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Unveiling the Rohingya Experiences: Exploring the Predicament of 'Identity' in *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks*

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Abstract: *The global refugee crisis has become one of the most pressing issues of the twenty-first century, with millions of forcibly displaced individuals seeking refuge worldwide. South Asia, in particular, has a significant share in this crisis, hosting a substantial number of forced migrants. The Rohingya ethnic group from Myanmar has been a prominent case, experiencing immense persecution and displacement, leading to their mass exodus out of the country since the early 1970s. This research paper focuses on examining the Rohingya crisis through the lens of personal narratives, specifically analyzing the memoir, First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks by Habiburrahman and Sophie Ansel. By delving into the protagonist's narrative, the study aims to challenge the dominant discourse presented by official sources and the media, which often overlooks the individual experiences of the displaced Rohingya. By exploring the protagonist's quest for identity and individuality in the face of societal expectations and integration into Burmese society, the study delves into the complexities of the Rohingya predicament. The paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the crisis, emphasizing the need to amplify personal narratives to challenge dominant narratives perpetuated by the state, host nations, and media.*

Keywords: Rohingya, narratives, identity, memoir, refugees, forced migrants, dominant discourse.

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Unveiling the Rohingya Experiences: Exploring the Predicament of 'Identity' in *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks*

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Introduction

The Rohingya, an ethnic group residing in Myanmar's Rakhine state, have faced long-standing discrimination and persecution. Primarily Muslim, with a small Hindu minority, they have been labelled as 'outsiders' due to their Indo-Aryan descent and language similarities with people from Chittagong, Bangladesh. The prevailing belief in Myanmar is that they are illegal Bangladeshi immigrants who supported the British during WWII, which intensified the animosity towards them. Myanmar has systematically denied their identity, subjecting them to abuse and violence. The United Nations has recognized the Rohingya as the "most persecuted minority in the world" (Human Rights Council). Their persecution stems from Myanmar's denial of their identity and incitement of hatred by ultranationalist Buddhists, supported by security forces and the governments in power. The term 'Rohingya' is crucial in acknowledging their marginalization as Myanmar attempts to erase their presence. Denied citizenship and basic human rights, they have been forcibly displaced, resulting in a rapidly escalating humanitarian crisis. The nation they called home for centuries now considers them forbidden and non-existent.

In the case of Rohingya refugees and fugitives, discussions often revolve around ritualized grand narratives which have been constructed, cultivated and honed by different actors over the years, troubled by undercurrents from a range of different discourses. But the writings expressing the point of view of Rohingyas or the personal testimonies of those growing up in Myanmar – the daily ignominies, their quest for existence, the horrors they encounter, the stories whispered through generations to secure them from being forgotten or lost in time, is relatively scant. This paper deals with the analysis of the book, *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks* – a poignant memoir, a coming-of-age story about how the world's biggest ethnic cleansing of the present times unfolded. This memoir being a literary representation of the Rohingya crisis will help construe the experiences of a Rohingya in the contemporary world by throwing light on the psychology of loss, ostracization and expatriation, and will blow the gaff on the excruciating actualities of the exiled condition upon a faultless population in a distant corner of the globe via the protagonist, Habiburrahman. While dealing with the theme of predicament of identity, this paper also deals with ways in which the protagonist has a propensity to

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rebuild or revamp his identity and individuality with respect to what is trotted out as suitable and the consummate, with an eye towards integration into the mainstream Burmese society.

Personal Narratives in Refugee Studies

Literary compositions bring out unembellished stories of plebeians in the manner of a documentary, and a different facet of those unadorned anecdotes is rendered through the represented escapades of their characters while they obliquely propose a humanist paradigm. The strength of literature lies in its ability to universalise the plain tales of common masses and throw open the prospects of informing the world community, which offers cosmopolites with varied interests an opportunity to reconsider some of the most significant present-day events concerning humankind. This includes re-evaluating the refugee experience within the political framework of social prejudices, and its endeavour to confront the situation by fostering egalitarian and anti-discriminatory ideologies and practices. Refugee narratives are those that are written, conceived, and made sense of by refugees themselves. Life story narratives or personal narratives of migration and refuge provide insights into manifold encounters within a social setting and allow a comprehensive grasp on impenetrable social phenomena. They also help to interpret and expound multiple, intertwined reasons behind the decision to leave everything behind and relocate, and the impact of expatriation over identity-construction.

