

Book Review

The Rohingya Crisis: A Moral, Ethnographic and Policy Assessment, By Norman K. Swazo, Sk. Tawfique M. Haque, Md. Mahbulul Haque, Tasmia Nower, published by Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2021, XII+78 pages.

The refugee crisis and forced displacement have been continuous events happening since time immemorial. The two World Wars and the successive waves of refugees grabbed the attention of 20th century International Relations and thus, the discourse emerged to address, assess, and identify the causes and effects of refugee crises across the globe. According to the UNHCR, by the end of 2020, there were 26.4 million refugees around the world.¹ Rohingya refugee crisis is among the largest and fastest refugee crises where over 700,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar to avoid the *Tatmadaw*'s genocidal persecutions in late 2017. Rohingyas are considered as the world's largest stateless population as the UN Secretary General called them the 'most discriminated people in the World'.² Bangladesh and several other Asian countries are hosting Rohingyas since the 1970s. Along with 135 other ethnic groups, Rohingyas were stripped off of their citizenship in Myanmar by the government's enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law which considered them as "Illegal Bengali Migrants." According to the latest "Clearing Operations", Myanmar security forces set fire to eighty villages and emptied 176 of 471 Rohingya villages in Northern Rakhine.³ The UN Human Rights Commissioner termed the situation in Rakhine State "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing."⁴

Scholars around the world and the international community were taken by surprise as the Rohingya crisis emerged in 2017 in the latest incident. Francis Wade, a freelance journalist of Burmese politics, wrote in his book, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence*, on the predicament about the Rohingyas. Wade perceived the Rohingya identity as a "political construction"—a sort of propaganda, which is in quest for crusading or militant Islam trying to islamize Burma."⁵ Thus, the books shed light on the ethnoreligious identity politics in Burma revolving around the Rohingyas. Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari, in his book *The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction*, wrote about the barbaric actions taken against the Rohingyas in Rakhine State and argues that the international

¹ Sean Fleming, "This is the global refugee situation, in numbers", available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/unhcr-how-many-refugees/>, accessed on 29 August, 2021.

² "Myanmar Rohingya: What do you need to know about the crisis", *BBC*, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-4156656>, accessed on 3 September 2021.

³ Shakeeb Asrar, "Rohingya Crisis explained in maps", *Al Jazeera*, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/28/rohingya-crisis-explained-in-maps/>, accessed on 03 September 2021.

⁴ UNHCR, "UN Human Rights chief points to 'text book example of ethnic cleansing' in Myanmar", available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar#.WfJRrltSy70>, accessed on 3 September 2021.

⁵ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim other*, London: Zed Books, 2017.

community must ensure their repatriation with full citizenship to their ancestral homeland.⁶ Mohd Aminul Karim's book, *Genocide and Geopolitics of the Rohingya Crisis*, highlights the ineffectiveness of the UN system to deal with the Rohingya crisis while the weakness is used by Myanmar to avoid international repercussions with the support of China, India and Russia. The author provides suggestions for certain policy options to alleviate the current situation of the crisis.⁷ So, over the years, since the crisis emerged, the academia was taken by the storm and scholarship on Rohingya crisis became a pivotal topic for scholarly discussion to understand different dynamics of the crisis as well as looking for the potential solution of it. Thus, all the three books mentioned earlier are previous works regarding the topic of policy option formulation, identity politics issue and legal aspect of citizenship.

Managing the world's largest refugee crisis at the doorstep of a country like Bangladesh is a great challenge itself, but many other concerns mentioned above came into being as part and parcel of this humanitarian crisis too. Illegal arms trade and drug peddling, human trafficking, women and children abuse, food security strains, violence and lack of security in the camp area directly impact the refugees and the host community. Sustaining the large population in an inadequate space created environmental hazards and triggered mass biodiversity damages, deforestation and rise of pollution. Drinkable water scarcity, infectious disease spread, and the fear of pandemic breakout are also real possibilities in the camp region. All these factors are leading to a conflicting relationship with the host community in the Cox's Bazar area. Maintaining law and order, ensuring everyone's security and preventing misuse of this stateless vast population for malicious purposes like radicalization and extremism are difficult tasks to pull off without adequate policy planning and implementation of those in time.

