

Vulnerability and Voice in the Construction of the Refugee Identity: A Study of Poems from Bangladesh Rohingya Camps

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Abstract

The aim of the paper “Vulnerability and Voice in the Construction of the Refugee Identity: A Study of Poems from Bangladesh Rohingya Camps” is to look how the refugees construct their identity through their writings foregrounding themselves as both vulnerable and agential beings. It also highlights the problems they face which are not limited to political aspects, thus broadening the scope of refugee studies. Although the poetry collection used for the study is a translated to English written by non-refugees, the poems honestly capture the plight, anger and strength of the refugees as the original poems are written by refugees stuck in the camps. The paper highlights the importance of writing, instead of being written. The poems challenge the dominant portrayal of refugees as victims and threats embracing the nuances of the refugee experiences.

Keywords: identity, Rohingya, vulnerability, agency, survival, home

This paper titled “Vulnerability and Voice in the Construction of the Refugee Identity: A Study of Poems from Bangladesh Rohingya Camps” looks at how the poetry collection “I am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond” amplifies the unheard voices and misinterpreted lives misinterpreted in spaces beyond their limited geographical/ linguistic groups. Their articulations from the fringes delineate the need for representing themselves rather than being represented by someone without the lived experiences of a refugee. The paper focuses on the themes and tones used by the Rohingya refugees to highlight their condition and construct their identity. The vulnerability exposed through the fragility and instability of their identities, not only show the precarious condition they are trapped in but also as a claimant to their human race united by the condition of ‘vulnerability’ as explained by Judith Butler. The poetry collection is a ‘writing back’ against the dominant narratives and media portrayal of refugees as helpless victims and threats to the national security. The nuances of the refugee experiences are usually homogenised as a reductionist, singular

experience of uprootedness. The paper shows how the voices from across age groups, gender and linguistic groups not only give multiple perspectives but also give insights on the shortcomings of the present system in addressing problems specific to refugees. By foregrounding the human trait of vulnerability, the paper intends to distinguish between 'helplessness' and 'vulnerability'.

Refugee crisis and the related humanitarian concerns are major burning global issues of contemporary times which require global attention. The origin of a category called refugees dates back to World Wars or even earlier to the French Huguenots of the 16th and 17th centuries. Despite the regulations of the United Nations and other human rights organisations all over the world, a large number of refugees remain confined in refugee camps with no rights. One such community who lives in constant threat of persecution is the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar. Since the Rohingya community is not listed as an indigenous community, instead as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries by the State of Myanmar, they are denied citizenship and other politico-social rights. With the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya community by the Buddhist majoritarian State of Myanmar, there has been a mass exodus to Bangladesh and other neighbouring States from 2017 ("The Rohingya Crisis Continues" (1995)). According to the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, the Rohingya community is "one of, if not, the most discriminated people in the world" ("Myanmar Rohingya" (2020)). Refugees are one of the most persecuted and sidelined people of all times. Since their legal status is not politically acknowledged by any nation-state, they are denied civil rights of the citizens. Most often human rights since they lack access to redressal mechanisms. Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh is the largest camp that shelters Rohingyas who have fled Myanmar for safety after several human rights violation and continue to live in impoverished conditions in the camp.

I am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond is an anthology of the poems written by the Rohingya muslims residing in Cox's Bazaar refugee camp during a writing workshop conducted by James Byrne and ShehzarDoja, in 2019. James Byrne, the editor of the poetry collection, says that the poetry collection seeks to celebrate and record the "direct, activist voices" of the Rohingya refugees in its most raw form. He adds, "*I am Rohingya* is a poetic response from those who have survived" (13). Setting the tone of the poetry collection as one of survival rather than victimhood, self-writings not only narrate what happened to a particular individual but also constructs a self. The poems traverse through various themes like unending search for home, the desire to return to Arakan, violence they faced in Myanmar and uncertainty of living in the camps. The poems not only talks about traumatic past but also delves in the hope of a brighter future. The idea of the poems is to humanise the refugee by highlighting the human vulnerabilities and survival capabilities.