In *Narrative in the Study of Migrants* (2017), Anne De Fina and Amelia Tseng note: "telling stories is a way of sharing and making sense of experiences in the recent or remote past, and of recounting important, emotional, or traumatic events and the minutiae of every-day life" (381). Migrants employ narratives to make sense of their daunting experiences and forging a sense of endurance as they exist in a state of unpredictability and precarity in the course of their lives, as well as making sense of their past and present escapades. Testimonials of displaced persons are thoroughly probed for any fabrication by asylum workers for credibility. Researchers and artists extend a rebuttal, asserting that present-day migration can be discerned through the literary rendition of displacement and refugeehood and related themes. Life story accounts or narratives are appertained to identity, specifically to the cultural connotation of personhood. Personal testimonies carve out a space to speak, for those who are nothing more than data and figures in records. Self-narratives can resuscitate conventional and customary spaces required by displaced communities to safeguard their ethnic identities. This paper explores the predicament of identity, self-demonstration, and personal exploits as pictured through narratives. It also highlights the significance of memoirs and life stories in contriving the refugee identity.

A narrative is the recounting of a story by the individual/(s) who experienced it, recounted in the manner as they lived it. Its relatability or truthfulness cannot be vouched for. A narrative is a socio-anthropological manifestation where activities are chronicled and meaning is attributed to them. Apart

from being manifestations of life, narratives are expositions or constructions of the past fostered in a particular context of the present. The thought behind narratives is that people make use of them as a means to negotiate and substantiate their stories. Refugees tell their narratives because it works as a way to transact their present and as a way to gain control of circumstances that can render them vulnerable and powerless. It is an established fact that humans have an immanent urge for remaining active rather than supine and acquiescent. Therefore, narratives enable an individual to be on the move and effectual when very few alternatives are bestowed on the displaced individuals for authority over their selves and their development. They allow for an inquest between the self and the social world, and become a tool for identity creation and analysis. They are pivotal to the production of personal and shared identities and are used to suggest ways of existing and social familiarities.

A fundamental academic goal of narratives is to excogitate scholarship about processes of exile as endured by narrators and protagonists of their stories, thus annulling the often-pessimistic judgement about marginalized groups propagated through administrative discourse and mainstream media. Literary narratives endeavour to accord a voice to the displaced persons, and mark their banishment from domineering and prepotent discourses. *First, They Erased Our Name* is one of its kinds of a memoir wherein a Rohingya makes himself heard for the first time, to unveil the reality behind this global humanitarian catastrophe. Attention is drawn towards the historical oppression and persecution of the Rohingya community in Myanmar through the eyes of a child, and the violence that Habiburahman lived through for all his life until he fled the country is witnessed through his self-narratives. Personal narratives, then, do not echo displacement alone but they also show how identity is produced through competing recognitions. In this sense, the narrative structure of the memoir itself is evidence of the instability of identity, as the narrator is repeatedly compelled to speak in multiple social languages, like those of family secrecy, of state categories, of racial slurs, and humanitarian labels, so that identity appears as a field of contestation rather than a unified interior truth. This also anticipates the later scenes of bureaucratic naming and detention in the memoir, where labels do not describe the person so much as they redistribute rights, risks, and the chances at life.

The Predicament of Identity, Non-Identity and Imposed Identity

Elaborating on Michael Billig's *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology* (1987), our personal realm of mapping out an awareness of who we are is formulated on confabulations and dialogues that are brought into play in the domain of our quotidian interactions (Bamberg 6). Thus, narrations are germane for the construction of identities, and the awareness of self and identity subsumes entire existence. The connection of personal identity with narrative, conceived of in an autobiographical context, is the outcome of a marked and colossal historical change. From the vantage point of a narrative, the salient presumption of identity is that personal self-recognition materializes in the

