



***First, They Erased Our Name* and the Politics of Witnessing the Rohingya Genocide**

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.12>

Abstract:

The Rohingya have been described as ‘the world’s largest stateless population’ and are in the midst of an urgent refugee crisis. In *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks* (2018) the only available memoir in English by a Rohingya, Habiburrahman, its protagonist, exposes the precarious, lived reality of his marginalised, ostracized community and reveals a hidden apartheid-like state in Burma (now Myanmar). This paper uses the frame of testimonial life writing to describe the generic classification of this text and embeds it within a larger existing global tradition of using nonfictional, subaltern narratives to shape public opinion on ongoing humanitarian crises and record events erased from official histories. Habiburrahman’s account of atrocities is treated in this study not just as the story of an individual’s triumph against adversity but as a representative voice for a silenced people. The text shows the Rohingya community trapped within the intersection of statelessness, persecution, and racism, suggesting that the ‘vulnerability’ of a minority community itself is manufactured and enforced. This paper reads Habiburrahman’s text as a strategic tool of survival, resistance and human rights advocacy. This aligns it with similar strategies adopted by individuals and communities from the margins of history and literature to ensure the continuation of their existence by generating empathy, awareness and meaningful action in distant ‘others’ worldwide.

Keywords: *Testimonio*, Life Writing, Human Rights Literature, Genocide, Rohingya.

Introduction

First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks (henceforth *First*) was first published in French in 2018; this paper cites the English translation published in 2019. It is the most recent and the only available atrocity narrative (at the time of writing this essay in 2026) to have emerged from Myanmar on the Rohingya crisis. The text is based on the oral testimony of Habiburahman, a Rohingya living as a refugee in Australia, which he narrated to the French journalist Sophie Ansel, who has a long record of working with persecuted minorities in Myanmar. Ansel first met him in 2006 while investigating the living conditions of refugees and migrant labourers from Myanmar who were eking out a precarious existence in Malaysia, where Habiburahman too was living as an illegal immigrant after being forced to flee Myanmar. As the violence against the Rohingya escalated in 2012, Ansel helped Habiburahman, who was then seeking asylum in Australia, to write and publish this text as a way to narrativize and thereby highlight to a global audience, the suffering of his people. Initially published in French, the text was translated into English by a U.K. based freelance translator, Andrea Reece.

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic and religious minority calling the Rakhine (formerly Arakan) state of Myanmar (formerly Burma) their home, and they have been the long-standing target of a systematic genocide conducted by the Sit-Tat/Tatmadaw or the state armed forces of Myanmar and the majoritarian Rakhine Buddhist population. The choice between the names Burma and Myanmar is itself not a neutral one. The latter was imposed by the military junta in 1989 and has since been read by many as a tacit endorsement of the regime that renamed the country, while the former remains the preferred usage of much of the democratic opposition and diaspora (Gallagher and Selth). This paper uses Burma/Myanmar throughout to register that unresolved political contest rather than resolve it. Although most contemporary accounts of the injustice suffered by

the Rohingya community limit their analysis to the events of 2012-17, which was when word of the situation first caught the world's attention, the text analysed in this paper lays bare the fact that this was not an isolated incident. However, the latest product of a sustained campaign of organised violence and state sponsored racist ethno-religious discourse that has its roots in the history of the previous century. The radical ultranationalist Rakhine Buddhists frame the Rohingya as illegal immigrants who migrated from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) during British colonial rule and immediately after independence. They claim that the term Rohingya itself is a recent invention of Islamists with no records to support a longer history. However, certain official British records as early as the 18th century note that the Arakan region had a population of "Mohammedans" that called "themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan," which disproves the illegal immigrant narrative (qtd. in Zarni and Cowley 690). These claims of historical evidence in colonial archives were not enough to stop the emergence of anti-Rohingya hate speech in the Rakhine state which erupted into an unrestrained spate of violence. The situation was exacerbated by viral disinformation spreading on social media sites such as Facebook, which was flooded by the racist rhetoric of religious ultranationalists like the infamous Buddhist monk U Wirathu. When a Muslim extremist outfit calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked government buildings in 2017, the situation escalated further with the Rakhine Buddhist majority reacting in panic as the Muslim population had not put up organised resistance on this scale in recent memory. The attack created a perfect opportunity for State forces by providing them with a 'just' cause to begin a genocidal campaign against the entire community. The intensity of the violent frenzy forced around a million Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh to escape the massacre, where they sought shelter in refugee camps such as the one in Cox's Bazar, which is today one of the world's largest refugee centres plagued by crime,

overpopulation and resource scarcity. The Rohingyas have been described with the ignominious and tragic title of the “World’s Largest Stateless Population” (“The Rohingya”). In the present age of nation-states, it is difficult to imagine the identity of any human being without automatically associating it with their nationality. However, even after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has entitled all human beings with the basic ‘Right to Nationality’, there continue to exist millions of people in the world who are officially stateless, spectral beings whom no nation will accept as their own. These people are forced to eke out a precarious existence in the in-betweenness of the larger political manoeuvrings of nation-states, for all purposes a ‘stateless people’.

