

Statelessness and the Rohingyas: Constructing and Contesting Diaspora Identity on Social Media platforms (first draft)

By highlighting recurring themes and patterns of engagement on these web-based platforms, the article looks at how diasporic civic and political e-activisms are transforming the very contours of Rohingya identity formation and their pursuit of recognition. In recognising the role of online platforms in addressing a variety of offline constraints, the article also revealed a quintessential global North-South gap among the Rohingya diaspora. Finally, focusing on such a creative constellation of socio-cultural and political issues in virtual space, the research also demonstrates how the exiled Rohingyas practice a politics of resistance and recognition while confronting the policy pretensions of Myanmar's government.

Introduction

The Rohingyas have been exposed to chronic violations of human rights, including ethnic cleansing, statelessness, and likely genocide, and are frequently referred to as the most persecuted minority group in the world. (Alam, 2017). Starting as early as 1978, the Rohingya people of Myanmar's Rakhine state have been fleeing the country in large numbers due to the state's decades-long military rule, interethnic conflict, and recent state-supported persecution. (Ansar, 2020). The Rohingya's citizenship status remains uncertain and contested by the government and people, as well as the term "Rohingya" itself. (Kyaw, 2015: 50). By revoking their citizenship and enforcing punitive regulations, the Rohingyas have been routinely denied a number of fundamental human rights accorded to Burmese citizens, including as freedom of movement, access to education and health care, and the opportunity to marry and have a family.

The denial of citizenship and ethnic identity, and consequently the Rohingyas' total isolation, has been the political tactic of the different military regimes that have ruled Myanmar for decades, as well as a means of expelling them from Myanmar. Today, the vast majority of the ethnic Rohingya population is stateless as a result of systemic and direct breaches of human rights. Most of them have taken refuge in South and South Asia – predominantly in neighbouring Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand, and to a lesser extent in the West and the Persian Gulf – over the past two decades.

In exile, the situation is not any better. The ambiguity around their status deriving from their perceived statelessness, irregular migration, forced displacement and the lack of coherent policies of the host countries to attend their needs, brings yet another struggle for the Rohingya people to survive. Most of the Asian countries where the vast majority of the Rohingyas are settled in denies their basic rights as refugees stipulated in the 1951 refugee convention. Nevertheless, as a result of the last exodus and the subsequent global attention, a burgeoning and a vibrant diaspora community has emerged in recent years composed of both old and new Rohingya refugees.

Within this backdrop, this paper attempts to bring a new dimension unfolding in the Rohingya conundrum by revisiting the notion of diaspora in connection with the mass exodus of the Rohingyas following 2017 conflict and their access to communication technologies and involvement in social media platforms. In this changing socio-political context where the Rohingya crisis has attracted a major global attention, prompted a proliferation of virtual connectivity within and beyond the Rohingya community in exile- which we portray as “Rohingya Digital Diaspora”. In our understanding, hardly any study has been undertaken to explore this emerging diaspora dynamics within the Rohingya community in exile. This study, therefore, while acknowledging the challenges and the predicaments associated with this endeavour, yet, attempts to take a cautious step to further the debate and understanding around Rohingya community in exile.

Methodology

While there are multiple online sites where members of the Rohingya community are actively engaged, we focused mainly on two key platforms: Facebook and Twitter. Based on the number of followers, posts, and comments, we have identified the top ten Rohingya-related social media pages and Twitter accounts. The Facebook pages and Twitter accounts were identified using eight search terms, i.e., Rohingya refugee, Rohingya genocide, Rohingya women, exiled Rohingya, Rohingya activist, Arakan Rohingya, United Nations and Rohingya, Rohingya in Bangladesh. In addition to conducting in-depth analysis of these ten Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, we also analysed a variety of other Twitter accounts and Facebook pages that appeared in these pages as shared posts and retweets. The qualitative corpus comprised posts and tweets that were open to the public. The transcripts of Facebook discussions and quotes were manually inserted into a dataset. The study covers the period from August 2019 to August 2021. Additionally, the search for relevant online