In this regard, different frameworks and academic assessments and policy papers have emerged in the last four years to analyze the crisis from different paradigms and perspectives to understand and provide a potential solution to address the crisis. This book *The Rohingya Crisis: A Moral, Ethnographic and Policy Assessment* intends to look into the history of persecution of the Rohingyas due to their contested ethnic national identity crisis in Myanmar while the initial chapters address the geopolitical crisis morphed in South Asia by the event. Given the current circumstances and the concern that emerged from this crisis, it is important to study the history and navigate through policy options carefully to find out possible solutions to resolve the crisis. Hence, this book provides adequate data about the subject and sheds some light for scholars, academics and policymakers to show the way forward.

The book contains 78 pages, along with the foreword, the book has major three parts discussed about different perspectives of the crisis: moral, philosophical,

⁶ Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari, *The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction*, Markfield: Kube Publishing, 2018.

⁷ Mohd Aminul Karim, *Genocide and Geopolitics of the Rohingya Crisis*, Dhaka: Nova Publication, 2020.

public policy and historical analysis. In the foreword, Dr Syed Amir Albar, Former Foreign Minister of Malaysia, mentioned that this book provides a fair and balanced portrayal of the actual picture on the complexity and intertwined critical problems and challenges of the crisis in the South Asian context. The three authors, in three different chapters, have given mutually exclusive discussions on philosophical, legal, moral, geopolitical, and socio-cultural grounds; and lastly, they have also asked the future of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. The authors took several key aspects of the issue into considerations while providing a clear discussion about the potential stakeholders and their roles in the possible crisis resolution in the future.

The book uses qualitative analysis to illustrate the arguments through substantial empirical validation from legal and historical contexts. The authors write on the subjects they covered with in-depth extensive research to present their respective arguments throughout the book. The three chapters provided distinctive arguments on three separate issues. In chapter one, Norman K. Swazo, highlighted the “Scandal of Refugees” to discuss three policy options for moral philosophers, political scientists and possible way outs to address a refugee crisis in the light of the Myanmar crisis. The second chapter written by SK. Tawfique, M. Haque and Tasmia Nower evaluated the harsh reality of the geopolitics where humanitarian crisis was suppressed by the major powers in the region and they turned a blind eye, while Bangladesh pursued a peaceful and fruitful solution to the Rohingya crisis. Lastly, in the third chapter, Md. Mahbubul Haque explained the Rohingya alienation due to the racial, ethnic as well as religious identity by the Burmese governments since their independence as Rohingyas remained on the wrong side of history.

The Authors of the book were to be appreciated for their appropriation of language and kept their respective chapters well-articulated with the literary art of the book. The book has covered multiple disciplines, so it lacks a general framework. This makes the writings inconsistent but yet elaborative in nature that any enthusiastic reader can go through the book and get a clear picture. For example, the first chapter discusses the moral ethics and international law to explain the legal narratives of the Rohingya crisis. The author extensively discussed the UN Refugee convention, statements of Myanmar governments in the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council in their attempt to question the citizenship of the Rohingyas systematically which was comprehended each argument were backed by precise information and evidence. Rightly the author pointed out the ambiguity in international law, moral philosophy and policy to address crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide, and exclusion from identity politics though these disciplines remain relatable among them. The author showed how the Rohingyas were labelled as ‘terrorists’ by Myanmar authorities and their military operations were their ‘counterinsurgency’ action. Bangladesh, on the other hand, identifies Rohingyas as “forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals”. To explain the communal ‘narrative’ of identity politics in Myanmar, the author incorporated “constructed meaning” citing Neil MacGregor’s work; while challenging several questions about this disputed historical narrative like “Who are

the Rohingyas?”, “Who are true Myanmar’s citizens?”, “What ethnicities are legally welcomed to Myanmar?” and “What religious convictions are to be tolerated?”⁸ The Author points out, Burmese Buddhist monk U Rarzar’s interview about religious rhetoric was used to securitize, dehumanize and criminalize the Rohingyas with their Muslim identity. This victimization of Rohingyas for a long time eventually leads to atrocities against them systematically from their own government.