But how is statelessness manufactured? After all, it is not as if the stateless were born in a non-place, a land that belongs to no nation. This paper develops from an understanding that the primary ingredient in the identity of a stateless person is that of a lack, often constructed and sustained by citizenship laws so powerful that they can render living humans completely vulnerable to all manner of persecution once they become invisible and unwanted ‘others’ in the eyes of the state. It examines Habiburrahman’s memoir as a form of testimonial life writing, showing how it functions – as a witness statement, and as a political strategy of human rights advocacy – to bring the invisibility of a people and the genocide perpetrated against them, to the attention of the world – wherein witnessing of the genocide becomes a way of attesting to their claim for justice.

As the Rohingya have no written history and have been prevented by the state from educating themselves, there is a dearth of literature chronicling the experiences of Rohingya individuals growing up in Myanmar that reveal the realpolitik of how statelessness is constructed and enforced. Habiburrahman’s testimony fills this gap by chronicling the history of his community’s

prosecution by detailing the corporeality of the daily indignities and pervasive fear that is the mainstay of the Rohingya experience, and his story is vital because it is not just an individual's narrative. However, the shared tale of the tragic fate suffered by several generations that seeks to ensure the preservation of their community. Part of what Barbara Harlow (qtd. in Kaplan 120) calls "resistance literature... a body of writing that has been marginalised in literary studies: writing marked by geopolitical situation", Habiburrahman's memoir is an atrocity narrative where the victim performs the act of witnessing in which he recounts and reenacts the trauma experienced by himself and his community. He functions in this text as the principal witness who moves from victimhood to resistance by voicing and reconstructing the experience of not just his own physical and psychological suffering. However, the historic persecution of his entire community. Evidence of this link between individual suffering and collective trauma is to be found in the memoir's preface, where it says: "This book is not only my story. It is the chronicle of a genocide." (6). It can also be noticed in the conflation of the personal pronoun 'I' with collective pronouns such as "we" and "our" in the narrative, where the singular is universalised. This same principle is at work in the title of the text "First they erased our name" where the collective pronoun "our name" refers to the erasure in 1982 of the Rohingya community's name from list of officially recognised national races in Myanmar. The author here becomes the voice that represents millions of Rohingya worldwide who have been forced to flee their homes, who have been effaced from state records and remain nameless, and the thousands of silent dead lying in mass graves. Even though the publishing house chooses to promote the text as a memoir (which usually focuses on the private, interior life of the author), a decision that was most probably made by the marketing and sales team as it is currently one of the best-selling literary

genres, this paper is built on the premise that Habiburrahman's narrative can be better understood as a form of testimonial life writing.

This paper is written in three sections. In the first, I discuss the form of testimonial life writing in order to justify my attribution of the term to Habiburrahman's memoir. In the second, I offer a background to this text by presenting the tradition of resistance narratives in Burma/Myanmar, before going on, in the third section, to a close reading of *First, They Erased Our Name*, illustrating its unique politics as a work of personal witnessing and a testimony of collective Rohingya experience. In the process, I suggest that reading texts like these, written against unambiguously established human rights violations, involves a kind of politics which the reader is as unable to escape as is the author and those involved in its making and circulation. *First*, draws the reader into its unique personal and collective witnessing (already supported by scribe, translator and publisher), expanding the corpus of witnesses for whom the text is a fleshing out and endorsement of a story that is often actively suppressed or remains invisible because of the peripheral status of the location.

Testimonial Life Writing

The term testimonial life writing emerges from theoretical discussions surrounding the work that the non-fictional genre of life narratives seeks to perform in the public sphere. Paul John Eakin, a leading theorist in Auto/Biographical studies (a field later subsumed under Life Writing studies), writes of the expanding use of confession as a preferred form in our times:

Critics have coined the umbrella term *life writing* to cover the protean forms of contemporary personal narrative, including interviews, profiles, ethnographies, case studies, diaries, Web pages, and so on. (Eakin, *Ethics of Life Writing* 1)

Eakin's scholarship reveals an important trajectory: when autobiographical narratives emerged as a field of inquiry during the 1970s, they occupied a marginal position within literary studies. By the turn of the century, however, literary critics like Eakin himself had successfully elevated their literary status. As the world entered the 21st century and the post-modernist school of thought established itself in academia, theoretical discussions on life writing came to be centred around the subjectivity of the genre and as a consequence "literary scholars working on the field of life writing have often neglected the historical interest of their material" (Eakin, *Writing Life Writing* 76). Eakin here allows for two "exceptions", that of the "Holocaust memoir and testimonio. where the evidentiary authority of ego-documents is recognized and stressed", (*Writing Life Writing* 76) It is the latter genre, testimonio. that I have drawn on to analyse the Rohingya memoir in this paper.