platforms and social media tools was limited to the English language, as the Rohingya language is a spoken dialect¹. This dataset was then transferred and analysed using Max Q.D.A. software to categorise the thematic contents, frequency of words, hashtags and recurring themes.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of the paper are embedded on the idea that dispersed and oppressed ethno-religious minority or endangered groups, often organized in diasporas and use internet to “re-create identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, influence homeland and host-land policy, or create debate about common-interest issues by means of electronic devices” (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010: 11). In an ‘unevenly interconnected world’ digital platforms provide spaces and offer the alternatives to tap resources, building capacity, creating links and bonding for dispersed community (Ponzanesi, 2020: 978). When necessary, this online space also play the role of ‘crucial protagonists’ (Marino, 2015: 1) to manifest ‘diasporic identity, political activism and sentiment towards homeland’ (Marat, 2015:1). Besides, the “low barriers to entry and exit, and nonhierarchical and noncoercive” nature of internet provides diasporas a full package of ‘benefits’ to pursue their socio-political and cultural endeavour in digital platforms (Brinkerhoff, 2009: 47-48). The Rohingya community whose sphere of influence and space making is extremely suppressed by stripping of citizenship and thus effectively making them a stateless and rightless group-lacks all kind of fundamental rights including the right to self-representation and freedom of movement. Thus, social media inevitably become *the* space of togetherness of this dispersed community and connecting with the community members across the globe. The proliferation of and relatively easier access to different digital platforms thus, offers unprecedented opportunities for them to ‘create space for the expression of diverse and contested views’ that directly affect their life (Titifanue et al., 2018:2). As noted by Valenzuela et al. (2014: 2048) social media can heighten ‘processes of social identity construction in political spaces where opinions and ideas are shared’ and play a role in the creation, promotion or strengthening of a shared consciousness that can energise protest behaviour. In addition, this newly formed digital landscape is routinely transgressing the symbolic boundaries (Morley, 2000:3) and

¹ Rohingya dialect is a spoken dialect almost identical to the local dialect of the Chittagong region of Bangladesh. However, there is an ongoing effort to incorporate it in the planned upgrade to the Unicode Standard, the global coding system that turns written script into digital characters and numbers. See Abraham, I., & Jaehn, M. (2020) for more details.

generating prospects for ‘cultural activism’, social media functions as a means of cultural reassertion involving struggles of representation and identity (Ginsburg, 2008).

Amidst a growing and evolving diaspora in exile, this study looks at factors that trigger their online activism, how the lack of mobility and complex asylum status resulted in online interconnectivity. It examines the complex role of various digital platforms in building solidarity, forming, shaping and enabling new types of diaspora identity among the exiled Rohingya. Drawing upon a yearlong online ethnography, this article discusses to what extent digital platforms constitute spaces of digital togetherness, where diasporic experiences and Rohingya identities are constructed and mediated. The paper documents how the online diaspora advocates to influence the policies of the host countries and international cooperation to address their plight and call for a solution to this longstanding crisis. It also looks at how they celebrate, protect and reshape their cultural identity in exile. Going beyond the conventional connection between ‘home’ and ‘exile’, the study looks into the diverse spatiality and temporality of Rohingyas diaspora activism. This article seeks to understand how digital spaces function not simply as a platform of coming together, but also to ‘reshape and re-define self’. By highlighting recurring themes in these online platforms, the paper looks at how diasporic e-activism impacts the identity formation and influences socio-political movements within the exiled Rohingya communities worldwide. It examines to what extent does the internet activity of the Rohingya diaspora transcend local identities to strengthen a greater Islamic identity. While acknowledging that online platforms accommodate differences, mobility restrictions and geographical challenges particularly in times of pandemic, the paper critically underlines how the digital platform is creating a global North-South digital divide within the Rohingya diaspora. The study argues that these online diasporic exchanges transcend host–homeland territorial boundaries and encourage a distinct form of digital nationalism that are simultaneously both deeply local and digitally global- at times with the cost of narrow and exclusionary cultural representation. Finally, focusing on unique forms of ‘memory politics’, it further attempts to understand how digital constitution of Rohingya plights have been largely on selective issues which may impede processes of reconciliation in the wake of the latest military coup in Myanmar and the future prospects of peace.

