencies and charity organizations providing ranges of assistance in the resettlement process.

Life Histories of Rohingya Families resettled in Milwaukee

My interviewees include two families and four community leaders (3 males and 1 female). The families are relatively young families with young children. I also had a focused group discussion with a women’s group. The first family has three boys and a girl, the second family has three boys and a girl, the husband’s adult sister with a toddler boy. All children are 3-14 years of age and adults are 20-45. I have interviewed adults. Rohingya people have two names, one is Muslim

⁸ CBS data shows that, since 2006, about 55,000 Burmese refugees (including Rohingya) have been resettled in the United States until 2012. Many of them came from a camp in Thailand that helps prepare for the culture shock of life in America. Seth Doane reports on one family’s remarkable journey. Watch this short CBS video on arrival of Rohingya refugee in the USA, Burmese refugees prepare for life in America, Apr 24, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27p3MGGYbFs>

⁹ See for more information, <https://www.wuwm.com/post/milwaukee-likely-has-largest-rohingya-refugee-community-us#stream/0>

The Rohingya Solidarity Organization or Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front have not appeared to be able to pose any significant challenge against the oligarchy of Military-Government-Monk of Myanmar.

name of Arabic origin and other is Burmese name. They need a Burmese name to get into school. Generally, they speak Arakani language and know Burmese, English, Malay, some Urdu and South-eastern Bangladeshi Dialect. There are some confusions and discrepancy about the date and year in these narrations. It has become difficult for them to keep track of all the dates and time through sheer traumatic conditions. The community leaders narrated the conditions in general and facilitated the interviews and translated the expressions from both sides when needed.

Brother Yunus Ali, A Rohingya community leader of Milwaukee, at some point in our conversation, asked me to visit some Rohingya household and meet the people who have actually gone through immense suffering themselves. I was interviewing people in the Rohingya Community in Milwaukee only for a couple of months and in the course of my field work, I have found him as one of my respondents. On a scheduled day, instead of talking himself, he took me to such a part of Milwaukee I have never visited any more impoverished area in the USA before. It was spring 2017, people were walking through the street looking very different than any typical Milwaukee neighborhood. The family I have visited speaks in Rohingya language which is close to a dialect of South-Eastern Bangladesh. With a little help from Yunus I could manage to communicate with them. This family became dispersed and got reunited over 10-15 years. I interviewed three adults of the family: husband, wife and husband's sister. Husband and wife have three daughters and a son from 3-17 years of age. Three of them were born in Myanmar and the youngest one was in Malaysia. The sister has a 3-year-old son. The wife works in a delivery service company in Milwaukee and husband cannot work for his disability of legs caused from torture. All the names used here are pseudo names for confidentiality.

Family 1: Shafiq, Rabeya with their four children

Military raids, forced labor, burning village, beating and killing made our living in the village impossible

This is the first Rohingya family I have come across by chance in the mosque I used to perform my Friday prayer and my daughter attended the Sunday school. This family works in this mosque as cleaner, send their children to the Sunday school and performed their

Jumma Prayer, the weekly congregational prayer for the Muslim. I had a chance to have conversation sessions with this family on Fridays and Sundays at the Mosque while my daughter played together with their daughter. When I met this family, I quickly recognized them as Rohingya for the language they had been speaking, close to a dialect of South-Eastern Bangladesh I quite understand. We got introduced just as fellow Muslims before I started my fieldwork. Later, though they agreed for interviews, our sessions were very sporadic and interruptive due to their scanty spare time and as their four children kept them busy all the time.

This family speaks in Rohingya language within themselves. Rabeya, (30+) cannot speak much English or Bengali. She appears to be reluctant to talk in detail, or she allows her husband, Shafiq, (43) to elaborate on behalf of the family. So, when Shafiq talks and narrates events, his wife and children listen and sometimes comment. But he is the main spokesperson for the family to an outsider like me. He can speak and understand Bengali dialect. They arrived in Milwaukee three years ago. This couple got married in Malaysia and all of the four children have been born in Malaysia. The adults of this family work at very low paid jobs and their income does not look steady. Shafiq looks like the bread-winner of the family.