In the second chapter, the authors came forward with the geopolitical conundrum regarding the Rohingya crisis. Authors highlighted the Chinese “BRI” and India’s “Look East Policy” placed Myanmar into a pivotal position in their respective goals and interests on the regional and global stage. This chapter sheds light on how and why there is a public policy dilemma for all the countries as far as the Rohingya crisis is a concern. The authors explained India and China’s geopolitical interests with Myanmar through a realist paradigm in which all three parties aim to maximize their respective national interests as they have become the pivots with their strategic interests and foreign policies. In a realist anarchical world, India and China both intend to maximize their security and establish themselves as the new ‘Pivot’ in Asia.⁹ India’s interest in Myanmar is mostly due to their “Look East Policy” which intends to build a physical connection with Southeast Asia and integrate with the ASEAN economy. Myanmar is a key state for China’s BRI projects in Asia for investment, connectivity and economic corridor. Both the countries used the Rohingya crisis to bolster their relation with Myanmar and maximize their strategic interests by overlooking the humanitarian concern of the crisis. The authors shed light on Bangladesh’s repeated attempts to pursue the Myanmar government for the return of Rohingyas through peaceful and sustainable repatriation, specifically efforts made through three MOUs in 1992-1993, 2009, and 2011 which later lead to the tense bilateral relationship. The authors put forward the bilateral MOUs and, UNHCR efforts ending in vain as the Rohingyas were reluctant to return. The Burmese authorities’ intention not to repatriate them seemed evident in the chapter. The chapter mentioned ASEAN’s “non-interference” policy for member states’ internal matters kept them away from taking effective initiatives to resolve the crisis while individual states like Malaysia and Indonesia were strongly vocal. But Myanmar is able to get away with international sanctions and embargos due to China, Russia, and India’s support.

However, the authors neglected another active stakeholder in the crisis, the USA’s efforts which were missing from their discussion; but described the repeated efforts from Bangladesh. Due to veto from China and Russia, Myanmar did not face much pressure from the international community and the help from Chinese and

⁸ Norman K Swazo, “The Rohingya Crisis: A Moral-Philosophical Assessment”, in *The Rohingya Crisis: A Moral, Ethnographic, and Public policy Assessment*, New York: Routledge, 2021.

⁹ SK. Tawfique M. Haque, “The Rohingya Crisis and Geopolitics: A Public Policy Conundrum” in *The Rohingya Crisis: A Moral, Ethnographic, and Public policy Assessment*, New York: Routledge, 2021.

Indian investments sustained their economy. At the end of the chapter, the authors accepted the sad truth of Bangladesh's scarcity of resources to keep up and cope with the Rohingya crisis as well as the support from the international community. The authors could have stressed more on the public policy management of the crisis and diplomatic efforts from the Bangladesh government to provide the reader with a void in understanding the conundrum in-depth.

In the third and last chapter, Md. Mahbul Haque addressed the long intensification of discrimination of the Rohingyas since independence and their experience of alienation from the government due to their ancestral ethno-religious identity through progressive citizenship laws. The author drifted the readers through historical analysis to describe the origin of the mistrust and hatred which eventually led to this long-standing crisis. The author mentioned two major factors: ethnocentrism and Islamophobia behind the Rohingya refugee crisis that led to decades of citizenship denial and systematic deprivation.¹⁰ The Rohingyas have faced long discrimination since the 1982 Citizenship Law enactment on a racial basis. This is not just the case for Rohingyas but also seen in the case of Kachin, Karen, and Shan ethnic groups as well. In Myanmar, 'Kala' or 'Kalar' term signifies the 'Muslim' or South Asian descent, refers to the racist and derogatory narrative. But the Article-1 of International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, specifically mentions racial discrimination encompasses actions "based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin."¹¹ Historically, in Myanmar Rohingya people faced prejudice and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. This ethnocentric victimization contributed significantly towards the rise of ultra-nationalism and instigated ethnic conflict which eventually led to the massive Rohingya exodus in 2017.

From the social sciences standpoint, racial differences have been disregarded from the discipline though modern states still use the "Myth" for political purposes. The author has tried to explain the racial factor behind Myanmar's citizenship denial for Rohingyas that clearly indicates the victimization of Rohingyas in the present-day Myanmar. The chapter goes down deep in social anthropology and sociology to understand the role of race and ethnicity to describe historical xenophobic policies asserted by the Burmese authorities. *Time* magazine covered the "969 movements" and Ashin Wirthu's militaristic Buddhism to justify 'Rohingyaphobic'¹² rhetoric to instigate communal clash in the Arakan as author discussed the present-day condition in Myanmar.¹³ Interestingly, the author added an intriguing analogy in the study as he

¹⁰ Tasmia Nower, "A Future for the Rohingya in Myanmar" in *The Rohingya Crisis: A Moral, Ethnographic, and Public Policy Assessment*, New York: Routledge, 2021.