From Exile to Online: Emergence of a Digital Rohingya Diaspora

Since 2017, there has been a proliferation of social media engagement of Rohingya refugees visible in thousands of Facebook pages, twitter accounts, YouTube channels, online news portal and websites with different political purposes and support services for the exiled Rohingyas. From Overseas, these online platforms are serving as a ‘digital lifeline’ to demonstrate their presence and to deliver ‘a single and cohesive narrative’ and creating a tremendous socio-political impact within and beyond the community (Aziz, 2020). The role of Facebook here is ironical as many experts blames this social media giant to spread fake news, hatred and orchestrated violence inside Myanmar against the Rohingya community leading to their mass exodus in August 2017. Yet, in exile, this has become a new source of connectivity and a tool to further their collective struggle and self-representation.

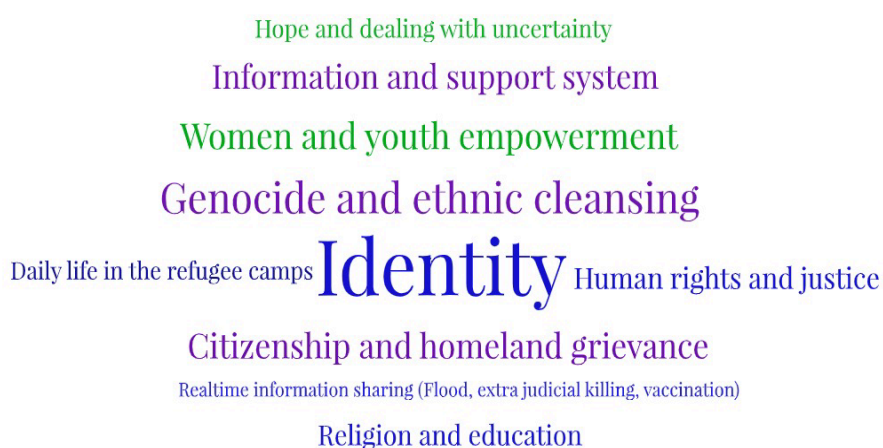


Figure: Recurring themes discussed online

The belonging, identity and connectedness are highly embedded in mobility and gathering where people share their feelings and connect with each other. As stateless refugee community, what often the Rohingya people are deprived of is the freedom of movement and therefore the connectivity within and beyond their community. It is in this context, internet and social media offers an unprecedented access to connectedness and provide a platform for a “virtual togetherness”. Recent studies also emphasised the emergence of digital transnational spaces where exchanges and communications take place (Marat, 2015).

Generally speaking, diasporic communities have always relied on networks; nevertheless, the Internet is now the mainstay for such networks, taking on a central function in many

migrants' day-to-day lives (Marino, 2015). For the Rohingya community, the central element here is mobility, which has been at the core of their struggle since the Burmese military government revoked their citizenship status and thus, restricted their freedom of movement and effectively isolated from the rest of the world. With the advent and access to technology, it has become an integral part of many Rohingya people.

The web has expanded the opportunities and motivations of Rohingya activists in diaspora to invite wider audiences to engage in online–offline mobilization activities. A number of issues frequently discussed on these digital platforms including community identity, human rights, justice, violence in Rakhine, killings and apartheid, international reactions, ICC hearing and Aung Sun Suu kyι, situation in refugee camps in Bangladesh, extra judicial killing by Bangladesh security forces in border areas, and global advocacy. Figure 1 illustrates the content of discussion in the social platforms.

Space of Remembrance and memory making:

The distinct displacement and forced migration experience led to a new form of memory making and nostalgia in social media platforms. Through this remembrance in internet and social media platforms, awareness has been raised among the younger generation of Rohingya population to develop and cultural and political consciousness and activism around the Rohingya plights.

The participation in the Facebook pages creates a sense of community, a “home experience” that becomes strategic for self-expression and representation. That being said, there is another feature that seems to characterize these transnational spaces, which is the feeling of loss and nostalgia for the past, family and friends left behind, routines and practices that were once familiar. Sharing of these feelings are very common in online particularly among the relatively older Rohingya refugees and those left Myanmar decades ago. What is also interesting is the connectedness only with the Rakhine state and not much beyond that and with other Burmese ethnic groups.