The term is derived from the Spanish *testimonio* whose breadth and scope is explained by the Latin American literary critic George Yúdice as:

An authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation... the witness portrays his or her own experiences as an agent (rather than as a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (17)

The distinction between "agent" and "representative" is crucial here. Yúdice's formulation suggests that while a representative speaks *for* a community in an authorised capacity, an agent acts *from within* a collective experience. Habiburrahman embodies this agential position: rather than adopting the passive role of spokesperson delegated by others, he seizes the authority to narrate his own testimony and, in doing so, realises the possible impact of his voice. This represents a reclamation of agency from a situation that systematically denies it. I use the term

‘testimonial life writing’ instead of *testimonio* in an attempt to liberate the form from its Latin American roots and deploy it where official state history has turned a blind eye and justice remains unserved. With the end of the Cold War, the radical potential of the *testimonio*’s written form seems to have been challenged, and indeed replaced, by new forms and media such as smartphone vlogging on the Internet, while the original political urgency that produced the *testimonio* narratives has also dissipated, leaving the form deprived of the ideological sustenance that originally shaped it.

In this paper, I retrieve the testimonial generic identity in order to understand and explain how a testimonial performance is enacted in another part of the world to narrativise another ‘subaltern’ community’s tale of trauma and survival in the hitherto unstudied memoir, *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks*, using the ideas of the literary and cultural critic, John Beverley, a founding figure of *testimonio* criticism, who suggests that the form no longer remains constrained to the continent of its origin and has been adopted by the ‘subaltern’ across the world, individuals and communities who exist at:

the margins of literature, representing, in particular, those subjects - the child, the “native”, the woman, the insane, the criminal, the proletarian- excluded from authorised representation when it was a question of speaking and writing for themselves. (25)

Testimonial Life Writing in Burma/Myanmar

Around the final decades of the last century, two parallel yet seemingly unconnected developments in fields of international justice and literary studies took place. Their intersection was marked by the postcolonial, feminist literary critics, Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer, in

Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition (2004). They commented on both developments and claimed:

Life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims. These two contemporary phenomena—human rights as the privileged mode of addressing human suffering and the rise in popularity of published life narratives—have commonly been understood to exist within the separate domains of politics and literature, respectively. (1-2)

Smith and Schaffer's crucial intervention is to argue against this disciplinary separation. They contend that human rights discourse and published life narratives should not be understood as occupying distinct spheres but rather as intertwined through shared moral, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions. This theoretical move opens space for understanding how personal testimony functions not merely as literary expression or historical evidence, but as a vehicle for justice claims. The Rohingya testimony examined here exemplifies this convergence: it operates simultaneously as memoir (literary form), as historical record (evidentiary claim), and as human rights advocacy (political intervention).

In what might be seen as a prelude to this phenomenon, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 was awarded to the Guatemalan Civil War's (1960-96) atrocity witness Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous Mayan Human Rights activist, who gained international recognition as the subject of one of the most iconic and controversial Latin American testimonios written by anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983). Menchú's Nobel award is symbolic of the official legitimisation of the merger between Human Rights and Literature through the genre I choose to call 'testimonial life writing'.

This dual development in global humanities and Human Rights is made visible in subaltern narratives on Burma/Myanmar published from the 1990s onwards. Their explicit intention was never for individual authors to gain wealth or fame (though few did). Instead these narratives were marketed as expressions of a benign endeavour meant to publicize the humanitarian crisis, so far confined within the country by junta censorship and isolationist policies, to a global reading public, inviting emotional investment in the cause of a democratic Burma/Myanmar. Evidence of this kind of writing can be found in *Freedom from Fear*, a collection of articles, letters and interviews from the 1991 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was then a prisoner of the dictatorship in Burma. The global publicity and moral outrage produced by the junta's house arrest of Suu Kyi and brutal suppression of her NLD (National League for Democracy) party members as well as the student-led 8888 democracy movement, was the catalyst that created the conditions for these accounts to be published.

