

Rohingya: Collective Voices

Rohingya Poets

Translated Mayyu Ali and James Byrne

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Translator's note: The following excerpts appear in the longer "Collective Voices" poem discussed in the interview with Mayyu Ali. Some of the "Voices" are just starting to write poetry after having been denied education for years. – *James Byrne*

Once I was born, I survived in two worlds:
One where I have lived for generations,
Another where I am merely a refugee.
In both places, I am displaced.
~ *Shanas, 18*

Nothing left, burnt buildings, villages.
The sky is smoke,
The earth smells of burning.
The Arakan, isolated, a brand-new inferno.
~ *AR, 27*

For days and nights we ran, stumbled and hid—
Exhausted, emaciated, hungry.
~ *Dil, 22*

Old men rely on bamboo sticks,
Women cling to life, babies on their breasts.
Grandmother in a plastic basin hung by bamboo stick threads—
The shadow of hell on earth.
~ *Mohammed, 24*

Genocide's blade doesn't choose us by our age.
He is strong, young, male and educated.
He is abducted, executed, sent to the grave.
~ *Nur, 23*

I am a young Rohingya.
I should have the same rights as you do.
In Myanmar, I cannot go to school.
In Bangladesh, there's no curriculum I can learn.
~ *Yasmin, 21*

She was gang-raped, set alight, and left for dead.
She carries a killer's scar inside her body.
~ *Omal, 18*

Over a decade, many times I have fled and returned.
This is the fourth time I have left Bangladesh—
A life spent on survival.
Am I fortunate enough to flee again?
~ *Mohammed, 26*

Perpetrators lie in various ways
While the world still debates definitions of genocide.
You can see the fire but not how we are burnt,
You can read of killings but not how our throats were cut.
~ *Rahmat, 27*

A bullet in the chest bigger than a heart.
A body drops into the water
And the world just watches on.
~ *Rusminara, 19*

Translators and Interview Participants: Biographies

***World Literature Today* Editors**

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Mayyu Ali is a young Rohingya poet, writer, and humanitarian activist who runs the Youth Empowerment Centre in the refugee camp at Cox's Bazaar. He has written many poems and articles, mostly for rohingyablogger.com. His articles have also featured in *Al Jazeera*, *Dhaka Tribune*, and on CNN. Recently he published *The Blossom*, including some of his early poems, and distributed them around the camps. His poems have appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation* (special feature on Rohingya poetry) as well as the *Best English and Light of English* magazines in Myanmar. His poems will appear in a pamphlet of Rohingya poetry and folk songs published by Arc Publications in July 2019.

James Byrne is a poet, editor, and translator. His most recent poetry collection is *Everything Broken Up Dances* (Tupelo, 2015). He is co-editing a publication of new Rohingya poetry and folk songs, out with Arc Publications in July 2019.

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Rohingya Writing as Activism: A Conversation with Mayyu Ali

James Byrne

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James Byrne: You currently live in one of the largest refugee camps in the world. The Tatmadaw (Burmese) army is on one side of the camps, the Bangladeshi army on the other. What is it like to write and to live in a place like this?

Mayyu Ali: The Naf River separates Myanmar and Bangladesh. The water of the Naf flows through creeks into Myanmar. Being an exiled Rohingya from Myanmar in Bangladesh's refugee camp, I can still breathe the air of my motherland when it flies through the sky. And I can see the green forest in Arakan that seems to want me to embrace it. Thus, it always helps me to maintain the national spirit in my blood for Myanmar, my country. On the other hand, it often increases the yearning for my beloved motherland.

On the Myanmar side, the Burmese Tatmadaw are still committing human rights abuses against Rohingyas living inside. In Bangladesh, where the army has been providing refuge for more than one million Rohingya who have escaped the killings in Myanmar, I am just one among many.

Surviving in a place like this is like living in two different worlds at the same time. One place is the cruelty of inhumanity in Myanmar. Another is the safety of humanity in Bangladesh. Writing about being a Rohingya in such a situation is a battle between trying to survive and raising the voices of people who are counted as forgotten in the world.

Byrne: The refugee camp at Cox's Bazaar was originally created by Captain Cox in 1799, who asked for "wastelands" near the Baw Calli River around Ramoo. You write in English. How far is your decision to write poetry in English a response to colonial oppression, and how difficult has it been for the Rohingya to create their own poetry in the Rohingya language?

Ali: Rohingyas were kings in Arakan. The Rohingya language was used in Arakan courts. Historical evidence, like stone inscriptions and coins, tells that the Rohingya are a bona fide ethnic group of people who have been living for centuries in Arakan. Moreover, they belonged to a distinct culture, tongue, and scripture.

During the Rakhine dynasties, there were aggressions and wars. Decades later, Myanmar was under colonial oppression for more than one hundred years. On January 4, 1948, Myanmar got its independence. Since 1960, the country has been administered by military juntas.

During colonialism, people lost touch with their own culture and tradition. And during the administrations under military juntas, people, especially Rohingya, lost the long existence and national identification for which they have been targeted.