narrative. So, the individuals are assigned a definite degree of agency as they have the competence to produce their own story. The fact that identity is not simply possessed but argued into being through social interaction, becomes visible in Habiburrahman's narrative in how the family must manage identity as both danger and inheritance. At every step in Habiburrahman's story, it is learnt that the Rohingya community in Myanmar has to surrender its original identity in favour of the one cast at them by the ruling regime, and it is only through his personal story that he can identify himself as who he really is – a Rohingya. He says, "The word 'Rohingya' is forbidden. We only use it among ourselves in the hut. It is our secret identity. Dad insists that we use the term 'Muslim' when we introduce ourselves. If we say that we are Rohingya, we would be signing the family's death warrant, he says. So we never do" (Habiburrahman et al. 13). The scene clarifies that identity is not a single self-description but a distributed practice, split between what can be spoken publicly (Muslim) and what must be guarded privately (Rohingya). This split points out to the larger claim of the memoir, that how under the hostility of the state, identity becomes a survival technology – something that is performed, concealed, and revealed depending on the audience. Although he cannot make a clean breast of his identity in front of the Burmese authorities, yet he cannot distance himself from it. Talking about how his identity is cardinal to his survival he says, "For me and Babuli, the word 'Rohingya' evokes hidden danger but also immense pride. It is a connection that brings us closer to cousins, uncles, aunts, and friends who we have never met, who live in Arakan, the neighbouring region. Most of our people are concentrated there. Dad explained to us that if we ever had to flee our home, there would always be someone somewhere who would help us – just whisper the password 'Rohingya'" (ibid.). This guarantee of kinship shows that identity operates as a networked recognition, which promises aid precisely because the state denies it. In this way, the memoir concretizes theoretical claims that identity is produced between intersecting discourses rather than resting as a consolidated essence.

Contemporary research in narrative study has added new debatable viewpoints to the comprehension of the construction of human identity. Like other literary texts, life narratives are indeterminate and open-ended. Mikhail Bakhtin refers to them as "unfinalizable", for life tosses more alternatives in terms of meanings and identities, thereby eliciting more number of interpretations (qtd. in Brockmeier et al. 8). Analysis of memoirs and life narratives is not only habituated to the realistic and exceptional lived experience of the individuals, but transformed into a world of prospects for construction of their identities. Identity is not restricted to just one societal discourse but defenceless against change. Identity is able to recast itself and attune to the disputes of rising cultural heterogeneity in an increasingly globalizing setting. The manner in which the referential world is assembled as a concomitant of the interactive engagement, indicates how narrators want to be understood or how they register a sense of self. The notions of self and identity traditionally, culturally, and in each person's personal history, are subject to transformation and continuous change.

That identity is a social construction, is a general perception in the evaluation of discourse of the migrants and the displaced. In *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann posit that identity is regarded as something that surfaces in dealings and communication with other human beings, thereby vetoing any exclusivist perspective that associates identities instantaneously to biological determinants or superficial social grouping (De Fina and Tseng 383). It is hypothesized that identities are not illustration of necessary attributes to frame individuals or specific ethnic groups and intrinsically circulated by them; instead they are exhibited and mediated through discursive work in interaction and negotiations with others. Therefore, identities are not inherently possessed by individuals, but acquired by them during the process of self-presentation. Ultimately, identities are considered as umpteen and "heteroglossic" in that part of their creation implicates discrete voices, inclusive of those of others, much in consonance with what M.M. Bhaktin referred to in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ibid.). These ideas are elemental to the studies and analyses on storytelling by the displaced, and have been enlisted through ideas such as self-presentation and viewpoint.

The case of identity is not a perspicuous and definite concept as it is assumed, and so, it rakes up a crisis-like situation because something inferred to be predetermined cogent and established is supplanted "by the experience of doubt and uncertainty", as argued by art historian Kobena Mercer in his *Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics* (1995) (Dizayi 1000). Identity is not a resolute but a faltering concept, as attested by Stuart Hall in *Ethnicity: Identity and Difference* (1989), where he writes, "Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses" (ibid., 1001).