Many of these texts and tracts which are committed to the cause of fighting against the tyrannical rule of military dictators who had been traumatizing the country for more than half a century are explicitly political and veer towards propaganda in their polemical use of language and rhetoric. Their literary quality is questionable, neither are most of them written by established authors and perhaps these are the reasons for such texts being ignored by literary critics. Beverley, Kaplan and other experts on the testimonial form stands against such condescending attitudes in literary studies and argue that the *testimonio* "challenges the hallowed categories of singular authorship, literary aesthetics, and the elite cultural construction of masterpieces" and stand for the position that "any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value" (Beverley qtd. in Kaplan, 123). Since the use of witness testimonies in victim-perpetrator dialogues in the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission during the 1990s, the use of personal narratives

have become part of evidence collection in the process of rectifactory justice, a role which the literary genre of testimonial life writing too, can perform. Internationally today, institutions such as the Centre for Applied Human Rights, and publications such as the *Journal of Human Rights Practise*, are dedicated to the study of Human Rights discourse and activism. As Paul Gready, Professor of Applied Human Rights at the University of York states in the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Human Rights Practise*, titled “Responsibility to the Story”, the present-day discourse of human rights makes equal use of both legal language and testimonial stories as instruments for serving justice (177-78). Gready sees the potential in narrative forms to “spark the law into life, transcend cultural and political difference, and cement solidarity”, thereby, bringing horrifying but often boring statistics to life by narrativizing individual victims of atrocities and their traumatic experiences for the sympathetic reader or listener causing a greater and more lasting emotional impact that may hopefully urge them to act in defence of the persecuted (178). This observation proves central to understanding how texts like Habiburahman's testimony function within the international human rights regime. Legal frameworks require evidence, but statistics alone—figures of displaced persons, casualty counts, mortality rates—can become numbing abstractions. Gready argues that personal narrative transforms such data into lived experience, generating the emotional resonance and moral urgency necessary to move audiences from passive awareness to active engagement. Habiburahman's testimony performs precisely this work: it gives specific, embodied form to the structural violence encoded in statelessness, rendering legible to international readers the daily indignities and existential precarity that quantitative measures alone cannot convey.

It must therefore be granted that the type of text I have chosen to study here has perhaps had some role in influencing the globally imagined identity of Burma/Myanmar today and its

position in the discourse of the international Human Rights regime. Testimonial life writing on Burma is a rich and hitherto unmined field. There exists a large body of non-fictional, first-person accounts which makes it possible for readers to imagine and experience the precarious existence of victims, survivors and their allies in Burma/Myanmar. Their generic identity varies from missionary memoirs to soldiers' autobiographies, from backpackers' travel writing to Human Rights activists' diaries. The sparse literary research in Burma Studies that does exist, focuses on fictional narrative forms, especially the novel, and has so far largely ignored the extensive oeuvre of non-fictional literature. The significance of life writing in adding to the conversation on Burma/Myanmar has been recognised by the dedicated Myanmar watchdog and journalist Bertil Lintner. In a 2016 article published in the online newspaper *The Irrawaddy*, Lintner reviews *Prisoner of Conscience: My Steps through Insein* by Ma Thida and *My Conscience: An Exile's Memoir of Burma* by U Kyaw Win, both narratives of civilian democracy activists resisting the military dictatorship. He writes:

In times like these, when Burma is undergoing major changes, there is no shortage of essay collections in which Western academics and other observers try to make sense of a seemingly bewildering situation. But the quality of those writings varies and few, if any, reflect the views and sentiments of the Burmese themselves...It is therefore refreshing to read these two books... Read together, these two books give a better perspective on modern Burma than any academic thesis or essay ever could.

Lintner here appreciates the potential of testimonial life narratives to add to the academic knowledge on Burma/Myanmar by bridging the gap between theory and praxis, between the Western point of view and indigenous knowledge. His review seems to suggest that such works could be part of a new project of imagining the nation as a union of diverse ethnicities and

religions. In what follows, I read *First, They Erased Our Name* against the backdrop of such subaltern narratives, as an agential text (following Yudice) and as an intervention in the conversation on Burma (following Lintner), attempting to show the complex role that such a text takes upon itself while exposing the human rights violations ongoing in Burma.

Testimonial Performance and Human Rights Advocacy

In *First*, Habiburahman as the principal witness performs two roles, one of witnessing and the other of advocacy. As a witness, he not only recounts atrocities from his memory but also reenacts and reconstructs the trauma experienced by himself and his community for the reading public so that these events are kept alive in their collective consciousness just like an open wound preventing them from being willfully forgotten from the pages of history. As an advocate of Rohingya human rights, Habiburahman demands justice for his community when he calls for what happened to the Rohingya to be recognised by international bodies as ‘Genocide’ and proposes certain plans of action for all involved. He is also performing advocacy by using his personal struggle against adversity as an example for others to follow. This includes his struggle to educate himself, his taking up of the cause of migrant workers in Malaysia and his current work as a spokesperson for the rights of Rohingyas seeking asylum in Australia.