Thus, the moment I was born to a Rohingya parent in Myanmar followed decades-long state-sponsored persecutions. I learned the Rohingya language without its particular written form (which is two hundred years old and uses a version of

Arabic script). While learning Rohingya as a language, I found that the culture and literature of my people have been eliminated because they are socially targeted. The experiences in my life have taught me to write in English rather than in Burmese, because I want people from all over the world to understand why my people have been discriminated against for decades. And yet Rohingya still belongs to the culture that my grandfather knew. He would often sing me to sleep with the songs and poetries written in our dialect. Unfortunately, today, we have lost our language.

Byrne: Your poems are what I would call tough, direct, activist. Recently we've been talking about ways of writing poems that document what you can see. How difficult is this given your apparent desire to share the Rohingya experience with the outside world? How might activism and imagism operate together in a poem for you?

Ali: As mentioned, as I grew older in western Myanmar, I encountered a world where every human right was denied to us. I learned how we (Rohingya) were marginalized and discriminated against religiously, socially, and politically. Despite this, I managed to receive an education at a government-run school in a rural area. In 2008 I passed my matriculation—the exams needed to enter university. In 2012 anti-Muslim riots spread across Rakhine State. After this, hundreds of Rohingya students were banned from attending Sittway University. I finished my first and second years for an “English Specialization” at the university. But since the violence broke out in 2012, I was prevented from attending to continue my studies.

Being a Rohingya in Rakhine State, access to reading good books or popular magazines is rare. Our movement is severely restricted even from one township to another. At an early age, life taught me to take on the role of writing poems and articles that speak to the pain and despair of my people. Thus, writing became a passion in my blood.

Writing for Rohingya people is activism. For me, being a Rohingya, victims of a slow-burning genocide in Myanmar, imagism is far from activism. ...

Byrne: We've recently put together a collage poem of Rohingya voices. How is the Rohingya voice able to mobilize, living in the camps? With daily survival the main priority, are artists able to make responses to the experiences they are living through? If not, what could change to make this happen?

Ali: Here in the camps, everyone struggles, looking to survive each day. We need everything here. For Rohingya who have been seeking peace and justice, daily life lets them know what the greatest concerns are.

There are Rohingya parents who want formal education for their kids. There are Rohingya youth who want to rebuild lives in the community. There are students who want to continue their studies.

On social media like Facebook, Rohingya youth have been trying hard, writing poems and articles for people. They want to be the voice for their people. They want to change lives. They have the same dreams as others in the world.

When I requested my friends and colleagues to share their “collective voices,” they were excited. They wanted their voices to be heard. They wanted their pain to be recognized. I encouraged them and helped with translation. Finally, it happened. Now, they are all excited to read their voices in magazines and elsewhere.

Byrne: In the first poem I ever read of yours, “That’s Me, a Rohingya,” I remember the stanza: “Even when I watch the sunrise, / I’m not living like you are. / Without the fertility of hope I live, / Just like a sandcastle.” It struck me quickly that, far from being “hopeless,” your poems read like powerfully active survival mantras. But how, for the Rohingya, can hope genuinely find a way?

Ali: Since we were recently politically targeted in Myanmar, we had hopes that Aung San Suu Kyi would help us. She was our

hero when we lived in the country. When she came to power, winning a landslide victory in the 2015 election, she turned a blind eye and now does not care about the Rohingya situation in Myanmar. Soon after this, the world's fastest exodus of Rohingya happened in August 2017 under her administration. She is a leader and has moral authority for her country's minority Rohingya people. But she has failed. And Rohingya lost their last hope.

On the other hand, what the international community has been doing is not enough. And justice for Rohingya who are mostly living in the diaspora, in several neighboring countries, remains elusive.

If we don't have this support from Myanmar or the international community, we have to find hope within ourselves. One of the most important interventions for Rohingya to find a way is to rebuild a life from inside themselves, doing what they can with what they have where they live. To make this happen, Rohingya leaders who live overseas should take more responsibility and prioritize these rebuilding activities. Every Rohingya should take part in leading the community to be civilized.

When I am being a Rohingya, referred to as the world's most persecuted person, I feel like I am pushed to be the world's

most hardworking person. This passion circulates now inside me from vein to vein.

Byrne: The false promise of repatriation in October was resisted by Rohingya at the end of last year. For you, what is the best way out of the camps? Where do you want to be?

The Myanmar government should ensure safe repatriation and proper rehabilitation for us. Historically, geographically, ancestrally, we belong there.

Ali: I want to go back home. Myanmar is my motherland. We had been living there for generations. The Myanmar government should ensure safe repatriation and proper rehabilitation for us. Historically, geographically, ancestrally, we belong there.

In a decade, we have fled and returned many times. Every Rohingya wishes to go back to their homeland in a safe, dignified, and voluntary way. We want peace and justice first. Perpetrators of the violence should be held accountable. The Myanmar government should restore citizenship rights to the Rohingya population. The international community should stand firmly until Rohingya enjoy the same rights as other ethnic groups in Myanmar.