The idea of a completely fixed, consolidated, accomplished, and consistent identity is an illusion. Rather with the multiplication of the frameworks for meaning and cultural representation, one is accosted by a baffling and transient plurality of potential identities. Thus, identities are characteristic of the social environment and backdrop of a given time period. Identity is a political entity and an undercurrent of power and authority is associated with it which can be determined from the opinion that association with a group can serve the function of both an instrument inclusion and exclusion. While disenfranchised individuals and groups yearn to carve out their identities for themselves, they also come to be identified by the influential and authoritative in society. This eventuates a power struggle between the formidable that aspires to ascertain the identity of the subjugated group, and the vulnerable group that endeavours to exert all its might and capacity to take the lead in defining its own identity. Rebecca J. Erickson in *The Importance of Authenticity for Self and Society* (1995) declares: "…members of oppressed groups are more likely to confront 'problems' of authenticity, being more often faced with dilemmas that require them to choose between acting in accord with their self-values or in accord with the expectations of powerful others" (qtd. in Kebede11). If an individual is compelled to plump for any

one as against deciding for their own selves, the identity that is invented is undoubtedly a forced one that does not necessarily manifest the people's genuine or legitimate self.

Identity is not just a shallow narration about who an individual is but it is about recognizing our deep-seated, inner selves. Stuart Hall in *Negotiating Caribbean Identities* (1995) argued that identities "actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us" (qtd. in Kebede 12). Social judgements are at the centre of the dilemma of identity since there will not be a self-contemplation without the intimation of the world around. Contrary to the belief of identity being a social construction, the Essentialist theorists are convinced that "national identities function as the main source of 'natural identity'" (Kebede 13). So, in case of absence of national identity, one cannot have a secure and stable personal identity. Ever since the Rohingya have been denuded of a national identity, they have been at loggerheads with the Myanmar state for rendering them incapable of preserving and safeguarding their natural identity.

In "Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity" (1991), Roger Zetter contends that "labelling is a process of stereotyping" (44). Therefore, institutionalized denominations are influential in the manner that these tags dictate those being labelled. Joane Nagel in *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (1996), adds that there is a contention between the self-recognition of people and the manner in which identities are ostensibly thrusted upon them. Here, the labels attributed to forced migrants are known to subsume negatively-loaded connotations and stereotypes nested in the language which may impede the recognition of their genuine selves (Kebede 16). While individuals are rightful creators of their own identities, yet certain labels impact the way people regard themselves, and that having an affiliation to specific labels may obstruct their original and unprejudiced opinion of themselves. This is true for all individuals who are living unauthorized in a nation. The Rohingya, who have an illegal presence and even more precarious existence in Myanmar and all host nations, have to live with the identity shoved down their throats. Throughout his childhood, Habib (short for Habiburrahman) is an easy target for Bamar and Rakhine children who reprobate him and his family as *kalars*, which he feels is equivalent to "spitting into our faces" (Habiburrahman et al. 14). Habib and his family has been the butt of severe racial profiling and identity denial at the hands of the Myanmar authorities and the general Buddhist public. He is subjected to pejoratives of *kalar*, *Bengali*, imbecile, nigger, ogre, parasite, cretins, imbecile, and other expletives. Habib is well aware of the fact that his ill-treatment is the consequence of his identity: "The authorities subject us to special treatment because we are Rohingya" (ibid. 22). Growing up, he is discouraged from identifying as Rohingya amidst the larger population of Myanmar. His father admonishes him: "You are a Rohingya, never forget that, but you must never again say this word when you are with people from other ethnic groups, even your best friend… You can say that you

are a Muslim. But if you say that you are Rohingya, they will lock you away and then kill you" (ibid. 31-32).

To understand the extent of the problem of non-recognition of Rohingya identity, the authorities have undertaken well thought out manoeuvres to wash out all signs of Rohingya from the ethnic mosaic of Burma from time to time. Describing one such campaign, Habib says, "The Rohingya do not have a written history. Our story could be told through the number of deaths, or the number of refugees, if only someone were counting…They want to eliminate everything that defines our identity" (Habiburrahman et al. 73). He reiterates the same later in the book, in the backdrop of a cultural centre being built over the land sequestered from the old mosque of Sandhi Khan: "History will be revised here; people will be told that Arakan has always been a Buddhist state… No document will attest to the presence of Muslims on these lands. The official version of Arakan history is a lie… the publication of Rakhine history books that omit any mention of the Rohingya…" (ibid. 105).

