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Bangladesh: Breaking the Silence – Postcolonial
Criminology, Ethnography and Genocide**

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Title Page

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**The Victimisation of Rohingyas in Myanmar and Bangladesh: Breaking the Silence –
Postcolonial Criminology, Ethnography and Genocide.**

Abstract

This paper gives voice to the victims of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar. Using criminological ethnographic research in refugee camps in Bangladesh, we examine the qualitative accounts of violence and persecution and ‘break the silence’ by giving voice to Rohingya people who had fled military violence. We place the Rohingya’s testimonies within a wider theoretical and historical discussion that also addresses the condition of criminology when it comes to understanding and analysing the crime of all crimes – genocide. In recent years, the potential for postcolonial criminology in explaining global inequalities has been much discussed. However, we critique parts of this debate and instead emphasize the importance of foregrounding the realities of extreme victimization of powerless individuals such as the Rohingya.

Keywords: Postcolonial criminology, genocide, Rohingya, ethnography, state crime.

Introduction

"I lost my mom and dad in army attack in our village. One day, Myanmar army came to our village and started firing on us randomly without any intimation. They also burnt many houses, in that many children and women who were inside were burnt alive and when some people came out of the house again, Myanmar army fired on them. In that massacre, my mom and dad were killed, somehow, I manage to escape with my neighbor's family... I was with my neighbor's family who helped me to reach Bangladesh. We walked for around 4 days hiding in forest and without eating any food. While leaving the country [the] Myanmar army was firing randomly, which, I felt like they were not even treating us like an animal. In that random fire, I got injured with a bullet in my upper foot near my ankle. When we reached seashore, we hired a boat to reach Bangladesh and I did not have any money in my hand, my neighbor's family helped me there also by paying for me. We were totally 11 members including my neighbor family and me, for which boat man took 200,000 Burmese kyat i.e. approximately 18,000 per person to reach Bangladesh seashore."

(Fazal)

The words above involved conversations with the lead author, **who** interviewed Fazal in a refugee camp in Bangladesh in 2018 during the height of Myanmar's military violence towards the Rohingya people. Fazal was still carrying the visible injuries from a bullet that had wounded him as he fled from Myanmar. Like many individuals victimised in that period, the reality of his experiences, what he witnessed, and what he knows, is little known to the world. Fazal had

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3 escaped with his neighbour's family, managed to join a fishing boat on the coast, and fled to
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5 Bangladesh.

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8 There has been little criminological work on the crimes committed against the Rohingya in
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10 Myanmar (Soundararajan, 2019). Criminologists have also highlighted the lack of research on
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12 genocide generally (Karstedt et al, 2021; Kazyrytski, 2022), with Brown and Rafter (2013:
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14 1017) suggesting Criminology's focus upon genocide 'lags far behind genocide studies in other
15
16 disciplines'. Zarni and Cowley (2014: 688) asserted that analyses of abuses against the
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18 Rohingya fall into two narratives: the first divorces the problem from its historical context and
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20 frames it as 'communal violence' emanating from the 'dark side of transition' (see also
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22 International Crisis Group, 2013). The second places state and security forces central in
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24 orchestrating a campaign of violence against the Rohingya as an example of a crime against
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26 humanity, which the authors argue does not go far enough in highlighting the state's intent on
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28 consigning an entire population to history. The violence against the Rohingya can be seen as
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30 an outcome of longer-standing military power structures facilitated by the Myanmar state, who
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32 are committed to the annihilation of this minority group in an ongoing process of genocide
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34 (Zarni and Cowley, 2014).