¹¹ OHCHR, "International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination", available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cerd.aspx>, accessed on 1 September 2021.

¹² Tasmia Nower, op. cit.

¹³ Hannah Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror: How militant monks are fueling anti-Muslim violence in Asia", available at: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/asia/0,16641,20130701,00.html>, accessed on 31 August 2021.

has taken the South Asia-Southeast Asia, Muslim–Hindu Asia and Buddhist Asia and Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid Asia context of geographical factors. The nationalist programme taken by President Ne Win’s quest for racially pure Burma incited the process of dehumanization and demonization of minorities in Myanmar. The policy was supported by the military Junta and its supporter group’s political ambition as part of their loyalty towards the regime leader. Thus, the enactment of the Citizenship law of 1982 made ethnic Muslim minority Rohingya *de jure* world’s largest stateless community in the country of their ancestors. Finally, the author pointed out the lack of human rights mechanism, societal hatred, and suspicious perception towards the Rohingya community which expanded scope for systemic atrocities and the perpetrators got away with that in the name of national integration and racial purity.

Overall, the book was organized in a meticulous manner and argument placements were strong in the writing. The empirical data analysis was from authentic sources though the referencing was not well managed by the authors. But yet the authors made the reading enjoyable for the readers in a way they put forwarded with their arguments and placed well-articulated enunciation of the past and present in their chapters. The book seems to lack in providing more weight in the discussion on ‘nationalism’, ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ as all the authors mostly relied on that analogy for explaining the persecution of the Rohingyas in their work. Nevertheless, the book does not provide a clear idea on what can be the way forward for the crisis resolution as the title suggest, rather the book remains clearly in the discussion of the crisis origin or current situation. Writers like David Lewis, Rey Ty, Utpala Rahman, Anas Ansar etc. covered a wide range of areas covered with much more intensive arguments provided with historical analysis and way forward for upcoming days to the resolution of the crisis. For example, David Lewis talked about the Bangladesh perspective of its own refugee crisis and highlighted the formal and informal response from both ends considering changing dynamics of the crisis to explore different narratives.¹⁴ Scholar Rey Ty presented the cause and effect of the problem with a proposal with agenda for the resolution of the crisis.¹⁵ On the other hand, Anas Ansar placed British colonial rule effect along with the troubled ethnic history of Myanmar coupling with post 9/11 realities to escalate the ethno-religious tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Myanmar.¹⁶

However, the book addressed three distinctive, mutually exclusive, rigorous and precise areas to analyze the Rohingya crisis from different perspectives. However, the book is not free of criticism. The book has academic and disciplinary inconsistency from chapter to chapter thus making it critical to understand with a

¹⁴ David Lewis, “Humanitarianism, Civil Society and the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 10, 2019, pp. 1884-1902.

¹⁵ Rey Ty, “The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Context, Problems, Solutions”, *International Journal on Human Rights*, Vol. 16, No. 9, 2019, pp. 49-62.

¹⁶ Anas Ansar, “The Unfolding of Belonging, Exclusion and Exile: A Reflection on the History of Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Southeast Asia”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2020, pp. 441-456.

singular paradigm. The book is compact, precise and rigorous in respective discussion but at times, the chapters' discussion seemed repetitive. The book title suggests leading towards policy options for academics and practitioners while all three chapters ended with no clear policy recommendations to resolve the crisis. The book's pessimism ignored the optimistic options out of the equation thus leading it to be a study of Rohingya crisis history rather than making it a guiding book for policy formulation in the future.

In conclusion, the book *The Rohingya Crisis: A Moral, Ethnographic and Policy Assessment* can be considered as a notable contribution in the field of refugee migration study to understand the underlying factors of the world's largest stateless community crisis. With its multidisciplinary approach, the authors sketched different considerable factors for further academic study. Hence, the book can be a good read for large readers from different disciplines. Due to logically manifested arguments and comprehensiveness this book can be recognized as a noteworthy contribution in the field of refugeehood and migration. The book stands as a bridge between moral philosophy, ethnographic study and public policy discipline incorporate with the refugee migration field to understand the past, analyze the present to find the way for the future.

Reviewed by
Md. Nahiyah Shajid Khan
Research Officer
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)