With his fellow villagers and extended family, Rakhine district of Myanmar, Shafiq endured numerous types of tortures, humiliation and bonded labor. In his childhood and adolescence, he witnessed and endured huge suffering of forced labor by the Myanmar military. They used to come to the village to arrest young boys starting from 13-18 years for forced labor in the forest or some unknown place. Military used to raid the villages in the middle of the night, burnt houses, beat people up, tortured and killed. They took young men captive for slavery and fight as slave-soldiers with the opposition. There had been a lot of conflicts and those young men were sent in the conflicts to fight and die.

Shafiq fled out of Myanmar at the age of 18 and entered Bangladesh. He lived in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong areas of Bangladesh for 2 years as undocumented Rohingya refugee. He engaged in making a living in the fishing boat in the Bay of Bengal for a few years. It was very laborious and messy work. He and his wife never had much chance to finish school and go for any better job. Since these tortures have been intensified, he, like many other men and women, flew

away and entered Bangladesh. But, he could not live there for more than two years and was pushed back to Burma. He escaped Burma through the fishing boat to Malaysia. That was a story of intense suffering. Food and water run out at some point. There was nothing to eat, but the raw fish in the boat and only salty water from the sea. Some other boats have rescued these to them and help them to reach Malaysia. There were lots of human traffickers even including Rohingya, Bangladeshi and Burmese who are making money assisting people to leave Burma to any counties. They also tortured people in numerous ways. He saw women had been subject to sexual abuse and forced to prostitution for a living.

In his opinion, his father, grandfathers and the other villagers did not make education a priority. Again, the children of the village could not attend school because of the prohibitive approach of the government. Rohingya children had not been admitted in the school and had no chance to make a decent life through education, job or politics. To qualify to be admitted into basic primary school, children need Burmese names. He learned English, Bengali, Malay, through making friends. He saw many people die and suffer in front of him. He thinks that it is important to write down the history of Rohingya people, so that it can transmit to the generations to come.

His children, born in camps outside Myanmar, got to know some of these stories for the first time during our conversation. His parents and grandparents are still living in the same village. He thinks of sending money to his parent's family, though he has never become able to do so.

Rabeya, Shafiq's wife, flew from Yangon, the capital of Myanmar, with some other relatives and acquaintances without parents to Malaysia. She lived in camps there and got married to Shafiq. She wears a traditional Rohingya dress when coming to the mosque. I could not talk with her much. On the one hand, she remained quiet when her husband talked and on the other hand, she never talked with me alone, and looked uncomfortable for language or doubtful about sharing her experience.

They are happy to be able to send their four children to school and hoping for a better life for them, better education, better job and better life. Their children speak English. They do not have any personal memory and experience of torture since they have never been to

Burma, but they were born in camps and exposed to a refugee life in Malaysia where they had not been citizens.

In Milwaukee, they are so engaged with making living here, it is difficult for them to have time and space for recall and discussion about the life they left behind. I felt, it requires some more time and space to share such an intense level of personal trauma with a stranger like me. So, I did not push our conversation for any further clarification and rested calm listening to whatever they have to tell me. I have just tried to be the space for them to release their experience.

His wife's parents lived in Yangon, whom he never had the chance to meet. I was scheduled to conduct more interview sessions. During the first weekend of April 2017, I called up Shafiq to set up one more follow up interview session. One of his sons picked up and informed me that he was in the emergency room in a hospital. He just had a heart attack. I consoled his son and prayed for his recovery. Couple of weeks after that, I met his wife Rabeya and eldest son cleaning the mosque. I asked about Shafiq's health. He had been recovering slowly, but had not met him again in the mosque until I wrapped up my fieldwork.

Family 2: Halim, Amina and their four children with Halim's Sister with a son

My youth has got rotten away in Burma

Brother Yunus, a community leader, at some point in our conversation about the plight of Rohingya people, asked me to visit some Rohingya households and meet the people who have actually gone through immense suffering. I wanted to interview him first, but, instead he took me to such a part of Milwaukee, I have never visited any more impoverished area in the USA before. It was spring 2017, people were walking through the street looking very different than any typical Milwaukee neighbor. I was welcomed to this Rohingya family's apartment. This family got dispersed in Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia over the course of fleeing out of Myanmar and got reunited in the USA after 15 years. Husband cannot work because of his leg condition. Now Amina works for FedEx.