Although media reports of violence are available to the world, they are sometimes tainted by the discourse that projects them as security threats or helpless beings in need of charity. The description of the violations and violence the refugees faced makes them more

poignant and personal. Rather than statistical figures of deaths and torture, narrations of incidents from everyday lives present the refugee as a tangible human being with feelings. The poem “First Day at School” by Thida Shania shows the discrimination is built in and perpetrated systemically through institutions like educational institutions. When a fellow student says, “This chair is not for a kalar”(Byrne and Doja, 2019,p. 28), not only is the narrator denied a seat in the chair, but learns of her inferior status and unequal opportunities in the country. A similar concern of not being allowed to grow despite being in a fertile land is reflected in Yar Tin’s “About those Born into this Place”. Ro B. M. Hairu’s “Behind Life” details the types of restrictions and discriminatory practices they are subjected to. Movement restrictions, lack of freedom to visit a mosque, playground or even a school (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 43) are few of the restrictions specific to Rohingyas. Violence need not always involve gory or bloodshed but “is constitutive of, intersubjective relations, institutions, language, logic, and subjectivity” (Rae and Ingala, 2019, p. 2). Restriction of an individual’s basic right is a violation and a violence upon his/her body. Subjected to a life of fear where their lives and livelihood are constantly disposed off, Hairu gives a grim picture of their everyday reality giving the readers an opportunity to contrast the condition of the camps with that of the readers and their own nostalgic homes’. “In our golden land, the trees give shade. /In Cox’s Bazaar, tarpaulin offers heat.” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 48)

The motif of journey surfaces throughout the collection. The theme of journey is accompanied with the tone of melancholy and weariness. Yasmin Ullah’s choice of words in “Birth” are indicative of this: “long exiles”, “our feet are so tired” and “our journey of pain” (Byrne and Doja, 2019,p. 53). Apart from the protracted sufferings throughout the journey, the repetitive nature of the journey torments the refugees. To be on the run is their destiny. Mayyu Ali in “A Rohingya Refugee writes,“I always ask myself during repatriation/ Is this the last time?/ Could I be fortunate enough to escape again?” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 64) ,“This journey- anguished/ I am at last stage/ Facing failure” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p.56). Living in constant fear with the only goal to survive, they are unable to dream or do anything for themselves: “My life is spent just trying to survive” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 64) and “the slow fade of resilience” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 54).

However, they refuse to settle as resentful creatures, instead, take pride and confidence in being survivors like Maung Abdul Khan writes, “In the battlefield/ I am survivor” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 67). The poems also aim at changing the narrative of refugees as liabilities and presenting themselves as people of capabilities. “It’s not enough to hope for/ the generosity of helping hands/ or consoling voices,/I want the ears of love/ that believes / that as much we are victims/ there is potential in our social contribution” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 55). Though traversal through different spaces is a constitutive element of a refugee, their desire to go beyond people always on the move is reflected when Yasmin Ullah says, “There is more to being Rohingya than exodus” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 54). Unlike the dominant discourse of the State and media that fosters the image of refugees as

threats or liabilities, the voice of the marginalised by the marginalised themselves aims to challenge such stereotypes. “Rohingya mothers run with all their might,/ hoping to make it across to the other side... Their will to live was strong” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 51). The intense desire to simply exist as human beings is discussed in many poems. “We walk across a thorn-strewn, death-riddled path,/Just to exist as respectable, proper humans” (Byrne and Doja, , 2019, p. 31). Most of the poems adopt an assertive tone and demand basic dignity every human being is entitled to. “All I want is to live again in my own home,/A safe life, to enjoy my rights” and “deep breath of peace” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 67).

Another theme discussed in the poetry is the concept of home. Home takes up many definitions. Comfort, familiarity, family, ethnic roots, etc. can be seen as different aspects of forming an idea of home. For some, home is a nostalgic past, often imaginary, they crave for. Yasmin Ullah in “Unfamiliar Home” writes, “I keep missing a place I barely know” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 68). In Birth, she writes, “I lost count how many times/ we became refugees ... leaving children behind, /turning their backs on family,/ outside the comfort of home,/ alone and struggling... If we walked the entire earth barefoot,/ would we ever find *a home?*” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 52). Refugees occupy a complex position as they belong to a place where they cannot live and they live in a place where they cannot belong. “We who call Arakan home are labelled, *those who enter illegally, terrorists, and discriminated*” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 61). The desire to go back to a home that no longer exists and the sense of homelessness in the new territory describes the vicious cycle of being a Rohingya. They wonder, “would we ever find a home?”(Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 52). Through these changing definitions of home, the concreteness and universality of the concept is challenged. Such rhetorical questions also point how they are pushed into a helpless condition and forced into asking for aid.

