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The Rohingya: An Ethnography of 'Subhuman' Life

Sodip Roy^{a,b}

BOOK REVIEW

Nasir Uddin. *The Rohingya: An Ethnography of 'Subhuman' Life*. Oxford University Press, 2020, 268 pp. ISBN: 9780199489350 (hardback).

HISTORY Published 2024-05-13

This ethnography by Nasir Uddin illustrates the protracted state-run marginalization, persecution, and vulnerability of Rohingya Muslims of Burma or present-day Myanmar. As a scholar born in Cox's Bazar and trained in anthropology in Bangladesh and abroad, the author has been researching and writing extensively on the Rohingya refugee issue for more than two decades. Prior to this ethnography, he investigated transnational movements, identity politics, deterritorialization, vulnerability, and statelessness, hence addressing the Rohingya crisis from a South Asian perspective. The present work develops the "subhuman life" theory—a theory that advances the narrative of vulnerability of statelessness in general, and clarifies further what is to be understood through categorizing the experiences of marginalized people in this way.

The Rohingya comprises eight distinctive chapters, all of which play a role in helping Uddin construct the subhuman life theory. The introduction and the third chapter offer an in-depth context of Rohingya people in Myanmar and Bangladesh. As it relates to

Bangladesh, Uddin delineates the antagonistic relations of the Rohingya refugees with their host community, and argues that this unhappy relationship should be mitigated through proper social integration. The second chapter addresses the issue of the Burmese government's labelling of Rohingya people as "illegal Bengali" migrants since 1978. Considering this contentious identity as a source of marginalization and exclusion, Uddin debunks the erroneous and ill-intentioned project of Burmese administration with authentic evidence, exploration of public narrative, academic works, and archival records in Burma and Britain. Highlighting Fredrik Barth's framework of "ethnic boundary," the author refutes the manufactured "Bengali identity" of Rohingya Muslims, rejecting the notion that their transnational mobility in the region means they are not nationals of Myanmar.

The other important aspects of this book—statelessness and vulnerability—unfold in the fourth and fifth chapters. Here the author sheds light on the Burmanization project of the Burmese government, which promotes

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majoritarian domination and Buddhism, and seeks the suppression of minority ethnic groups including the Rohingya. Not only did the Rohingya have their citizenship revoked under the citizenship law of 1982, but the law also turned into an instrument of persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. The author maintains that even under the post-1990s' quasi-civil regime, the government did not change its anti-Rohingya stance—and actually advanced it on many occasions. Thus, the Rohingya continued to flee to Bangladesh, most notably in 1991–1992, 2012, 2015–2016, and August 2017, with the last being the largest exodus.

United Nations organizations identified government persecution of Rohingya as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” and “genocide intent.” Uddin explores this (re)production of vulnerability of dehumanized Rohingyas using Martha Fineman’s vulnerability lens, Hannah Arendt’s “right to have rights,” and Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life.” He discusses a range of government acts: the minimum rights of marriage, livelihood, mobility, and observation of religious rituals were all restricted for Rohingya people. They were constantly under surveillance and tortured by the military in Rakhine State. Atrocities committed by the military knew no bounds: from segregation to rape, killing after rape, and burning of villages. The author corroborates that noncitizenship and statelessness are not the only factors in such brutalities and vulnerability but claims that such precarity depends in part on the nature of the state and its attitude to its people (p. 189). He also argues that vulnerability is reproduced in the dire conditions of the refugee camps wherever the host country does not consider refugees as proper human beings.

To demonstrate the vulnerability of Rohingya people in Myanmar and Bangladesh,

Uddin unravels his theory of subhuman life in the subsequent two chapters. He traces Rohingya people’s vulnerability to subhuman life in five broad phenomena: (a) atrocious living conditions; (b) illegal objects in legal framework; (c) homeless at home and nowhere to go; (d) free licence to be killed, raped, and burned; and (e) a life worthy of extinction. In these situations, the author argues, the lives of Rohingya people are not proper lives but less: poorer than those of animals. He asserts that the vulnerability, uncertainty, and agony of their lives cannot be characterized under the existing theories of “bare life,” “precarious life,” “noncitizenship,” “statelessness,” and so on. Therefore, he proposes a new framework to portray the dreadful experiences and endless uncertainties of such a life, using the term **subhuman life**.

Uddin’s ethnography offers a painful examination of what he calls the subhuman life of Rohingya people. However, the construction of his theory of subhuman life has some perplexing gaps.

First, the author asserts that this theory is an outcome of his long-time fieldwork in the Rohingya camps. However, the book focuses on data mostly collected over a couple of months of influx in 2017. The narratives used in the book emphasize the persecution and atrocities of Myanmar military while saying little about deplorable life in the camps in Bangladesh. The book also fails to garner firsthand data from the other side of the border, with no narratives of Rohingya left in Myanmar’s Rakhine State after “genocide.”

Moreover, the author includes case studies from only two locations in Cox’s Bazar of Bangladesh and none from Rohingya refugees in other countries, even though the methodology mentions that the book incorporates such data. His theory of subhuman life relies on establishing that the case studies

from Cox's Bazar in 2017 reflect Rohingya refugees' experiences in destination countries. But they do not adequately support his thesis because the interviews were conducted immediately after the forced displacement. Fleeing conflict is always perilous and uncertain. While refugees may experience substantial vulnerability during their escape, life after reaching a destination can proceed along a trajectory towards restored rights and social inclusion; an example is the lives of Syrian refugees who have integrated in Germany. The book would have benefited from establishing that Rohingya refugees do not undergo such a trajectory and instead are relegated to subhuman life.

Second, this ethnography descriptively covers the vulnerability of Rohingya people rather than analyzing it comprehensively and comparatively. The author mentions several sensitive circumstances such as genocide, ethnocide, and crimes against humanity but does not elaborate and clarify their link with the susceptibility and uncertainty of Rohingya people. Hence, the reader may be confused about the introduction of these concepts and their connection with the subhuman life theory as a way to understand Rohingyas' experiences.

Finally, this account of the experiences of Rohingya people fails to establish the insufficiency of Agamben's bare life theory as a way of theorizing refugees' experiences. At one point, the author admits, "Nonetheless, I still think that Agamben is instrumental to understand the conditions of statelessness, non-citizenship, and refugeehood to some extent" (p. 84). While the ultimate focus of the subhuman life theory is vulnerability as a result of lack of legal or citizenship status, Agamben's bare life theory also analyzes the same situation: an absence of legal status and access to human rights. Thus, the significance of proposing a similar theory is

unclear. Put differently, the subhuman life theory cannot denounce the theory of bare life convincingly, as both indicate the illegal bodies and vulnerabilities of stateless people in a nation-state.

The author also does not consider empirical critiques that challenge Agamben's theory of bare life as applied to refugees. These critiques seek to demonstrate that refugees in protracted situations no longer remain in bare lives, but instead hold some sort of agency. The same critiques can be made of Uddin's subhuman life theory.

The work nonetheless makes a significant contribution to forced migration studies. Uddin, though reluctant to offer recommendations based on this ethnography, ultimately suggests legal recognition, social safety, and human dignity for Rohingya people as solutions to the problems, he illuminates. Thus, **The Rohingya** contributes to the public policy field as well as to the academic field. Further, with Uddin being an extensive contributor to forced migration scholarship, his efforts in this book will enrich this field by creating debate about whether there is a need for the subhuman life theory in addition to the bare life theory to gain better understanding of displacement experiences.

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