(Re)shaping Rohingya identity and Cultural (and religious) reproduction

Online platforms not only provide assistance with matters of everyday life, it also helps identifying 'who we are'. The community is fundamental in avoiding sense of being isolated or left alone.

Based on the narratives of the women and a digital observation of their activities, it offers a glimpse of how young women are reimagining the Rohingya identity.

“Why not I tell my story, when I am capable of doing this?! I am tired of being represented by someone else, who never come across what I have experienced and witnessed.”- Rohingya INGO worker in Malaysia

Our aim is to facilitate a platform for the global Rohingya community to recognize themselves and each other beyond current media narratives- Rohingya Online Educator in Germany.

The increasing connections among the diaspora members and the legal constraints to be physically connected, led to a growing phenomenon of Rohingya communities' online activism. Almost all the respondents in these study found to be strongly active and well present in the social media platform in community pages as well as linked to wider online social movement. In recent years, online media tools and several online campaigns have been instrumental for rekindling ties among the displaced Rohingya community in different parts of the globe, reinvigorating their culture and being a platform for political discourse.

Nostalgia has been recreated in social platforms. It reignites the past memories for elderlies and connect the younger generation with their 'motherland'.

“Our body is here (in Bangladesh) but our soul is in Rakhine (in Myanmar). Every day, I read at least 20 stories in different Facebook posts, to remind me, how was life back there. It makes me feel home, feel good.” – An online activist in Bangladesh.

Thus, an emotional and nostalgic life is recreated and enhanced within online communities. It also provides intimate spaces where Rohingya refugee women can nurture—and share—*“expectations, concerns, difficulties, practical, and social needs”*- as another respondent from Canada reiterates.

There is nostalgia surrounded in their everyday life. Despite the fact that many of the respondents experienced violence at first hand and the traumatic memory remains vivid, yet there is a strong nostalgia about their 'Home' in Myanmar is associated with their everyday

life. The sense of territoriality appeared to be quite strong among them, particularly those in Bangladesh camps. One activist from Bangladesh shares her feelings this way: *“bukor vutor puri jagoi (the heart burns) when we wake up every morning and go on the hilltop, we see our para (village) –on the other side of the Naaf (river).”*

fracturing the Rohingya as a group and thus disrupting and ending their ability to be a cohesive cultural group. Since 2017, there have been a proliferation of Rohingya YouTube channels, online webpages, blogs and even television channels that runs through online platforms. The majority of the respondents are actively part of this wider social media engagement that aims not only to craft a common narrative of suffering and violence but going beyond, they perform as educator, social awareness building, connecting with the transnational diaspora community and above all, the preservation of the Rohingya language in its spoken and written forms.

. It is not only a question of mobility, rather an opportunity to reclaim identity. One respondent from Canada illustrates:

“I left Myanmar when I was six. I have no memory of home, of Maungdu (the largest township in Northern Rakhine), of our neighbourhoods. But 20 years later, I see the images of the town, the Bazar, my grandfather’s shop that was burned down by the Rakhines—all through Facebook connections”- Rohingya Social Entrepreneur in Canada.

For many Rohingyas- they did not leave the Rakhine state voluntarily, instead they were forced to do so. Therefore, there remains a strong emotional connection with the Rakhine state. Within this scenario, the Internet as a meeting point reflects different levels of their transnational interaction to gain political and community visibility. It has been the case for many dispersed diasporas globally (Marino, 2015; Georgiou, 2001).

Another respondent states- *my father was killed by the army, my mother is in Thailand and I am here (in Australia), as part of third country resettlement. Most of my relatives are in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. I have not seen any relative including my mother, in the last 3 years and don’t even know when it would be possible. Facebook is my only option to stay connected with them- Rohingya Social Worker in Australia.*

This arrival of ‘digital diaspora’ also highlights the temporal contexts and dynamics. We see this trend in a young generation and many of them left Myanmar in their early childhood and have been strongly affected by their long-term experience in the diaspora. For many of them,

digital platform is how the past can be recreated for the present and to further their resistance and longing for 'homeland'.

