



## Reflection piece

Inspired by Ingmar Bergman's only colored film named "cries and whisper," which depicts the story of three women bound to a history of love, suffering and death, I attempt to use self-portrait as a medium to explore social and gendered dimensions that make the in/visible devastation effect of everyday violence, such as confinement, control and violence that lead them to eventually death which state power sometimes through the border or beyond border exert upon on women bodies.

Reflecting through art has a personal reason, as it can provide the freedom to explore and bridge between fact and fiction by producing new meaning. The white spaces in my piece represent the invisible spaces, and the red symbolizes the soul of women who continuously strive to escape violence.

The production of the modern border has fictitious tactics designed to kill people, not only through technology and surveillance but also by making every day geographic locations "as carceral spaces of potential graveyards". My piece reflects on the everyday torture of the border, and that border has not only bound to specific geological locations far beyond that, but it also reveals its existence by exposing stateless women to death by gendering them.

## **How borders produce 'gendered death':**

The Rohingya community from Rakhine state in Myanmar has been facing systematic exclusion and racism since 1948 when they became independent from Britain. The geopolitical space of the Rakhine state near Myanmar-Bangladesh has a long political history and can be understood by colonial and postcolonial subjugation (Aljazeera 2017).

I want to focus on those mainly Rohingya Muslim women who experienced a mass exodus in 2017 and till now in 2022 when the Myanmar government-orchestrated a genocide and forced approximately 730,000 people to seek refuge in Bangladesh (Tripura, 2022). Among them, around 76% were women and girls, and most were victims of various sexual and gender-based violence by the Myanmar military. UNHR recognized Rohingyas as refugees, but 32000 Rohingyas are not registered as refugees from two registered Rohingya camps. However, the Rohingyas who came to Bangladesh by dangerously crossing borders, via sea routes at different times were not registered by the UNHCR as refugees and remained "illegal intruders" (Tripura, 2022).

The Myanmar military used rape, genital mutilation, and sexual torture as a weapon to terrorize women to cross by sea. A survivor expresses the terror by saying, 'I think I had been lucky as only three men raped me' (Forbes 2022).

Mbembe's explanation of "Necropower" can be related here "the horror of the state cannot be fully imagined or embraced because the positionality of the state is outside of the life and death" (Mbembe, 2003). The spectacular violence and terror forced them to leave their country of origin and led them to seek shelter in Bangladesh by the sea, where most of the women are dying till now, as UNHCR expressed shock, "in 2022, May among 630 Rohingya who tried to cross porous border women and children constituted 60%" (UNHCR 2022).

Myanmar uses the hostile terrain structure like the sea to push Rohingya to migrate to Bangladesh, making a "space of exception" by exerting violence upon gendering others; what Agamben' explained, the "crisis" enables racialized construction of the enemy and ultimately, removal of the entire group to abandoned zones of indistinction (Agamben, 1998).

Here the sea is the zone of indistinction where the number of dead women is unwitnessed/unknown; thus, recovering the bodies is impossible, so it enables the state to refuse responsibility to avoid accountability for these deaths; both deaths are produced as accidental and to be blamed then on the sea, not the country of origin who are not protecting rather imposing violence (Kovras, I & S. Robins, 2016). Then it has almost erased as a local administrator of Bangladesh remarked after finding an escaped boat from Myanmar on the Bangladeshi coast, "they are unable to swim; this is why they died" (REUTES 2017).

When they died in the sea, a place one cannot think of as a border; the dead illuminate the border as a disguised power that functioned through taking austerity measures or blocking them from the Myanmar state (Mbembe, 2003).

Myanmar's sovereign power and control averted the repercussion of its purposeful pillage by blaming 'accidental causes that make invisible the evidence of regular violence happening in the sea. The objective is to hide the consequences of social phenomena slowly killing racialized others (De Leon, 2015).

### **"Gendered bare life":**

The work by Hosna is the heart of my piece, which teaches us to think about the limit of constructions of "bare life" by Agamben without considering the "social vulnerability" and "gendered notions" that contribute to the devaluing of women life leading them to expose to death (Hosna, 2013). Considering ethnographic examples from the Rohingya women in Bangladesh were those women Living with vulnerabilities in their everyday life in the camps, I reflect on Hosna's critique of the "bare life" construction in the Rohingya context.

It is fundamental to consider gendered vulnerability for the formation of bare life, as they exist in a patriarchal society which creates gender inequality by exposing them to sexual violence because of their statelessness in Bangladeshi society. As she explains, "the extra-legal conditions create certain gender-related distressing experiences" (Hosna, 2013). So, they don't have any legal rights; their lawless conditions restrained them from excess basic rights like health support during emergency health conditions and enhanced sexual violence and patriarchy.