This is how Halim Miah narrated his journey: I am from Aikkaghor Najipara village of Burma. In 2001, the government together with

‘Mog’ people intensified torturing. Situation was so unsettling, we no longer could stay at our own homestead. We started hiding here and there. All the everyday errands and domestic chores became impossible - movement, work, business, eating- all sorts of daily activities. It was an immense suffering and could not stand any longer. In 2002, some people managed a boat to flee to Malaysia through the sea. There were all men, around 45 people, young, adult, and children. I left our family, my parents, my wife and children behind. This boat had no navigation, they just depended on their eyes. It desperately set for anywhere, any country, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh. We did not have any situation to make any choice. We floated in the sea for 15 days. After 15 days we were caught by the Burmese military, Naval Patrol near Thai border, the name of the Thana/Village was ‘Patang’. That was a naval base, military camp. One day, they started torturing us, me and all the people indiscriminately. They interrogated us with all sorts of questions. They were calling us, Bangladeshi, Bengali, Muslim, and so forth. They were claiming that there were no Muslim in Arakan. But, we did not have anyone in Bangladesh. They have ordered all of us. Many other people had been killed before we arrived there. There were mass graves. We saw many bones and human remains in the jungle. By the mercy of Allah, they did not kill us finally. Some old men helped us to flee into Thai border in a boat. UNHCR helped us there and then again, Thai military (border guard) caught us. After two weeks keeping us in a camp, they pushed us back to Burma. There were some agents (human traffickers) who advertised that, if we have any relatives in Malaysia and could give them money, they would transport us to Malaysia. Lots of people were killed in Thailand, that’s a huge history. They buy and sell people in the boat. They were armed and carried a pistol. They tortured and killed people randomly. I, with three other guys, had managed to escape and flee to a mosque at ‘Patani’, Thailand. There we got some help from a few people. Maulana of that mosque allowed us to stay in the mosque for a while. I sold bread there and earned some money for paying the human trafficker to get into Malaysia. Since Thailand is a Buddhist country, Malaysia is a better option for us. I felt they might have some sympathy for us as Muslims. One year has passed here and there like this after we had set out from Burma. Finally, we entered Malaysia. Nevertheless, there was no less suffering. We were not permitted to work. Police kept us on the run, arresting and torturing every now and then. We were hiding from place to place and worked any sort of

job hiding from their surveillance. There were many more people like me, suffered random arrests, arbitrary detentions, jail, camp -all sorts of things. At this point, UNHCR started to issue cards for us. That was Malaysian UNHCR. They only issued ID cards, but no food or shelter was provided. Sometimes police accepted the cards, sometimes they did not. There were people who could not go to doctor, pregnant women were dying of complicated delivery without medical care. There were more people without cards than those who got cards. Those who had cards could have a chance to visit doctors.

UNHCR started to help people to migrate to some other countries accepting resettlement. I had an interview for that and they brought me to America. I told you my 15 years' story in just an hour. I lived in Malaysia for 15 years and came to America for a year now. I do not know my real age neither can I remember any dates and years properly. I went through such trauma and tension, I could not have the track of date and time. Burma's government has destroyed Rohingyas birth records and all other records. The records exist 30-40 years back, but later, the government has destroyed all the records about Rohingya people. When I came to make travel documents in the UN office, I told the office assuming my birth year was 1980.