Becoming Online Activists: Mainstreaming the Plights of Burmese Rohingya and the alleged "Genocide"

For the Rohingya community, the central element here is mobility, which has been at the core of their struggle since the Burmese military government revoked their citizenship status and thus, restricted their freedom of movement and effectively isolated from the rest of the world. With the advent and access to technology, it has become an integral part of their life in exile. It is not only a question of mobility, rather an opportunity to broaden the solidarity.

They are reframing diaspora politics through human rights discourse. Political grievance, international recognition, establishing Rohingya identity in Rakhine remains some key features in these digital dialogues. The use of English in contemporary diaspora identity politics presents an interesting cleavage that contradicts to some extent, how passionately they try to assert their identity.

Nevertheless, question remains on how the digital diaspora complements the everyday life struggle of ordinary refugees trapped in the refugee camps and makeshift settlements in different parts of South and Southeast Asia. How transversal the dialogues and discussions are when they are connecting in online platforms. It also stresses on the fact that civic engagement through digital platform can also be messy, personal and highly contextual and even argumentative.

Transcending ethnic boundaries: becoming global activists:

Internet has not only created the scope of self-representation but also to extend this 'new found freedom' to overcome the sense of immobility and engaging with wider global concerns. Internet has served as both a space and an instrument for the Rohingya diaspora to engage in a new forms of global activism and transcending the ethnic boundaries. Many Rohingyas find a simultaneous connection with the plights of other similar groups particlaurly with the Palestinian cause. Thus, they create connection with communitiies who feel the same pain. In various ways, they seek to 'annex the global' within their struggle and fight for justice (Appadurai, 1996: 4). There is also a social dimension in this effort to transcend their boundaries. The Internet empowers them – the Rohingya problem is no longer the problem of a minority in a remote area; it is a problem that lies at the heart of the global

community like the Palestinian cause. This way, it widens their narrative and get many other actors on board.

Political and social Mobilisation: Connecting Domestic and Exile Struggles

Their offline confinement has been traversed through the prism of internet and social media platforms. The internet has made a tremendous contribution to spreading the scale and evidences of human rights violations and genocidal incidents inside the Rakhine state of Myanmar.

The users strategically used the social media , for instance the ICJ case between Gambia vs Myanmar, social media has played a major role in organising Rohingya diaspora in exile and widening the movement and sharing with other activists platform. This in turn, increased the global attention towards them.

The findings show how Internet has become the political platform and activists space ‘that can serve to extend as well as to expose the limits of territorial sovereignty’ (Ponzanesi, 2020: 986). Rohingyas abroad have been successfully using social media to draw attention to their cause. Myanmar has a long history of diasporas leading change, especially during the nearly 50 years of direct military rule that lasted until 2011. Exiled women’s organizations, such as the Burmese Women’s Union and the Women’s League of Burma, documented human rights violations when the nation was still closed off to the outside world. They lobbied international governments and pressured Myanmar to end impunity for military attacks against civilians.

Similarly, Rohingya advocates are working to ensure an end to the ongoing genocide of their people.

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Role of International community and situation in the host country

While the overarching focus on forced migration and the Mediterranean Refugee crisis in Europe helped the Rohingya crisis to be also part of the global humanitarian discourse, nevertheless, social media campaigns and images of stranded boats carrying Rohingya refugees surfing on different online platforms have been increasingly employed by to inform and internationalise the Rohingya crisis and their plights in Myanmar.

This perceived internationalisation and a large scale global solidarity with funds, reliefs and hundreds and thousands of new projects on addressing the Rohingya concern in South and South Asia provided a new opportunity for many Rohingya activists to be an active part of this new endeavour. Within this new trend, women also become a key actor. The massive exodus of Rohingya in 2017, also triggered multi-dimensional factors that the humanitarian actors needed to carefully tackle. Besides, as a large number of refugees were women and girls and victim of sexual and gender based violence in Myanmar, provided the platform for many women to ride on such issues that they also experienced closely prior to their exodus.