The anthology is a project that challenges the dominant discourse that dehumanises the refugee, thereby resituating the refugee in the human sphere. This objective of ‘humanising project’ is achieved by exposing their vulnerability as humans. “Vulnerability is a permanent status of the human being whereas finding oneself helpless depends on circumstances” (Cavarero, 2009, p. 31). “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation” by Judith Butler looks at human life from the vantage points of ‘precarity’ and ‘grievability’. Precarity of life is a shared trait of human beings. The understanding that any person can be injured or killed not only suggests the certainty of death common to all or the possibility of death at any moment, but also hints at the importance of social, legal, political and economic conditions to make survival possible. Butler explains what binds the human species is our understanding of human vulnerability and interdependence rather than the membership to the same biological category called homo sapiens. Violence against any person points to how any human being can be injured. Some lives are exempted from being liveable lives and some deaths from being grievable deaths. The book questions the idea of

“we” and “other”, when every human being’s life is related to another through exposure and dependency.

The dichotomy not only discriminates against people but also colours the moral response to acts of violence. When the acts of violence against “we” become crimes while the violence against “Other” is softened to the extent where deaths are unmourned or grievable. Grieving is not limited to an emotional response to the loss of a person. Butler looks deep into the political significance of the grieving. The value of life is proportional to the measure to which its death can be grieved. One’s worthiness to be protected also depends on how much his/her life is valuable and death grievable. The difference of attention human beings receive is critiqued in Ro Anamul Hasan’s “Being Rohingya”: I saw on television they had rescued a man./ Many navy boats, helicopters./ But not one wooden boats was sent to rescue/ Thousands of us drowning in the river” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 41). The differential treatment and priorities is suggestive of the legal or political status which also has sociological consequences determines the value of a person.

In her lecture on “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation”, Judith Butler delves on the relation between ethical solicitations, ethical obligations and responsiveness. She says that the ethical responses to ethical solicitations in the form of images or photographs does not emanate from one’s own ego since the ethical obligation impinges on us without our consent. It comes from a region that precedes ego, which Levinas calls as sensibility. Responsiveness does not have ego as its source, instead it is a “form of dispossession of the ecological” (Butler, 2012, p. 136). That is, consent does not delimit us from the ethical obligations that form our responsibility. She also argues against limiting one’s ethical responsibility towards an established category based on a shared characteristic like linguistic, cultural or regional similarity by pointing out the reversibility of events happening “there” and “here”. What happens there can happen here and “here” is also elsewhere (p. 150). The questions asked in Maroon Moon’s “How?” like “How do you turn your back on tears?/ How do you look away from the innocent” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 63) are ethical solicitations to the readers and the world at large. Butler also says that Levinas believed that the basis for ethical obligation is not reciprocity. The relation between the self and the other is asymmetrical. ie, I cannot expect the other to reciprocate the obligation towards me. Since the thoughts of self-preservation as the objective of ethical obligation to another, makes the relation less absolute and binding, Levinas argues egoism as the defeat of ethics (Butler, 2012, p. 140).

Although Butler agrees with Levinas in the refutation of self-preservation as the basis for ethical relation, she recognises the intertwined relation between self and other. Since my life and that is not my own is our life by the virtue of being constituted in and by a social world, one’s life is dependent on the life of the other (Butler, 2012, p.141). This intertwined relationship is made obvious in the line “How do you abandon a part of yourself?” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 63). The cruelty is exposed by ironically calling the inhuman murderers as

“kind killers” and the spectators of the violence including the readers as “brave” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 44). This mock appellation is an indirect call for the world as silence, in Jewish philosopher and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel words, “Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented”.