Amina has got married to Halim in Rakhine. She gave birth to five children, two died at infancy, her youngest daughter was born in Malaysia. She revealed the other side of the journey of this family:

“My name is Amina. I come from Burma's Arakan. Najipara. After we got married we had been together for 5 years only, then I gave birth to 5 children, 2 died and 3 remained alive. My husband fled to foreign land leaving us behind with the children after the Government rampaged our village in 2001. I fled to Bangladesh with my three children and without my husband. I had to live a life in dire misery with my children and did not know anything about my husband. After two years of his escape we got his whereabouts and came to know he was alive. Now, how I could live a life in this country alone with the kids. My husband told us over the phone, ‘I shall bring you to me. I do not have money now, when I can save money, I shall bring all of you here.’ He used to send some money on and off and we kept on reciting the name of Allah. 10 years had passed that way. He asked me, ‘Can you come by the ship?’ I said, ‘I feel very scared of the sea. They were about to kill you! How can I go the same way by ship with my children?’ I collected money, borrowing from kin and friends to

flee to Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, two traffickers took all my money. One in Cox's Bazar and another in Teknaf. They said they would arrange a flat (apartment) for me. Then I asked them to take me to Dhaka. I stayed in a hotel room with my three children and spent 900 taka for a day, the rent of the room was 500 per day. All my money ran out, I did not have money to go back to Teknaf. I lost all my money sent by my husband from Malaysia and I borrowed from other people. Finally, somehow, they took me to Cox's Bazar. Some more Rohingyas arrived in Bangladesh. Then I boarded a ship from Saint Martin's Island to Thailand. This journey took 18 days. I called my husband. He did not have any money and could not send any money for our maintenance. I stayed in Thailand for 2 years. I worked in the tea-stalls in Thailand leaving my children home. After 2 years, we were able to save money to go to Malaysia. 10 years passed in Burma and 2 years in the journey, finally, after 12 years (sometime mentioned 15 years) I reunited with my husband in Malaysia. My youth went rotten away in Burma. We could only talk on the phone very occasionally. We did not even have mobile phones in my country. My husband used to call once every couple of months to some other people's phones. I used to run to those people to receive the call.

I came to Malaysia with my two daughters leaving my minor son in Bangladesh in immense pain. I had my sister in Bangladesh. I left him to her custody. He was terrified of journey by boat in the sea. We already had dire suffering in the boat journey to Bangladesh. My son was caught and imprisoned in jail. He said, 'I shall not go by boat. Allah will save me.' We endured unbearable sufferings, whenever I remember that, I cry.

In Malaysia, we got together as a family, except my son left in Bangladesh. It took one year to get the card. Then he got the interview from UNHCR. Since we were yet to get our cards and my son also needed to join us, we sent money to bring our son to join us. He suffered immense pain in the ship near to death. It took 18 days to travel to Malaysia. He was only 15 years of age at that time. He lived alone here and there with some acquaintances in Bangladesh. Human traffickers took him to Malaysia and demanded 7000 Malaysian Dollar for this. I did not have money, I sold my gold and my sister's jewelry to rescue my son. The trafficker's brother locked me to get the money. Then after paying the money they gave my son after 20 days and released me as well. Among the traffickers there were both Burmese and Bangladeshi. There are traffickers of all kinds, Burmese,

Bangladeshi, Thai, Seyang, Buddhist and even there are Rohingya traffickers too. They make money out of this business. Numerous people died along the way. I saw many people die in front of my eyes. “I saw 200 people die in front of my eyes. The traffickers torture, beat up, kill, rape people and ask for money” – added Halim Mia.

Community leaders’ narrative

Community leaders holding office had been mostly male. From an outsider’s view they are the gatekeepers for the access to the community having formal and informal leadership positions. I could have met some women leadership as well, but not before at the end of my research. There was a significant difference of narration between male and female. Usually, Rohingya men tend to talk about their experience as Rohingya nation and focus on the broader political aspects and often speak in a tone of representing the community and nation. The content of their narration includes the role of Nobel Laureate state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Government, UNHCR, Media, Political Parties, International politics, while the women’s narratives include mostly their personal experience and family affairs.

The Rohingya community leaders’ narrative reveals the process of reorganization of the community to survive in the USA and establishment of Rohingya American Society of Milwaukee. This is a multi-purpose complex of the Rohingya refugees in Milwaukee. The primary function of the mosque is to perform religious activity and build bonds through those activities. Other than five times daily prayers in the mosque, they run a Sunday school for children and *hafeji* program for memorizing the Quran, *halaka*, weekly religious discussion for adults, perform *nikah*, wedding service and so on. The building also has multi-purpose service of liaison offices and community center. They provide community support for new Rohingya refugees and essential services such as finding school for children, negotiating domestic conflicts, interpretation and translation, ESL and Basic literacy training, home health care services, workforce development, transitional services, community organizing events, food pantry and so on.