Besides, situation in the host countries, particularly in Bangladesh and Malaysia, provided an opportunity for many Rohingya women to be actively involved in the overall management of the humanitarian intervention. For example, in sprawling refugee camps in Bangladesh, where the vast majority of them are concentrated today, the primary leadership and decision-making structure within the camp is through the Camp Management Committees (CMC). The CMC representatives are the key focal point for people to communicate their needs and issues, and CMCs in turn are expected to communicate these concerns with service providers

and government departments. However, CMC representatives are predominantly male and there is an acute lack of trust in the ability of CMCs to represent the interests of the women residing in the camps. While at the beginning of 2018 almost the entire CMC representatives were men, as of February 2020 women occupy approximately 20% of CMC positions (OXFAM, 2020). One of the female CMC representatives consider this leadership opportunity ‘possible only in Bangladesh and under UNHCR Support’, referring to the patriarchal challenges and other structural barriers she had to endure prior to her departure from Myanmar. Therefore, host country policies towards the Rohingya refugees and how the overall management of the situation provide space for women to actively take part, is also a crucial factor for women’s visible and meaningful engagement in the community development initiatives.

Lastly, the internationalization of the situation helped many women to be in the frontline and embarking on the massive engagement. In Myanmar, they did not have the options; they were not allowed to be active in the public space. This is new-found freedom for many women and thus, also reaffirm the nexus between the situation of the host country and the Refugee women’s access to civil society participation. One respondent from Bangladesh tells:

“My family left Myanmar in 2012. Until 2017, no one (in Bangladesh) even asked me whether I am a Burmese or Bangladeshi. But now they are so specific- which part of Rakhine state I am from?”

The internationalization indisputably helps reminding who we are, where we belong and what shall we do to achieve that status- another respondent from Bangladesh continues.

Conclusion

This article examines how Rohingya community in exile have innovatively used digital platform to maintain familial connections and revive culture, and how this has evolved over time to take on an increasingly political dimension. The findings suggest that community belonging, the quest for self-determination and claiming a Rohingya identity have found less space in offline spaces which triggered the proliferation of exiled Rohingyas online engagement and freedom of expression and thus findings the sense of ‘digital togetherness’ which has eventually extended to cultural and political movement and the pursuit of reclaiming a unique Rohingya identity. This paper attempts to reveal how the complexity, fluidity and dynamism of Rohingya identities in diaspora, which are both shaped and are

shaping their exposure in the digital domain and how social media offers sites of connectivity amid spatial, legal and structural barriers. For a community that has never been able to taste the idea of togetherness in Myanmar, the digital platforms offer a unique opportunity of togetherness albeit virtually. This leads to a constant transition and transformation of the community both politically, socially and spatially among the various forces that remains to be at play both globally and locally. It offers a new take on the long building Rohingya conundrum and the socio-political unfolding. It unpacks the multiple layers of invisible aspects of the Rohingya identity, clouded in the digital platforms. While highlighting how they acts as a force of resistance against state and non-state actors and engage with wider global community of similar narratives and objectives, it is also simultansuously struggling for new identity markers, new meanings, mechanisms and survival strategies. The findings encompass how the distance and mobility restriction has been mediated through social media, social media has been used for troubleshooting and addressing certain needs of the community in exile and how it has mainstreamed their plights and give a shape to their demands and struggle for justice.

In this process, digitalisation emerged as a salient feature in current Rohingya diaspora engagement and their transnational connectedness, albeit how far reaching such impacts, remains a topic to be explored further. In this digital platform, it obscures many local features to accommodate a more globalist view on Rohingya. This narrative also largely excludes non-Muslim Rohingyas in this process of narrative making. Besides, strong sense of transnationalism, multiculturalism, digital transformation and lastly, the internalization of the crisis, have paved the way for asserting rights and creating a sense of a community in exile. In this process, the article also triggers the question of to what extent this digital togetherness, includes or excludes certain features of the Rohingya community and how a new transnational identity is being constructed and negotiated. This article demonstrates how the digital connectivity has transformed the Rohingya community in a profound ways and provide new avenues to self-representation, self-identification and bridging gaps between home and exile. Yet, this is not without certain caveats. While it is important to acknowledge the role of digital technologies in enhanced connectivity within the dispersed community and visibility of their plights in myanamr and in exile, there remains questions on the digital divide, inclusive representation and the spatial privilege. The notion of this digital diaspora allows certain notions to be strengthened while some significant others to be ignored on purpose.

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