We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim ...When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the centre of the universe. (Wiesel, 1987)

Ro B.M Hairu adopts a tone of anger to lash out at the silent world: “The world outside too weak to us”, “The world outside was too blind to see us”, “The world outside was too quiet to hear”, “The world outside must be pitiless” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 59). The poems solicit humanitarian action and involvement from fellow humans. “Reach out to us with your human touch, /Give us permission to hope” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p.31). Ro Pacifist writes, “Hardly alive at all, /I wait here for your kindness” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 37). Yasmin Ullah writes, “So, please,/ look at me,/ my people, us,/ through the lens/ you reserve for someone/ special,/ wholesome, human-/ not so different/ from you” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 55). The poems are ethical appeals and requests that intend to bring ethical responses from the audience.

“They Are Kind Killers” by Mayyu Ali using a sardonic tone graphically presents the violence a Rohingya family awaits each day: “I watched/ my baby snatched from me/ Thrown into the bonfire (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 44). The disturbing details of arson and rape also speaks how women becomes the target of the most heinous crime: “And then he raped me one after another./ The last one said: *I am not going to use my penis on you*. Instead, he used his knife (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 44)” In Birth, Yasmin Ullah says, “Every rape, every assault/ leaves woman more/ bare/ more raw, /more exposed, / more vulnerable” (Byrne and Doja, 2019, p. 51). “UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women” (1995) recognises rape as a war crime during genocide; rape is seen as a means to terrorise and demoralise the enemy”. In a social context that links a woman's body to honour of the family and community, violating the female body has the function of violating the entire community. As feminists have pointed out, the body is a site where power is contested.

Though vulnerability and helplessness are used interchangeably to mean defenceless, the meanings are different. The difference between helplessness and vulnerability is that the former is condition created by others while vulnerability is what makes a human being human. The term vulnerability suggests that a human can be wounded. According to Cavarero, “The human being is vulnerable as a singular body exposed to wounding”. This mutual trait of ‘I’ and ‘you’ is the underlying principle of empathy. This universal condition is what bonds human race as one species. Vulnerability exists as long as a human being exists. On the other hand, helplessness is not a natural trait of human being. It is an induced

state when the person loses or lack the ability for self-defence. In helplessness, the “scene is entirely tilted toward unilateral violence”. The agency of the individual is taken away by force or by an accidental circumstance, rendering the individual incapable of action (stripped off agency). Although a human being at birth is helpless, he/she grows out of this condition with age. That is why, help in the form of protection with an air of saviour complex can be felt as an infantilising experience for the marginalised community. A refugee who shares the human trait of vulnerability like a citizen, is rendered helpless by political, economic, sociological factors.

The major themes of the poems include unending dangerous journeys, directionless travels and shifting places of refuge. The poems express their hopes to live in what they identify as ‘home’. Stuck in a place that they do not feel at home, the constant sense of not belonging makes a refugee’s psychological condition worse. Even when every possession is lost, the intense desire to live with dignity and hopes of a future resonates in the poems. When media portrays them as masses of people running into a new place to live, the individuality of the refugees are often compromised. Each poem in the poetry collection belongs to a single person despite its appeal as a collective voice. The idea that refugee is not one in an anonymous, nameless lot instead the refugees who run away from their homes and in camps are individual capable of survival with the human trait of vulnerability is conveyed through the form and structure of the poem. The assertion of “I”, therefore is not the rejection of the collective refugee identity or an aggressive statement of arrogance. It is an attempt to problematise the homogenisation of the refugee experience. By resisting the reductionist approach of the dominant narrative, each individual poem becomes an act of resistance. Instead of being represented, unrepresented and misrepresented, by taking the pen in their own hands the refugees construct an identity for themselves, thus showing their ability to actively stand for themselves and present their reality without being passive subjects of the “charity” that satisfies the saviour complex of the outside world. The tone of the poems ranges from anger to pity to helplessness. This multiplicity in tone is indicative of the nuances of refugee experience.

However, the aim of every poem is to amplify the voices from the margins, educate the world about the humanitarian crisis and seek ethical responses that would lead to political and social action from world leaders and remove the “otherness” from the minds of the general public. Exposing the camp dwellers as vulnerable is not an attempt to perpetuate the idea of refugees as a liability and weakness. Through the narrative of vulnerability, they become part of the human race as vulnerability and the potential to be hurt is one common trait of all humans. The several resonances of the statement ‘I am a human’ appears in various poetic verses. Vulnerability allows one human to connect with another and share the ethical obligation of protecting each other without any insistence on reciprocity. Through the writings, one human makes an ethical appeal to another human being: in this case, the reading community.

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