Drowned in Silence: State-Engineered Erasure, Smuggling Economies, and the Perilous Maritime Journeys of the Rohingya in Habiburahman's First They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks

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ABSTRACT

The Rohingya crisis in Myanmar illustrates how this Muslim minority community from Myanmar's Rakhine State, were driven to undertake the deadly sea voyages not by choice, but by the systematic destruction of their legal and human existence. Using Habiburahman's memoir *First They Erased Our Name*, the study draws on Edward Said's theory of the Other and Hannah Arendt's philosophy of statelessness to show that the violence of the sea crossings was the direct consequence of state-engineered identity erasure. The Myanmar state's 1982 Citizenship Law stripped the Rohingya of legal recognition, leaving them without documents, rights, or protection and therefore uniquely vulnerable to exploitation by transnational smuggling networks. This paper argues that smuggling networks did not create Rohingya vulnerability rather they profited from conditions that the state had already manufactured. Habiburahman's memoir is read not only as a record of suffering, but also as a political and literary act of resistance. The paper concludes by calling for a fundamental reconceptualization of international responses to statelessness moving beyond humanitarian management toward the restoration of political membership and citizenship rights.

Keywords: Rohingya, statelessness, identity erasure, smuggling networks, maritime displacement, postcolonial theory, Other.

The Rohingya refugee crisis stands today as one of the most severe and protracted humanitarian emergencies of the twenty-first century, produced by decades of state-sponsored persecution and sustained by transnational networks of human traffickers who profit from the misery of those fleeing it. Driven from their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine State by systematic violence, forced displacement, and the deliberate denial of citizenship, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya men, women, and children have been compelled to seek safety across dangerous international borders. They find themselves ensnared by criminal smuggling and trafficking networks operating across the sea routes. As Habiburahman documents with unflinching clarity in *First They Erased Our Name*, persecution and human trafficking are not separate problems that affect the Rohingya community,rather they are structurally linked. The refugee crisis that the Rohingya endure is the direct consequence of their legal erasure and their vulnerability to traffickers is, in turn, the direct consequence of that same erasure.The memoir's title *First They Erased Our Name* is both a biographical statement and a political claim. To erase a name is to remove the very foundation of legal recognition. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which excluded the Rohingya from the country's officially recognized ethnic groups, did not merely take away a document. It performed what philosopher Hannah Arendt called the loss of the "right to have rights", a process involving the removal of a people from the political community that makes rights meaningful. In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she observes:Statelessness in a mass dimension has set before the world, the inescapable and highly puzzling question of whether or not there is such a thing as inalienable human rights, which are independent of any particular political status and only arise out of the mere fact of being human (246).This manufactured legal nothingness delivered the Rohingya directly into the hands of smugglers who understood that a person without legal status has no recourse, and therefore no protection from exploitation.

This paper examines how Habiburahman's memoir illuminates the relationship between state-engineered identity erasure and the maritime smuggling economy that feeds on it. The central argument is that the physical dangers of the Rohingya sea crossing such as the drownings, the debt bondage, and the violence, are not accidents. They are the structurally predictable outcome of statelessness. When a state declares a people legally non-existent, it places them outside every system of protection including legal, humanitarian, and diplomatic system.This paper's theoretical foundation draws on two key frameworks. Edward Said's concept of Othering, developed in Orientalism which explains how the Myanmar state constructed the Rohingya as fundamentally alien within the national body politics. This construction provided the ideological justification for their legal exclusion and physical persecution. Hannah Arendt's analysis of statelessness in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* demonstrates that the destruction of legal personhood is the essential precondition for all

subsequent exploitation. Habiburahman's memoir functions simultaneously as the object of analysis and as an act of resistance against the erasure it documents.Edward Said's *Orientalism* established that defining the Other is always a political act. To label a people as fundamentally different as outsiders, threats, or non-belonging is to legitimise the withdrawal of rights extended to the Self. Said argued that colonial discourse constructed the Orient not as a geographic reality but as a political fiction, designed to justify imperial domination. Myanmar's official discourse consistently described the Rohingya as Bengali immigrants and as illegal settlers from Bangladesh with no historical claim to Burmese territory. This narrative propagated by Myanmar government, maintained across decades of official policy and public propaganda, served the same function as Orientalist discourse. It transformed a community with deep historical roots in the Arakan region into an alien threat that could, with ideological justification, be persecuted, expelled, and eventually eliminated.