The host country's institutionalized mechanism of "gendered bare" life pushes Rohingya women to death by affecting to an increase in maternal mortality death. According to a study, the data of pregnancy-related death constituted 52 out of 82 between September 2017 and August 2018 in the camps" (Parveen et al. 2019).

In Noakhali district when a sick woman in "Bhashan char", the isolated Rohingya camp, strived to escape to get health service from the Bangladeshi mainland by negotiating with a middleman who left her in the isolated village; the report said the victim named, "Setara was suffering severe fever for 25 days and was so weak" (New-age Bangladesh 2021).

The precarious conditions of Rohingya women as stateless people in Bangladeshi camps demonstrate they are subjected to the host country's regulations in their everyday lives. The absence of country of origins regulation creates an abandoned stateless space for the Rohingya where they always must live outside of the host country's benevolence. As they don't have any rights to citizenship, they are exposed to various forms of injustice and inequality and are subject to death.

### **Socially constructed 'gendered bare life.'**

Echoing Hosna, I also believe sovereign power is not the only creator of "bare life" because only sovereign constructed bare life will give an "incomplete picture" of women in stateless zones (Hosna, 2013). So other social factors are responsible for invoking the social susceptibility to exert control and power upon female bodies. This vulnerability she called "social vulnerability" to construct bare life initiated by smugglers, traffickers, and local and Rohingya men-sponsored

everyday violence; thus, women encountered another form of insecurity. Then, Rohingya women desperately attempt to find an escape route and eventually, they are pushed to borders that let them die.

The hidden menacing threat for Rohingya women in their place of refuge is human trafficking. Traffickers trick the social vulnerability to women for sex slavery, domestic Labour and forced marriages.

According to an AFP report where Bangladeshi police officials estimate "adolescent girls from 15 to 19 age groups are at higher risk to sex trafficking". US state department's report on trafficking suggested Rohingya girls are sent to different neighboring country's capital cities, in Dhaka, Kathmandu and Kolkata, where they are prostituted. After returning home, they are involved in the sex trade; the report by "South China morning post" mentioned Kutupalong camp is thriving in the sex trade" at least 500 prostitutes are living there in the camps. They are at risk of sexually transmitted diseases, as a sex worker said to the "South China Morning Post", "she has taken birth control, but she is in constant fear of getting HIV (The Daily Star 2019)".

Another destination for Rohingya women in Malaysia, where they are subjected to forced and child marriage, in a report by Al Jazeera suggested, "as growing poverty and insecurity creates fewer options for Rohingya they are forced to go to a trafficker for reaching Malaysia to get married". In that report, A volunteer worker blamed the economic factors behind the increase in trafficking and child marriages; she said, "this is happening because the monthly rations are inadequate and there is a limited income opportunity for them" (Al Jazeera 2019).

The Rohingya women face multi-layered abuses by local and Rohingya men.

In the camps within the "humanitarian system" and the growing uncertainties of the future, restrictions of movement increase frustrations among Rohingya men. They often channel it through gender-based violence (Tripura, 2022).

In a report by the new humanitarian, a Rohingya NGO worker named Rozina said, some man came to my house and threatened to stop working; otherwise, they will take me out of my house" she added, "I am scared of my own people" (The New Humanitarian 2021).

Women are subjected to sexual harassment by Bangladeshi men, according to a study, A Rohingya woman said, "we have to get water from the nearby village; the men target us, verbally abuse us and sometimes end up attacking and raping us." The study also mentioned that most women don't know where to complain about the abuses (Tripura, 2022).

The host country treats them as illegal women's bodies which are reduced to 'bare life'; everyone has the "right to kill" them without any legal obligation because their life does not exist 'by the law' as Mbembe argue "Right to kill", as not only being physical death rather the ways the entire female population are relegated to the margins of life, a "space "between life and death, the space where life is so devalued such the death becomes inevitable without need for accountability (Mbembe, 2003).

The violence posed by "social vulnerability" on Rohingya women. Those austerities make them choose dangerous smuggling routes to avoid violence and expose them to death.

As one of the UNHCR officials suggested, "they leave the camps to avoid a difficult living situation in the camps where they are at risk of sexual violence," (The New Humanitarian 2020).

In my piece, I use high-key photography to represent the invisibility of details quotidian Rohingya women's suffering from the trauma and violence they are encountering everyday perpetuated by the sovereign state and the other forces on which the state relies upon to create "gendered bare life", Rohingya men and men of the host country (Mbembe, 2003).

Through my work, I want to pose a question, can a combination of art and Anthropology of migration encourage us to resist empathy and the possibility of the future to address these horrendous atrocities of the so-called "modern era"?

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