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37 Political debate has also considered whether such crimes amount to genocide, with officials
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39 from several countries including Canada, France, Gambia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, and
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41 Turkey referring to it as such. However former State Councillor of Myanmar between 2016-
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43 2021 - Aung San Suu Kyi – prior to her arrest and subsequent deposition by the Myanmar
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45 military junta in February 2021 - defended her country against allegations of genocide at the
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47 United Nations (UN) International Court of Justice (ICJ). She suggested that claims that
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49 Myanmar committed atrocities against Muslim Rohingya were "an incomplete and misleading
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51 factual picture of the situation" (Bowcott, 2019). Her statement before the ICJ in The Hague
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53 capped a jarring shift for many in the West, for Ms. Suu Kyi, a 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner
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and champion of **democracy and** human rights, had shifted to apparent apologism for military brutality. **Known as Tatmadaw**, Myanmar’s military is mostly comprised of Bamar people and endorses a Burmese Buddhist ideology, which is at odds particularly with the Muslim Rohingya population. Since 2016 there has been no shortage of **Tatmadaw’s** documented beheadings, sexual violence, and burning of villages **(for instance: Al Jazeera, 2016; Pannett, 2023)**. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights **[OHCHR]** has described the military campaign as an infringement of ‘civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights’, with reasonable evidence of war crimes (OHCHR, 2022: 2). **However**, Suu Kyi insisted that what foreign observers have called an organised, years-long campaign of atrocities against the Rohingya were exaggerated and misconstrued, suggesting that “genocidal intent cannot be the only hypothesis” (Al Jazeera, 2019).

This article draws upon original data gleaned through the lead author’s ethnographic research in refugee camps in Balukhali, Bangladesh, across 2017-2018, involving 27 in-depth interviews with Rohingya refugees who had fled Myanmar in light of Tatmadaw’s state-sponsored brutality. Accordingly, it offers nuanced, rich, and harrowing data on a qualitatively under-researched issue in criminology – genocide against the Rohingya people. The paper involves a research collaboration with scholars from the global north and south, united by our shared desire to give light to the voices of marginalized, persecuted, and silenced individuals such as the Rohingya. The article also *breaks criminology’s silence* on genocide and seeks to move beyond post-colonial perspectives by demonstrating how the violence against the Rohingya cannot be solely attributed to colonial legacies.

The paper begins with a discussion of mainstream criminology’s relative silence on genocide and the plight of the Rohingya, calling for the study of genocide and extreme violence to be

central to criminology while critiquing various post-colonial perspectives. Next, it offers a historical discussion of the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. The paper then documents the qualitative methodology that was deployed in the data gathering process. The article's findings section principally explicates the original qualitative data, giving light to Tatmadaw's brutality against the Rohingya, including the numerous interviewees that witnessed the murders of their family and friends, endured sexual violence and the burning of their villages. The paper closes by summarizing the key arguments and the findings broader significance, particularly for criminological debates on genocide and extreme violence.

Criminology, Genocide and Myanmar

Genocide, often referred to as *the crime of all crimes* (Rafter, 2016) has seen hundreds of millions of people murdered, raped, sexually assaulted, forcibly displaced, kidnapped and mutilated throughout human history (Hintjens, 2001; Hagan and Raymond-Richmond, 2009). While criminologists are dedicated to explaining these types of crimes and social group conflict more broadly, they typically focus upon the interpersonal and intranational criminal acts of violence. As Karstedt et al (2021) note, those studying mass atrocity and genocide have frequently omitted criminological theories; even though these have potential to help explain mass atrocities and direct a scholarly light onto the contexts in which they take place. The most extreme state crimes are not often a focus of contemporary criminology (for exceptions see: Brown and Rafter, 2013; Kazyrytski, 2022; Mullins, 2009; Rafter and Walklate, 2012), whereby the worst violations of human rights (Savelsberg, 2010) seemingly occur at a notional distance and represent a form of selective disinterest (Stanley, 2007).