The memoir's insistence on erasure of identity and its depiction of the attempts at revisions of history can be read not only as discrimination but as a strategy of cultural erasure. While cultural genocide remains a contested category in international law and is not codified in the genocide definition of the UN, scholars and heritage institutions note that the concept remains analytically relevant for describing systematic destruction of the cultural presence and memory of a group, even when legal thresholds are under debate (United Nations, "Definitions of Genocide"; Getty, *Cultural Genocide and the Protection of Cultural Heritage*). Accordingly, erasure functions through mechanisms of (i) naming prohibition, (ii) deletion of archives, and (iii) modification of cultural and religious space, producing what may be understood as a coordinated assault on the conditions through which a community can appear as historical and political. Such erasure functions as epistemic violence, with the forced constriction of what can be known, said, and recorded about the Rohingya as a people, so that Rohingya knowledge and self-narration are disqualified in advance. In this sense, the memoir's act of testimony becomes a counter-archive that challenges the attempt of the state to monopolise history and to render the Rohingya identity non-knowable (OHCHR, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*).

Hannah Arendt in her impactful essay on Jewish refugees, "We Refugees" (1943) while talking about forging new identities in order to assimilate in a new society, says "A man who wants to lose his self discovers, the possibilities of human existence, which are infinite, as infinite as is creation. But the recovering of a new personality is as difficult – and as hopeless – as a new creation of the world. Whatever we do, whatever we pretend to be, we reveal nothing but our insane desire to be changed, not to be Jews" (271). On finding themselves entangled in the cobwebs of non-recognition by their state, the Rohingya do not adhere to their original identities. For instance, in the book, Habib mentions having a Burmese name, Nyi Nyi, in addition to his Muslim name, in aspirations for assimilating and being

accepted into the Burmese society. He also falsifies his name on his school documents while in Irrawaddy and adopts the Burmese name, Aung Soe Naing to steer clear of the sight of the authorities, at least on paper. After becoming an outlaw throughout Myanmar, he makes every possible effort to break free from his original identity. "If I want to live free outside Arakan, my prison-region, I need to be reborn with my new Burmese identity" (Habiburrahman et al. 142). While in detention on Christmas Island, Australia, Habib is given the identity of a detainee as Habiburahman-1979 512-03C-00571 MAL-001 Sg-(HABIB), which leaves him pleased at having his fears assuaged eventually: "Deep down, I feel happy simply to be alive. I am ready to be reborn" (ibid. 227). He is overcome by similar emotions when he is recognised as a refugee and is assigned a new identity at being reborn as a free individual. Zetter contends: "[w]ithin the repertoire of humanitarian concern, refugee now constitutes one of the most powerful labels. From the first procedure of status determination – who is a refugee? – to the structural determinants of life chances which this identity then engenders, labels infuse the world of refugees" (39).

Designating and assigning labels to individuals is a powerful undertaking, with profound denouements on those being labelled. Habib yearns to break free from the hellhole he has been flung into, owing to his identity and plans an escape from the vicissitudes of fate: "I am going on a perilous journey to escape this bottomless quagmire of life as a Rohingya" (Habiburrahman et al. 135). There is only one instance mentioned in Habib's memoir, where he neither has to conceal his identity nor is he looked down upon for being who he actually is, and that is when he joins the research project with his teacher, U Zaw Kyaw at Irrawaddy. "…no one calls me a *kalar*. They call me by my first name, and I do the same with them", he says (ibid. 154).

Identity and Racial Discrimination

Non-recognition of the identity of the Rohingya community paves way for targeted racial attacks on them. The Buddhist Burmese kids in Habib's neighbourhood often take racial digs at him. In one such incident, three kids hurl abuses at him:

> "Look at the dirty *kalar* who believes in his *kalar* God! Is he on his way to wash off his filth?" "With his big nose, big eyebrows, and big ears, he's more hideous than an ogre." (Habiburrahman et al. 16)
>
> "Forget the thanaka, nigger. You can't hide your pongy *kalar* skin." (ibid.).