Habiburahman’s non-fictional account presents a personalised narrative of the history of Rohingya Muslims’ persecution, which he traces back to 1982 when the military dictator General Ne Win declared a new Citizenship Law that excluded the Rohingya from the official list of the 135 recognised *taing-yintha* or national races, effectively rendering an entire community stateless in the land where they had been living for generations. After Burma gained its independence from the British, three of its successive governments recognised the Rohingya as an ethnic group of the country. With the new Citizenship Law, the name Rohingya itself became

a forbidden word, and nobody could identify themselves as belonging to the community without facing harassment, forcing many to live secret lives under fake names. Consecutive military regimes would go on to carry out several ethnic cleansing operations against the minority, aimed at driving them from the country, creating several waves of mass exodus across the border to Bangladesh and across the seas to countries like Malaysia. The violence against this ethnic and religious minority that forced its large-scale exodus from Myanmar in 2012-2017 is only the latest in what has been called a “slow-burning genocide” (Zarni and Cowley 682) conducted over 35-plus years that began with military campaigns targeting the minority in 1978. The persecution of the Rohingya cannot be separated from the still wider and longer-running civil conflict between the Myanmar state and its many ethnic armed groups, a conflict so protracted that it has been called the world's longest-running civil war (Miliband). What was new this time round was that the genocide was being carried out under the leadership of a government which claimed to be transitioning towards democracy and included internationally renowned champions of Human Rights such as Aung San Suu Kyi in decision-making positions, though her defenders argue she had little real choice given the pressure exerted on her government by the military. The deep-seated, violent racism faced by the Rohingya is evident in the official names of the military “clearance” operations to which Habiburahman draws our attention in the text, such as Operation Pyi Thaya which directly translates to “Clean and Beautiful Nation”, Operation Sabae or “Purify and Whiten like the jasmine flower” and Operation Myat Mon or “More Purity” (79). The association of concepts such as cleanliness and beauty with the racial supremacy and purity of the Buddhist majority, emerges clearly from these names alone and they are a sign of the official state-organised racism and discrimination faced by the Rohingya community as a consequence of

the 1982 Citizenship Law. The lived reality and the consequences of this arbitrary law are described in Habiburrahman's voice:

I am three years old and am effectively erased from existence. I became a foreigner to my neighbours: they believe that we are Bengali invaders who have entered their country illegally and now threaten to overrun it. They call us *kalars*, a pejorative term expressing scorn and disgust for dark-skinned ethnic groups. In a different time and place, under different circumstances, *kalar* would have meant wog or nigger. The word is like a slap in the face; it undermines us more with each passing day. (6)

These lines have been quoted from the first chapter of the book and display a convention of the testimonial form, where the image of the community comes before the portrait of the self, because it is the social identity that determines the condition of the narrator's existence. The use of racial slurs like "wog or nigger" deserves attention. Their application is a deliberate attempt by the author to make a transnational connection between the local situation of the prosecuted Rohingya with historical global Human Rights movements such as the Civil Rights movement against racism in the U.S.A. I believe that we can see here the contribution of the "secondary witness" who implements such strategies in order to mobilise the empathy of an international audience by giving them a well-known historical paradigm so that they can relate it to the suffering of the Rohingya (Nayar 26). Following Nayar who first applied the form of the testimonio to analyse the Dalit autobiographies from India, I suggest that the secondary category of witnessing, even though it does not include direct participation, nonetheless plays a critical supporting role in the performance of the protagonist's witnessing (26-27). The "secondary witness" refers not to one individual but to a site of "solidarity" between Habiburrahman and all those who helped bring his account into the international public discourse (Nayar 26-27). This

category combines several figures: the subject who provides the testimony (Habiburahman), the investigating reporter who recorded it (Sophie Ansel), the translator (Andrea Reece), the publishing houses (Penguin Viking and Scribe), and finally us, the readers. All of these authenticate the victim or survivor's narrative and help it find an international stage where the testimony will be heard. This alliance, made up of international networks, determines crucial aspects that shape the articulation and reception of testimonial narratives by controlling access to the publishing industry and reading publics. There is also the question of mediation, i.e. how much of the primary witness Habiburahman's voice that we find in the *First*, actually is a creation of the secondary witnesses, Ansel and Recce. Kaplan warns against viewing the author of the testimonio as a "singular voice without acknowledging the mediations of the editors and market demands of publishing" because it can lead to "new forms of exoticization and racism" (122). The final version of the narrative which we read has been translated thrice, from Habiburahman's native tongue to Ansel's French and then to Recce's English. The book itself is written in simple almost pedestrian English. Its deliberately bare and unadorned style helps the narrative gain credibility as that of a poorly educated, oppressed minority in the eyes of the audience/ reader since it makes it more believable and aligns with the reader's expectations. This is a common rhetorical strategy in testimonio where, in the texts that shaped this category, uneducated, indigenous peoples are often written as speaking the pidgin version of popular languages in an attempt at verisimilitude.