Theoretical criminology seems to have largely greeted approaches that see identities and statuses of individuals and groups in relation to their experiences of crime as core. Approaches grounded in identity politics have become increasingly centralized components of

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3 criminological theory. Criminology has readily accommodated the view that identities are
4 socially constructed, flexible and powerful (or not) (Potter, 2013). As Potter (2013) has
5 remarked, identity is power and identity is core to all elements of social life, meaning identity
6 must be considered within the contexts of criminality and experiences of victimization. Yet
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criminological theory. Criminology has readily accommodated the view that identities are socially constructed, flexible and powerful (or not) (Potter, 2013). As Potter (2013) has remarked, identity is power and identity is core to all elements of social life, meaning identity must be considered within the contexts of criminality and experiences of victimization. Yet victimised identities are less considered, perhaps because the “construction of an identity based on victimhood and a collection of excruciating memories, such as those of genocide, is ontologically perilous and empirically harmful” (Mazinani, 2013: 29). Despite criminology’s recognition of plurality and diversity, the identities that garner the bulk of the attention across the discipline are still framed by a Western-centrism and frequently wedded to Western liberal democracies (Moosavi, 2019). Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, culture, religion, age, and socioeconomic class are all part of an important nexus of analysis and the identities an individual holds should be considered in criminological research based upon social forces that generate crime and the reactions to crime by victims. Whilst it is essential that race and ethnicity constitute a key part of criminological study (Philips et al, 2020), it is important that scholars also incorporate a full account of the historical record and be cautious of principally gravitating towards colonialism as the core explanation when there are often other factors to consider. As we will see, in the case of the genocide against the Rohingya this particularly includes the interlinked forces of colonial experience, religion, demography, and the psychology of group loyalty.

Recent calls for criminology to be more inclusive and considerate of wider identities, however, seems to have resulted in very little change in focus. Calls to ‘decolonise criminology’ (Agozino, 2004; Blagg and Anthony, 2019; Murdoch and McGuire, 2022; Moosavi, 2019) or introduce postcolonial perspectives (Cunneen, 2011) have resulted in little change in empirical practice. For example, consider the victimisation of Yazidi women in Syria, the plight of Uyghurs in China, the millions of people suffering in Yemen because the Houthis and other

Yemeni authorities have denied the UN and other aid agencies unhindered access to those in need of aid. The experiences of Rohingya in Myanmar now displaced into Bangladesh because of a third military-imposed exodus (OHCHR, 2022) have largely been confined to a footnote, as so often are those people facing the worst crimes perpetrated against humans today. Academic coverage of the Rohingya people has been limited primarily to publications in outlets that are somewhat peripheral to criminology such as within the areas of human and legal rights (Zawacki, 2013), *The Lancet* (Mahmood et al, 2017), international law (Levy, 2019) and *Conflict and Health* (Haar et al, 2019).

As Stockdale and Sweeney (2022: 482) assert, ‘the colonial nature of criminology and the white, male, straight, cis-gendered lens through which criminological topics have been viewed, alongside the impenetrable focus on the global north’ has been viewed by some as deeply problematic. Yet despite widespread lamentation of the current inertia, few critics have produced research that shows the emergence of a more dialectally global or collaborative criminology. As Siddiquee (2020) suggested, colonial legacies do not simply shape the continuation of Western and advanced capitalist countries control of less developed nations in the global south. The process of global harms today must understand the legacies of history, but arguably it has become a little too common to see such historical readings rendered down to causal processes, whereby the foregrounding of the generative drivers of contemporary harm are simply past legacies that are widely criticised but inspire little difference in praxis.

Recent social scientific calls for the ‘need to address the political relations of extraction that bound colonies to national metropolises and which, in the process, defined colonial global economies that serviced national projects in the West’ (Bhambra, 2022: 9) tend to present rather simplistic and one-dimensional pictures of complex periods of history and developmental processes. Moreover, much of contemporary criminology is focused heavily upon social constructivism and competing hierarchies of identity, involving issues that tend to divide social

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groups rather than what unites them. This fails to formulate collective human interests and values that cut across geographical boundaries in both the global north and south. Many scholars calling for criminology to be decolonized often do little in practice to both promote the voices of silenced victims in the global south – in this case the Rohingya – and address the structural conditions that have favored Western-centric Criminology. As we will encounter, perhaps a better way forward lies partially in the expansion of international ethnographic networks. In this article, we seek to make this point through an ethnographic study regarding the treatment of the Rohingya; a crime against humanity that has received perplexingly little attention within mainstream criminology.

