

Paper: Through the Lens of Genocide Survivors: Rohingya Testimonies and the Struggle for Genocide Recognition

Paper details

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Abstract

This paper presents a contestation and dissonance between the lived experience of Genocide survivors and their scholarly representation, with the case study of the 2017 Rohingya Genocide. It critically examines how Rohingyas residing in refugee camps in Bangladesh rearticulate their experiences of Genocide, and how they challenge the existing textual narratives of Genocide. Drawing on 60 intensive evidence-based micro-narratives recorded through ethnographic fieldwork carried out among the Rohingya Genocide survivors in

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January-March 2025, the paper offers an emic understanding of atrocity and brutality rooted in the voices of the survivors themselves. In doing so, it foregrounds the narratives of the Rohingyas, a historically marginalised people seeking recognition and accountability for genocide violence. The paper puts forward two key contributions. First, it enriches ongoing debates surrounding the recognition of the Rohingya genocide by demonstrating that victim testimonies can substantively inform, and even challenge, international legal mechanisms, heavily based on externally produced fact-finding reports. Second, it contributes to the broader scholarship of genocide studies (Lemkin, 1944; Kuper, 1981; United Nations, 1948) by underscoring the significance of survivor narratives in understanding both the mechanics and the politics of Genocide denial. The findings align with Paulo Freire's (1970, 1974) idea that even those submerged in a 'culture of silence', in the case of Rohingya, perhaps through severe torture and brutality, hold the agency to critically reflect on their lived experience and contribute meaningfully to the scholarship of genocide recognition. By illuminating the perspectives of Rohingya survivors, this paper suggests their inclusion in the international proceedings, parliamentary select committees, and broader humanitarian inquiries. In doing so, it challenges the epistemic hierarchies that privilege institutional knowledge over lived experience and calls for a more victim-centred approach for the recognition of Genocide, accountability for the Genocidal violence, and for ensuring transitional justice.

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