I argue that the secondary witnesses' mediation results in an important trope used in Habiburahman's account, that of Apartheid, which is frequently referred to while describing the oppressive conditions within Myanmar faced by its ethnic and religious minorities. As the author's writes:

In Africa, there is a country where white people live separately from black people The different communities are segregated in order to protect the power of the whites.... In northern Arakan, a similar, but nameless, system exists: the segregation of kalars, non-citizens since the law passed by the ex-dictator Ne Win, which has been blithely maintained by his successor Than Shwe. The NaSaKa continue to terrorise the towns in which we are confined. Settlers' villages, known as NaTaLa, are springing up like mushrooms on land confiscated from the Rohingya. Arakan must become Burmese and Buddhist. That is our version of apartheid. (8)

The comparison with Apartheid South Africa is a rhetorical strategy meant to establish the 'universal' nature of the Rohingya's suffering, which goes beyond geographical, regional and social categories. As described by Habiburahman, the Rohingya have been systematically forced into concentration camp-like villages, which he calls "these prison-lands, these hostage lands" that they cannot leave as they are surrounded by "Black Zones" where any individual is shot on sight (149). Strict records were maintained of each individual, and every imaginable human activity required permits impossible to obtain without paying hefty bribes. In his story, we find a young, teenage Habiburahman having to make the difficult decision of rejecting the advances of his beloved because he cannot imagine a future where they can exist in peace together. He writes, "Love is just another obstacle that I do not want to inflict on myself as I try to escape my destiny." (102). This statement is not to be read as a sign of his emotional maturity as a teenager but as evidence of the inhuman policies of the Burmese state, which prohibited Rohingyas from being legally married, yet another example of how deep the repressive apparatus of the racist Burmese state penetrates into the lives of its persecuted minorities where not only is the physical self of the Rohingya attacked but their very sense of identity, culture and society are constantly under seize. The facts mentioned by Habiburahman in his testimony make it clear that the

treatment of the Rohingya population by the Burmese state meets all the criteria of “Article 2 of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” which defines Genocide as:

[A]ny of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (Zarni and Cowley 685)

The genocidal conditions imposed on the Rohingya motivate Habiburahman to try and escape his ‘destiny’ of dying a violent death or living a sub-human existence by walking on the path to education, which is illegal for him to attain. In a sense, the entire narrative can be read as a subaltern’s struggle to obtain the educational skills and qualifications that shall set them free from their chains of invisibility and namelessness. In an imagined peaceful society where if Habiburahman and others like him were given equal rights, respect and opportunity, he might have written his story as a bildungsroman. However, his reality is far from being ideal and the pursuit of education leads Habiburahman to adopt the fake Burmese identity of a Muslim from the Shan state (since it is impossible for him to hide his physical features, which are unlike those of the majority Burmese) and enrol in an electrical engineering course in the Shan state. The use of pseudonyms is another trope of the testimonio form since for the protagonist it is a survival strategy to try and blend into a society that actively seeks to discriminate against them and so their “real” name becomes less important than their “social identity” (Nayar 19). The only step for the Rohingya to survive in Burma/Myanmar is to remain hidden, as evidenced by the fact that

at each step of his journey, Habiburahman encounters nothing but hostility from the Buddhist majority for his religion and ethnicity. However, in his college, Habiburahman encounters the first Bamar who treats him like an equal, U Zaw Kyaw, his professor and a National League for Democracy (NLD) member who faced imprisonment for taking part in the 1988 democracy movement. He decides to reveal his true identity, that of a Rohingya, to his teacher which poses major risk to Habiburahman's existence and goes against every instinct of survival taught to him by his father, who believed that only by remaining hidden and tolerating abuse could a Rohingya remain alive in Burma. This is also part of the aesthetic performance of the testimonial form where things that "cannot be written about" or in this case even talked about "are written about" thereby exposing the secret underbelly of minority existence in Myanmar (Nayar 23). Here is a snippet of the conversation between Habiburahman (H) and his teacher, Zaw Kyaw (Z.K.) which reveals the reality of living on the margins of society:

Z.K: You have never said, but you are Muslim, aren't you? I do not want to make you feel uncomfortable. I am just curious. How did you manage to get admitted to the school, and then obtain the papers to travel outside Arakan? I have always thought that Muslims could not leave the state. You are the first one that I have met."

H: Professor, you know, I come from an ethnic group whose name I am not allowed to say. We are called Rohingya.

Z.K: The name is largely unknown. I have heard of it, as a bad thing of course. But I do not know any more about it. do not be afraid, this will stay between us. However, I am honoured to have made your acquaintance. And what about the other ethnic groups in the country, do you know them? (163-65)

This dialogue between pupil and teacher is revelatory for anyone studying inter-ethnic relationships in Burma/Myanmar. It becomes clear from the discussion that the country is “terra incognita” not just for foreign researchers but also for the different ethnic and religious groups living within its borders (Steinberg qtd. in Selth, 3). Through the successful implementation of its isolationist strategy and the exercise of complete hegemonic control over all forms of knowledge production and distribution, the military dictatorship has ensured that communities cannot share the grievances they have in common and thus remain alien to each other. By practicing the policy of ‘divide and rule’ the military dictatorship makes sure that the ethnic minorities cannot form a united front against them.

