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Statelessness, Refugeehood and 'Subhuman' Life: A Case of the Rohingya

Abstract:
Statelessness renders people 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998), exposing them to forced displacement, resulting in refugeehood. The transition from statelessness to refugeehood is neither linear nor smooth. It is, instead, often mediated by the intensity of atrocity, putting people in conditions of being treated as less than human beings, what I call 'subhuman' life (Uddin, 2020). The lecture substantiates this argument with the case of the Rohingya people living in the borderlands of Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The Rohingyas, the most persecuted group in the world, experienced an unprecedented brutality in 2017 committed by Myanmar security forces and vigilantes, which drew global attention due to its ruthlessness and extensive human rights violations. In response to an alleged attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on August 25, 2017, Myanmar security forces launched a clearance operation, which displaced 725,000 Rohingya civilians, killed 10,000 civilians, raped 1.900 girls and women, and destroyed 392 villages fully or partially (UN Fact-Finding Report, 2018). By sheltering this massive influx, combined with the previous ones, Bangladesh now hosts 1.3 million Rohingyas in the world's largest refugee camp in its southeastern regions of Ukhiya and Teknaf. The Rohingya refugees are now struggling with a shortage of food, poor healthcare, lack of education, inadequate water supply, poor housing, increasing insecurity, random trafficking and scarcity of everyday essentials, despite Bangladesh's sincere efforts in collaboration with UN bodies, NGOs and INGOs. The local community is becoming increasingly 'unwelcoming' as 1.3 million additional people share local resources, livelihoods, and social amenities. The hope for repatriation has worsened due to the ongoing civil war in Myanmar and the growing dominance of the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State. No third country is offering asylum to them. Now, the Rohingya lead their lives with their atrocious past, critical present and blurred futures. However, they are still haunted by the 2017 genocidal experience, which the UN Human Rights Council described as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing," with many others calling it "genocide" (Ibrahim 2018; Lee 2022). Nonetheless, the stories of the Rohingyas reveal the horrific treatment as if they are less than human, what I describe as 'subhuman life.' They belong to no state, as Myanmar revoked their citizenship four decades ago, and Bangladesh does not recognise them even as refugees. Given this context, supported by empirically grounded evidence, the lecture highlights the current situation of the Rohingya in the border regions of Bangladesh and Myanmar, within the broader framework of statelessness, refugeehood, and 'subhuman life.'

Short Bio:
Professor Nasir Uddin is a cultural anthropologist based in Bangladesh and a Senior Faculty member of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chittagong. Professor Uddin has held Visiting Fellow/Visiting Scholar/Visiting Professor positions at Harvard University, Oxford University, the University of Sydney, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE), Johns Hopkins University, East-West Center, Washington DC, Heidelberg University, VU University Amsterdam, Ruhr-University Bochum, Delhi School of Economics at Delhi University, the University of Hull, Kyoto University and the University of Shizuko. He has achieved several

prestigious awards and fellowships, including the MEXT Scholarship, the British Academy Visiting Scholarship, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Fellowship, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Fellowship, a Visiting Scholarship at LSE, a Visiting Fellowship at Oxford University, the Asian Studies Fellowship at East-West Center, Washington, DC, James Social Science Fellowship at the University of Sydney, Visiting Professorship at Heidelberg University, and Distinguished Visiting Professorship at Kyoto University. He has published scholarly pieces extensively with globally leading publishing houses, including the Cambridge University Press, the Oxford University Press, the University of Pennsylvania Press, Routledge, SAGE, Springer, Palgrave Macmillan, Berghahn, Bloomsbury, Orient BlackSwan and so on. His latest edited books include "Deterritorialised Identity and Transborder Movement in South Asia", co-edited with Nasreen Chowdhory (Springer, 2019), "The Rohingya Crisis: Human Rights Issues, Policy Concerns and Burden Sharing" (SAGE, 2021), "Refugees and the Media: Local and Global Perspectives," co-edited with Delaware Arif (Palgrave, 2024), "Reshaping Rohingya Futures: Coping Strategies and Emerging Agencies" (Palgrave MacMillan, 2025) and "Scattered Lives of Stateless People: The Rohingyas in SAARC and ASEAN Countries" (Springer, 2025). His latest books include "The Rohingya: An Ethnography of 'Subhuman' Life" (The Oxford University Press, 2020), "Voices of the Rohingya People: A Case of Genocide, Ethnocide and 'Subhuman' Life" (Palgrave, 2022) and "Indigeneity, Marginality and the State in Bangladesh: Homeless at Home" (Routledge, 2024). His book "The Rohingya: An Ethnography of 'Subhuman' Life" was short-listed as the best book in social sciences published in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 by the International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS). Professor Uddin's theory of 'subhuman' life is widely discussed in the area of scholarship on refugees, migrants, non-citizens, asylum seekers, stateless people, IDPs and forcibly displaced people.