At school, Habib trips over and falls down, after probably being stumbled by someone, seeing which a group of boys erupt into laughter and one of them chiacks him saying, "Your big eyebrows stop you from seeing where you're going, do they?" (ibid. 44). Whilst he is jostled and trampled on by the boys at school, the girls engage in verbal onslaught directed at the colour of his skin and his facial features.

Speaking on how unbridled the racial attacks are, Habib morosely exclaims, "Hunting down the 'Bengali invaders' – the Rohingya, us – is a ritual that has been happening for decades in Myanmar. The lives of the 'parasites of the nation' are made more unbearable and miserable with each passing year, as the effort to eliminate the 'vermin', the 'black infidels' continues apace" (Habiburrahman et al. 68). The pinnacle of racism is reached when Rohingya are expelled from their homes to clear space for constructing houses for "pure races" of Buddhist Rakhines and Bamars, and in certain cases, as Habib puts it, "settlers are given *kalars* as slaves" (ibid. 69). Everyday discrimination in the form of racial slurs precipitates into intimidations and death threats which have come to be commonplace. Habib narrates one such incident when he attracted strident vituperation from three adult Rakhines while he was still a child, with one tending to scorn him by saying, "In the past my grandfather used to chop *kalars*' heads off, but they breed quickly, those mongrels" (ibid. 94).

The other two join in with similar affronts:

> They come here and convert our women. They marry four at once, and then they knock them up! It's like the plague, it spreads. The problem needs to be nipped in the bud before we get totally invaded…It's high time we did a real ethnic cleansing operation… (ibid.).
>
> "*Kalars* are like salt for us. We're going to dissolve you on our tongues until there's nothing left of you," threatened the third (ibid. 95).

At the new school in Sittwe, he is welcomed with the barb of 'ten-percent', which is suggestive of implying that Habib and his clan are "only ten percent human, not worthy of respect, of no value" (ibid. 100). In times of being hauled up by the police or soldiers, the racial jibes are at their sensitive worst, with brickbats flying all around.

In one of the sections of the book titled, "Thwarting Apartheid", Habib draws an analogy between the inhuman treatment of Afro-Americans and that of the Rohingya due to their race. As during the apartheid era in the West, communities were segregated on the basis of colour as a means to safeguard and reinforce the power of the Whites over the Blacks, in the same vein the so-labelled *kalars* were isolated as non-citizens with simultaneous mushrooming of settler colonies called as NaTaLa on the lands seized from the Rohingya. This is what Habib referred to as the Burmese "version of apartheid" (ibid. 125).

Non-Identity and the Enforcement of Illegality

Illegality of Rohingya in Myanmar is a top-down phenomenon. It is imposed. When anti-colonial crusades rose to power following the end of imperialism, and the successive coups, they did so in the garb of what they avouched to be a bona fide, native political identity, which in their representation of history, had been clamped down upon by the imperial forces. Thus, the legality of the state was tethered

to specific identities. But in an ethnically heterogeneous nation, everyone did not share the state's purportedly legitimate political identity, with the ethnic minorities not conforming to the post-colonial indexing of identity. After the infamous Citizenship Law came into effect in 1982, the Rohingya identity, which no longer colluded to as one of ethnic identities of Myanmar, caused far-reaching social and legal ramifications for the Rohingya. Habib says, "'Rohingya' has become a forbidden word, never to be uttered, sentencing the men and women who bear this name to capital punishment" – a quintessential condition of illegality (Habiburrahman et al. 68).