The meeting with his teacher is a life-altering moment for Habiburahman. Under Zaw Kyaw’s guidance, he joins a research project aimed at making an inventory of the country’s natural resources. This seemingly innocent activity is a significant act of dissent and exercising of agency as it poses a major risk to all involved since any research conducted without the dictatorship’s blessing is seen as a threat. As Andrew Selth, a dedicated, long-term Burma watcher states:

Until 1988, all internal research (even in science and medicine) by anyone employed by the state (which meant all academicians) was considered classified until presented at a state-sponsored research seminar and then formally approved for public dissemination. Since 1988, any research publications have had to meet the mercurial conditions of the official censorship board. History was reinterpreted and rewritten to emphasise the roles of the Myanmar military. (xv)

The narrative uses the research project to showcase a liminal space of resistance where twelve students from different ethno-religious communities in Burma can interact, learn from and about their peers to work together towards a common goal. The research project stands in the text as a

paradigm of peaceful interethnic co-existence in Myanmar. For the students and their teacher, it is a clandestine mission, a goal worth risking their lives for. They distribute the outcome of their research as pamphlets all over the town which state: “Together we are rich! 135 or 140 ethnic groups, what difference does it make?” (175). This spirit of rebellious, liberal intellectual activity is momentary as Habiburahman has to face the consequences of his dissent when he and his friends are exposed by an unnamed spy within their circle and imprisoned. In a chapter titled “I must survive”, Habiburahman writes about the inhumane torture that he had to suffer in jail. Habiburahman’s transformation from the idealistic, hardworking student to a cynical, tortured prisoner is shocking and heart-breaking. He describes in graphic terms the pain, hunger and humiliation he has to tolerate. The corporeality of the body becomes a central theme in this chapter and the narrative as a whole because there can be no evidence of an atrocity committed clearer than a wound on the body. The experience of pain, makes the narrator ask a crucial question:

Should I really have got involved in national causes when survival is the most important issue for the Rohingya? Did I really have to tempt fate by wanting to be a student like all the others? I am a Rohingya. Why did I even try to be like the others? (189)

These doubts that the narrator voices in the deepest moments of his sorrow, express a fundamental problem about the place of ethno-religious minorities in the democratic NLD-led opposition to the military dictatorship. It is as a direct result of his participation in the struggle for democracy, that forces Habiburahman to leave his native country with his education incomplete to become a migrant slave labourer in Malaysia and Thailand before finally finding refuge in Australia.

However, the sacrifices he makes are betrayed by the actions (or inaction) of Aung San Suu Kyi during the latest genocide against the Rohingya, which reached its peak in 2017-18, creating over 900,000 refugees. It is in the final “Afterword” of the narrative where he reveals the rationale behind his urgent decision to voice his testimony:

My people disappeared in the euphoria of a new age of democracy in Myanmar. Genocide was a taboo word, and the Rohingya, once again, did not exist.

The world was only listening to one voice in Myanmar, and at that critical moment the fate of the Rohingya depended on her. As long as that voice did not speak out, the massacre would continue...The one voice of Myanmar had not spoken for us, and so now we would have to speak for ourselves. (256-57)

The international community was shocked when Suu Kyi, instead of condemning the actions of the military, defended them before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019. She repeatedly termed the bloody events of 2017 as an “internal conflict”, saying Myanmar’s military was responding to attacks by Rohingya “militants” and armed local groups, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). It is possible to see in the vocabulary of Suu Kyi, who was then the State Counsellor, the kind of language used by the Western world in the aftermath of 9/11 to justify their invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as ‘war on terror’ where the rights of those condemned as ‘terrorists’ were rendered immaterial and collateral damage in terms of numerous civilian casualties were deemed acceptable. In Suu Kyi’s words, we can see the shadow of the very monster, the fight against which had initially defined her cult of personality. Due to her defense of the military’s actions in Hague, Suu Kyi faced severe criticism and her erstwhile international humanitarian allies questioned her allegiances. The fact that Suu Kyi has now fallen from grace as an international icon of democracy has definitely helped the SAC carry out its

2021 coup without facing the united, global opposition that could have been mustered under her name. If one looks at the history of the testimonio form, it has been engendered by atrocities but it has also received a charge from the kind of condition created against the group represented by the writer, by a larger narrative. In this case the legitimation of the crimes against the Rohingya by a much-respected international figure frames the text in a way that clarifies and elevates its intention. The Suu Kyi case creates a particularly powerful negative energy against which Habiburrahman's memoir sets its alternative narrative of witnessing genocide.