Habiburahman's memoir confronts this construction directly. From his earliest childhood memories, he records the official insistence that his people do not belong. He writes,"My name is Habiburahman. I am Rohingya. Throughout my childhood, these words became increasingly dangerous to say out loud" (Habiburahman 3). Here, the danger is not metaphorical. To claim the name Rohingya is to assert a political identity that the state has designated as non-existent. This is Othering in its most literal form. The denial of the name is the denial of the self, and it is the foundation for every subsequent act of violence.

To understand why Rohingya refugees undertook such dangerous sea voyages, it is necessary to understand the systematic erasure that preceded their departure. The memoir traces what may be called an escalating pattern of erasure. Initially, their name is taken, then the documents, then freedom of movement, then economic livelihood, then their physical safety, and finally their land itself. Habiburahman recalls how as a child he was taught to be careful with words, "My father told me never to say 'Rohingya' in front of a soldier or a government official. He said the word itself could bring trouble. But what are we, then, if we cannot say our own name?" (12). This encapsulates the entire logic of the persecution. The suppression of the name is the suppression of the political claim the name carries. Once the name is erased, the legal and historical argument for Rohingya rights is also erased.

The violence escalated through successive phases of military crackdown. Habiburahman describes Operation Nagamin of 1978 and subsequent military operations with the controlled precision of a witness who has spent years trying to make sense of what he survived. He writes, "The soldiers came at night. They burned the houses and took the men. We ran to the border because there was nothing else to do. But the border is not a destination. It is another kind of trap"(63). The image of the border as trap rather than escape is central to understanding the eventual turn to the sea. Land routes, controlled by military forces and reinforced by bilateral arrangements between Myanmar and Bangladesh, were not viable. The sea represented the only corridor the state had not yet fully sealed. By the time Habiburahman himself decides to flee by sea, the erasure is complete. He is, in the fullest Arendtian sense, a stateless person.

The relationship between the Rohingya community and the maritime smuggling networks that facilitated their passage across the ocean constitutes one of the most illuminating dimensions of this crisis. Media discourses often interpret this relationship through a narrowly criminal lens, foregrounding the exploitation of vulnerable refugees by transnational human trafficking. Rohingya refugees who wished to reach Malaysia, the most common destination, needed to pay bribes ranging from several hundred to several thousand dollars. For economically deprived communities burdened by arbitrary taxation, the sum was enormous. Families sold land they were not legally permitted to own, borrowed from relatives across borders, and entered debt arrangements with smugglers that would prove catastrophic once they were at sea.

Habiburahman's account of his encounter with the smuggling network captures the transactional coldness of the arrangement. He writes:

The men who organised the boats did not look at us with pity. They looked at us the way a merchant looks at goods. They counted us, weighed our money, and told us to get on the boat. For them, we were cargo, not human beings. We were packed so tightly that there was hardly any space to move or breathe (192).

This describes the actual social relation of the crossing. The smugglers owned the means of escape, the refugees needed those means, and the transaction was conducted entirely on terms favourable to the smugglers. The refugee had no negotiating power because they had no alternative.

Habiburahman also documents the terror of these transit arrangements. Refugees who could not pay were not released; they were detained, sometimes tortured, and threatened with sale to labour traffickers, "They told us that if our families did not send money, they would sell us to the fishing boats. Some people were taken away and never came back. We did not know if they were dead or somewhere else, working as slaves."(203). This testimony illustrates the full continuum of exploitation that the smuggling economy encompasses. The voyage that starts as a paid passage becomes, for those who cannot pay, an entry into forced labour, a new form of bondage directly enabled by the legal invisibility created by statelessness.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, has argued that the most thoroughly silenced and excluded by dominant power structures are most acutely found among women. Spivak's famous question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' refers not only to the literal capacity for speech, but to the structural conditions that determine whose speech is heard, recorded, and accorded authority. In the context of Rohingya displacement, this question takes on urgent material significance. If the Rohingya as a people are rendered subaltern by the Myanmar state, then Rohingya women occupy the most deeply silenced position within that subaltern. Rohingyan women are doubly

othered by the state that denies their national identity and by patriarchal social structures that limit their agency within the community.

Habiburahman's memoir, written from a male perspective, does not systematically centre the experiences of women and this absence is itself significant. Yet the text contains enough testimony to indicate the gendered dimensions of vulnerability at sea. Women and girls on the smuggling boats were subjected to forms of exploitation that exceeded those experienced by men, including sexual violence at the hands of smugglers and, upon arrival at transit camps, coerced entry into prostitution as a means of paying off smuggling debts.