In *The Condition of Illegality*, Chavez says that illegality is a societal, cultural, and political construction. As humans navigate penetrable frontiers, their identity is governed by those nation-states, not some indispensable trait fundamental to the genetic makeup or life philosophy of the displaced (Chavez 192). Since illegality is both manufactured and sustained, therefore, for illegitimate migrants, illegal and outlaw becomes written all over their faces. Illegality is a social position springing from decisions made by those in power, which is done through the construction of an 'alien', thereby imparting significance and prerogatives to the 'citizen'. The ruling military regime of Myanmar rendered a section of its population as illegal and outlaws in their own nation. Habib writes in his book, "I am three years old and effectively erased from existence… A tyrant leant over my cradle and traced a destiny for me that will be hard to avoid: I will either be a fugitive or I won't exist at all" (Habiburrahman et al. 1-2). His apprehensions come alive when he is compelled to live most of his teenage and adult life either as a renegade or in hiding in the neighbouring nations – an ordeal suffered by countless Rohingya in and out of Rakhine. Welled up with distraught, he says at the end of the book, "…my brother, sisters, and I are dispersed over several continents, stateless and rootless… Today, our people are scattered. Rohingya are living in exile around the globe…" (Habiburrahman et al. 235). Hannah Arendt concludes her essay along similar lines when she writes that, "Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their people – if they keep their identity" (Arendt 274).

Although this paper focuses on narrative identity and lived experience, the memoir's account also resonates with the limits of global governance. UN human rights bodies have documented the scale and systematic nature of violence in Rakhine State, including coordinated attacks and mass displacement, while simultaneously revealing the constraints of international enforcement when state cooperation is absent (OHCHR, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*; OHCHR, "Myanmar: UN Fact-Finding Mission releases its full account…"). In such a context, identity becomes geopolitically consequential as border regimes of the host states and refugee-admission policies determine whether the Rohingya are rendered administratively "refugee", "detainee", "illegal migrant", or "stateless", with each label distributing sharply different life chances (Zetter 39–62). The movement of the memoir across jurisdictions thus underlines how Rohingya

identity is negotiated within the majoritarian politics of Myanmar, and across regional and international structures that often fail to ensure protection.

The Rohingya community has long endured contempt and antipathy for their identity and purported illegality. There are occasions in Habib's story when disdain and torment become too hard to bear, that he is left disillusioned with his identity. In a 2019 interview to *The Guardian*, he revealed that his time of tribulation in Myanmar made him ponder upon certain existential questions. "Sometimes I feel, 'why I was born Rohingya? Why I was born a Muslim in Burma?", he often thought to himself (Alcorn). In a telephonic conversation with me, while talking about forging identity as a means to assimilate with the local Burmese populace, Habiburrahman revealed that "people from all minority communities have two names – the first being a representative of their religious community or ethnic group, and the other being a Burmese name" (Habiburrahman). The reason for this dual appellation is that, having a Burmese name enables individuals from minority groups to have a relatively easier everyday existence in the Burmese besides providing convenience in bureaucratic and administrative affairs. Habib's Burmese name, in fact, allowed him to camouflage his Muslim identity innumerable times in life. During his illegal stay in Thailand and Malaysia after having escaped the mayhem in his native land, he adopted different identities and at times, made use of his Burmese name to evade arrests or pass for being a non-Rohingya. But Habib says that he feels exhilarated more now than ever to be finally able to call himself by the name his parents gave him, while now in Melbourne, Australia, and is neither scared nor compelled to hide his identity.

Conclusion

Through a meticulous analysis of Habiburrahman's memoir, it is inferred that the creation and perpetuation of the Rohingya identity is a result of power struggles, socio-political narratives and historical circumstances that have profoundly influenced the marginalised community's sense of self and belonging. This process, which is intricately woven into the fabric of Myanmar's history, formed citizens' perception of the Rohingya people and established their place in the society. Habiburrahman's personal narrative underscores the on-going challenges faced by the Rohingya community in constructing and preserving their social identity while navigating the complexities of societal structures that seek to define and marginalize them. The narratives and experiences shared in the book were explored for an insightful understanding of the profound challenges faced by the Rohingya community in defining and asserting their identity emerges. It can be concluded that identity generation of a marginalized community is dictated by the influential community of individuals around them, and is an eternally transient condition. It is shaped by identifiable actors and institutions, which in this case, comprise the Myanmar state apparatus, the local social field of Rakhine/Bamar majoritarian norms and racialising vocabularies, and transnational regimes of governance. This implies that the social identity

of an individual is acknowledged when its existence has been laid claim to by the 'others' around. It is by means of pre-colonial and colonial structures, the construction of borders, and the politics of belonging pronounced by the state during the course of establishing Myanmar as a nation-state, that the identity of the Rohingya ethnic group has been devised and propagated.

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