The community leaders have narrated how few early Rohingya refugees organized a fund to find a property to build a mosque and center for the community. Few Rohingya refugees donated their own savings to buy the land of an abandoned religious center and used

part of their fund they brought with them to build the mosque. It appeared to me that building the center had been enormously important to reclaim their collective identity in the USA. That is important for them both for surviving and thriving as a collective and restoring Rohingya Muslim identity in the multi-ethnic fabric of their new home, the USA. They formed a committee of operation for the mosque and community center. The committee members participate in regular weekly meetings as well as afternoon informal gatherings. They have an office room and rooms for other activities.

Building of the Rohingya community center and mosque is a significant measure to facilitate the community to pave a way of living in the new country providing legal support, finding a job, providing religious education and services, archiving documents and publications, networking, serving as an information center, so on and so forth. They have created this space in a view to maintain the integration of the community and identity, express collective voice and organize a collective life.

The community leaders spoke in a voice of representatives of Rohingya, rather than sharing their personal experience and family histories. Nevertheless, all of them have their own personal tales to tell that I could have pieced together to understand the great Rohingya experience. They have their version of Rohingya history often without the support of any document. They have mythical stories of their origin and migration from place to place unidentified in time. On the one hand, they have their oral history of Rohingya people, on the other they are also organizing scholarly debates, joining conferences, and engaging in local and international conversations.

They also collect and treasure documents and evidence of Rohingya identity. They show me the Rohingya flag and coins. They also make efforts to respond collectively to the crisis developing in Myanmar, though in a very limited capacity. They try to contact other Muslim communities for support and solidarity for their cause. Sometimes, other Muslim communities try to raise fund for supporting Rohingya.

The Trajectory of Stateless Rohingya and Their Everyday Practices

De Certeau argued that, power script of the social order can only continue and perpetuate through the action of the users or social

actors. The agency of social actors maintains and reproduces the social order. "Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others ... We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its maker... The 'ways of operating' constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users re-appropriate the space organized by techniques of socio-cultural production." (De Certeau, 1985: p. XII-XIV).

My argument is that, the totally unremarkable Rohingyas' every day practice is operated through choices of the Strategies and Tactics (ibid: p.34-38) as suggested by De Certeau. Rohingya tactics, as the art of the weak (ibid: p.37), shows the ongoing overturning of the authoritative order and their strategies. A distinction between *strategies* and *tactics* appears to provide a more adequate initial schema (ibid: p.35). De Certeau calls a *strategy* the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment." A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*proper*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, "clienteles," "targets," or "objects" of research). Political, economic and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. It postulates a place that can be demarcated as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objective and object of research, etc.) can be managed (ibid: p.35-36).

On the other hand, a *tactic* is a calculus which cannot count on a *proper* (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of *tactics* belongs to the other. Insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The *proper* is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized *on the wing*. Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities." The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. This is achieved in the propitious moments when

they are able to combine heterogeneous elements; the intellectual synthesis of these given elements takes the form, however, not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is “seized.” Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many “ways of operating” (ibid: p. XIX).

Although tactics remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances, these traverse tactics do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it. In this respect, they are not any more localized than the technocratic (and scriptural) strategies that seek to create places in conformity with abstract models. But distinguishes them at the same time concerns the types of operations and the role of spaces: strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces (ibid: p.29-30).

By contrast with a strategy (whose successive shapes introduces a certain play into this formal schema and whose link with a particular historical configuration of rationality should also be clarified), a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver “within the enemy’s field of vision,” as von Bulow put is, and within enemy territory. It does not therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a district, visible, and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprise in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak (ibid: p.36-37).