The memoir makes explicit the differential treatment of bodies according to their perceived economic value. Habiburahman observes that the smugglers categorised their passengers, those with money or connections received marginally better treatment and those without were treated as fully expendable. Women and children were tortured. Habib writes, “Women experienced torture that only they can know. Caught in a trap, some preferred to jump into the water and drown themselves rather than fall into the repulsive criminal hands of these men”(18). The vulnerability of Rohingya women at sea is not a separate problem from the larger crisis. Rather it represents the most intensified and embodied expression. The maritime route does not merely expose existing gendered inequalities. It amplifies them within confined, lawless, and hyper-precarious spaces.

Habiburahman's memoir through a postcolonial lens depicts the act of writing itself as a form of resistance. Said's work, particularly *Culture and Imperialism*, emphasised that those who have been colonised or persecuted must speak back to the dominant narrative producing counter-representations that challenge and disrupt the stories that dominant powers talk about the Other. Habiburahman's memoir is precisely such a counter-representation. It speaks back to the Myanmar state, to international indifference, and to the broader erasure of Rohingya voices from official discourse.

The memoir's counter-narrative purpose is declared from its opening pages. Habiburahman writes, “I want people to know that Rohingya exists. I want them to know who we are, what was done to us, and why we had to run. If I do not tell this story, who will?" (1). This question is not rhetorical. It points to the structural conditions under which Rohingya testimony is produced and received. International media, human rights organisations, and academic researchers have all documented aspects of the Rohingya crisis, but they document it from the outside. Habiburahman speaks from within, with the authority of the person who lived the history that others merely observed. Habiburahman's memoir also serves as evidence in a context where evidence is systematically suppressed. The Myanmar state has repeatedly denied systematic persecution. International observers have been denied access, and survivors have been killed or silenced. In this context, the memoir functions as a contribution to the evidentiary record that future prosecutions of crimes against humanity might draw upon.

The sea journeys Habiburahman describes did not take place in a vacuum. They occurred in a regional and global context in which multiple actors like neighbouring states, international organisations, and Western governments made choices that either directly contributed to Rohingya vulnerability or failed to mitigate it.

Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia which are the primary destination and transit countries for Rohingya sea crossings adopted policies during the height of the crisis that effectively reinforced the smuggling economy rather than disrupting it. The 'boat push-back' policies, under which naval vessels intercepted Rohingya boats and towed them back into international waters with minimal food or water, condemned refugees to extended periods at sea. Habiburahman is acutely aware of this international failure. He writes with controlled bitterness about the gap between the world's rhetorical commitment to human rights and its practical indifference to Rohingya lives. Habib writes "They say there are laws that protect people like us. They say no one should be stateless, no one should be persecuted for who they are. But these laws are words on paper. When the soldiers came, the laws did not come with them" (159).

For those Rohingya who survived the sea crossing arrives in a new country did not bring an end to statelessness. The legal and social precarity persisted. In Malaysia, Rohingya refugees arrived without legal status, unable to work formally, unable to access public services, and vulnerable to detention by immigration authorities. Habiburahman describes his arrival in Malaysia with emotional complexity that resists easy categorisation as relief:

I had escaped the soldiers and the sea. But I had not escaped being Rohingya. In Malaysia, I was still nobody. I had no papers, no rights, no future that I could see. The difference was that here, the soldiers were not coming to burn my house. That was the only difference. (217)

This reflection powerfully captures the Arendtian dilemma of the stateless refugee who has crossed a border but has not crossed into the community of rights. Physical safety without legal status is an improvement over physical danger without legal status but it is not a solution. It is a different form of the same fundamental problem.

This paper has argued that the perilous sea journeys of the Rohingya, documented in Habiburahman's *First They Erased Our Name*, cannot be understood apart from the state-engineered process of identity erasure that produced them. Through the theoretical lens of Said's Other and Arendt's statelessness, the maritime crossing emerges not as a desperate gamble but as the terminal stage of a long, systematic process of exclusion that began with the suppression of a name and ended with the commodification of a body at sea.

The smuggling networks that profited from Rohingya desperation did not create the conditions of their vulnerability. they inherited those conditions from the Myanmar state, which manufactured statelessness as a political tool. Against this erasure, Habiburahman's memoir stands as a powerful counter-narration. To write the memoir is to refuse the erasure it documents. It is a demand for a fundamental rethinking of how international law and humanitarian practice address statelessness.

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