Conclusion:

The Rohingya had to fight a huge uphill battle to use the term "Genocide" to describe what was happening to their people. Genocide is a crime against humanity according to the 1948 Genocide Convention and carries serious legal and political consequences. However, it was seen that international humanitarian agencies as late as 2021 had continued to use the term 'ethnic cleansing' instead which in juridical categories is a less severe crime than genocide. The struggle over the use of the term is obvious in the recent debate over the Burma Act, which made it possible for the U.S.A. to enforce economic sanctions against the junta and provide humanitarian aid to the affected. Activists fighting for the adoption of the Act faced opposition from the Republican senator Mitch McConnell who was then the Leader of the Republicans in the Senate because he shared a business and personal relationship with Aung San Suu Kyi and believed the adoption of the term would reflect badly on the leader of democratic Myanmar. Despite his best efforts, today, the world recognizes the genocide against the Rohingya and it is in no short measure due to the efforts of activists like Habiburrahman who have used their voice to access their Universal Human Rights.

In 2019, the international news outlet *The Guardian* published an article on Habiburrahman where it was revealed that he now resides in Australia where he has been recognised as a refugee with a temporary visa, though he is yet to acquire a permanent protection visa (Alcorn). “Habib founded the Australian Burmese Rohingya Organisation (ABRO) to advocate for his people back in Myanmar and for his community. He is also a translator and social worker, the casual support service co-ordinator at Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees (RISE), and the secretary of the international Rohingya organisation Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), based in the UK. In 2019, he was made a Refugee Ambassador in Australia.” (2)

The fortunes of his family, however, remain uncertain as several members still live on the borders of Myanmar and others in refugee camps in Bangladesh. In the interview, he states that “most of his family has rejected him for leaving Myanmar because, as the eldest son, he was unable to help them or send them money.” (Alcorn). The trauma he experienced has left him with mental health issues, and remembering the past for him is a taxing endeavour that he compares to being painful, like “digging up the old wound, scratching back the scar” (Alcorn). He copes with his psychological struggles by using sleeping pills and drinking beer, which is considered to be taboo in the Islamic tradition, suggesting a break with the cultural, familial and religious identity of his past (Alcorn).

Habiburrahman’s testimonial narrative draws its readers into bearing witness to the atrocities committed against the Rohingya and the moral duty to take up the cause of human rights in a free and democratic Myanmar seems to be the only obvious ethical position available for any care about the people of the country. However, I have found here through my analysis of the Rohingya testimony that things are not so black and white. What would a democratic future for the country free from the military junta actually be like? Would all ethnic and religious

minorities have equal rights in this imagined new nation or would it be a dictatorship of the civilian Buddhist majority? Since the 2021 coup, the military has primarily been concerned with battling an armed resistance movement which is mainly Bamar Buddhist and is active in the heartland of the country. The junta's atrocities are on full display for all to see and are no longer restrained to the ethnic and religious minorities at the fringes of the nation. Despite the obvious urgency of the matter and the current availability of real-time data on ongoing atrocities in the public sphere, any committed human rights watcher of Myanmar will agree that the international community is struggling to rise up to the occasion and live up to the obligations of the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) by ending the violence immediately and negotiating for peace and justice. There is a growing sense of cynicism and frustration amongst the community concerned for the suffering of the people of Myanmar. Within the country, the majority community is now getting to know what the experience of being a minority in Myanmar feels like. Generation Z, who is leading the charge against the junta, has been brought up on the fruits of the nation's short-lived experiment with democracy, such as the Internet. The military dictatorship cannot establish the same hegemonic control that it enjoyed in the 20th century, and as the post-coup National Unity Government (in exile) has acknowledged and apologised for the Rohingya genocide, this new crisis has created a unique opportunity for the union of the majority and the minorities within the nation. The different communities within Myanmar must listen to each other's stories and if they do so, instead of the country becoming a site of contesting claims, maybe there is a chance of building a truly democratic Myanmar. This is where the type of testimonial life narrative that I have explored here can contribute, by offering alternative visions to the existing dogmatic discourse, thereby making space for the transition from victimhood to resistance. This is not only a literary question but a juridical one. As Joseph Slaughter argues,

international human rights law has always depended on narrative form to recognise its subjects, presupposing a kind of voice through which a claimant becomes legible to the law in the first place (406-08). Habiburrahman's testimony, read in this light, is not simply evidence submitted after the fact to a legal process already underway, but part of the narrative labour through which the Rohingya's claim to legal personhood and protection must first be made audible at all. By analysing the politics of representation in similar texts, maybe we can contribute new models of imagining a united Myanmar for tomorrow.

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