The more a power grows, the less it can allow itself to mobilize part of its means in the service of deception: it is dangerous to deploy large forces for the sake of appearance; this sort of "demonstration" is generally useless and "the gravity of bitter necessity makes direct action so urgent that it leaves no room for this sort of game. "One deploys his forces, one does not take chances with feints. Power is bound by its very visibility. In contrast, trickery is possible for the weak, and often it is his only possibility, as a "last resort": "The weaker the forces at the disposition of the strategist, the more the strategist will be able to use deception." The strategy is transformed into tactics when a Rohingya woman uses the opportunity of raid on traffickers for her escape from forced marriage with a trafficker in Thailand and uses trickery as her last resort to get back her stolen baby in Malaysia.

Lacking its own place, lacking a view of the whole, limited by the blindness resulting from combat at close quarter, limited by the possibilities of the moment, a tactic is determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power. In its paradoxical concision, this formula delineates the relationship of forces that is the starting point for an intellectual creativity as persistent as it is subtle, tireless, ready for every opportunity, scattered over terrain of the dominant order and foreign to the rules laid down and composed by a rationality founded on established right and property. In sum, strategies are actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power (the property of a proper), elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed. They thus privilege spatial relationships. At the very least they attempt to reduce temporal relationships to spatial ones through the analytical attribution of a proper place to each particular element and through the combinatory organization of the movements specific to units or groups of units.

Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time – to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation, to the relations among successive moments in an action, to the possible intersections of durations and heterogeneous rhythms, etc. In this respect, the difference corresponds to two historical options regarding action and security (options that moreover have more to do with constraints than with possibilities): strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the

establishment of a place offered to the erosion of time; tactics on a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power. Even if the methods practiced by the everyday art of war never present themselves in such a clear form, it nevertheless remains the case that the two ways of acting can be distinguished according to whether they bet on place or on time (ibid: p.38-39).

Tactics are more and more frequently going off their tracks. Cut loose from the traditional communities that circumscribed their functioning, they have begun to wander everywhere in a space which is becoming at once more homogenous and more extensive. The system in which they move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere. Because of this, the “strategic” model is also transformed, as if defeated by its own success (ibid: p.40).

The imposed knowledge and symbolisms become objects manipulated by practitioners who have not produced them (ibid: p32). We are concerned with battles or games between the strong and the weak, and with the “actions” which remain possible for the latter (ibid: p.34) The weak trace “indeterminate trajectories” that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move. They are sentences that remain unpredictable within the space ordered by organizing techniques of systems. Although they use as their *material* the *vocabularies* of established languages, although they remain within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes*, these “traverse” remains heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires, they circulate, come and go, mover flow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order (ibid: p.34). I am not to elaborate here, but to briefly note, another similar idea introduced as weapons of the weak by James Scott as “Everyday forms of resistance” where avoiding contesting the symbolic order of power, the weaker group constantly uses the invisible subversive actions every day (Scott: 1985). Rohingyas everyday life is keeping on recreating and rebuilding their life over and over again overwriting the rule set by the power structure. The pattern is evident in the regular living and using of tactics. Their reciprocal cooperation through kinship, family

and marriage, bonding of family, creating friendship, alliance with other Muslim communities, learning multiple languages, involving in creative work opportunities, and finally, building mosque and community center, creation of Rohingya American Society is clearly their agency of manipulating the exploitative conditions they are living in. Rohingya American Society and Mosque is a form of rebuilding identity in diaspora situations.

Conclusion

Throughout my fieldwork, I have discovered that, in the absence of any significant organized resistance movement, significant armed insurgency or any remarkable charismatic leader, Rohingya people have been facing the prolonged repetitive cycle of violence through mostly their practice of everyday life. My effort was to be able to view the Rohingya problem with the lens of very personal life experience and interpret the broader reality through it. From the life histories of the Rohingyas, through their intimate details, I have tried to discover and have a grasp on the modern stateless condition of a people in the world produced by postcolonial meaning of nationhood, citizenship, communal divide and militarization. This research contributes to understanding the everyman/woman actor Rohingya living marginal life at the edge of persecution and thus mapping human agency to survive and recreate society and identity. I consider Rohingya people as the part of this trajectory in South Asia. Unpacking of this cyclical violence and its chronic reproduction appear to me an important scholarly responsibility of knowledge production. This demands an elaborate scholarship project I would like to carry out in my future research.

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