Ethnic Cleansing and the Hidden Crimes of Myanmar

Formerly known as Burma until 1989, Myanmar was under British colonial rule from 1824-1948 (Tonkin, 2019; Ullah, 2016). While Mattei and Nader (2007) have suggested that colonialism and the rule of law can be utilised as a political tool by Western nations to validate plunder – whereby powerful political actors violently extract resources from weaker ones - the reality in Myanmar is far more complex. The country has faced internal repression from its successive military governments since independence from Great Britain in 1948 and a later Coup d'état in 1962. Consequently, it has spent much of its recent history under an authoritarian and repressive military junta (Turnell, 2011; Soundararjan, 2019). As an important point in the trajectory of human rights, the post WWII period saw the creation of the United Nations “[P]romoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion” (UN Charter Art. 1 para.3). The rise of international human rights institutions and instruments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) focused on human rights, and vitally the end of colonial rule in Burma, all correlate with this historical juncture. This period saw an initial recognition of the Rohingya as a distinct ethnolinguistic identity after gaining independence from British colonial control.

However, the establishment of anti-Muslim military governments since 1962 have been instrumental in eroding this status and with it, the Rohingya's rights, living conditions and identity (Zarni and Cowley, 2014). Whilst the UN was established in 1945 to safeguard world peace, security, development, and human rights, its failure to protect the rights of a great many people including victims of ethnic cleansing is well documented (Freedman, 2014). Indeed, questions of *human rights* need to be considered as complex and the product of a multifaceted system of power and domination that played out on a global stage; predicated not simply on narrow forms of extraction.

As Siddiquee (2020) notes, colonial tropes have been used as a rationale for the use of violence against groups such as the Rohingya. The socio-historically constructed forms of identity throughout the colonial and post-colonial decades are now used in Myanmar by ultra-nationalist Buddhists to repress Rohingya people (Siddiquee, 2020). The absence of references to the Rohingya in Arakan¹ by British colonial rulers has been used pejoratively to suggest that the group has no historical ties to the region and thus represents nothing more than an alien incursion. This antagonism has been borne out of an historical inaccuracy as British officials incorrectly referred to the Rohingyas as Chittagonian migrants from Bengal in their records (Tonkin, 2019). The term Rohingya - although only formally introduced in the post-independence 1950s era - refers to an indigenous Muslim population in Arakan that can be traced back to the Mrauk-U dynasty (1430-1785) or possibly even earlier (Nemoto, 2005). As we will see, the respondents' experiences are the end point of a logic of violence, with the Rohingya community one of the most persecuted minorities in the world (Letchamanan, 2013). In the supposed name of fighting against terrorism or insurgency, the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw have targeted the Rohingyas with a violence and callousness which the UN

¹ Arakan is a historical term used to describe the region that is now commonly referred to as Rakhine by the Buddhist Arakanese and the Myanmar Government.

(2017) called a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” Zarni and Cowley (2014: 683) outlined how:

‘Since 1978, the Rohingya, a Muslim minority of Western Burma, have been subject to a state-sponsored process of destruction. The Rohingya have deep historical roots in the borderlands of Rakhine State, Myanmar, and were recognized officially both as citizens and as an ethnic group by three successive governments of post-independence Burma. In 1978, General Ne Win’s socialist military dictatorship launched the first large-scale campaign against the Rohingya in Rakhine State with the intent first of expelling them en masse from Western Burma and subsequently legalizing the systematic erasure of Rohingya group identity and legitimizing their physical destruction.’

In 1982, the Rohingya were officially classified as stateless under the new promulgations of the Burma Citizenship Act (Letchamanan, 2013; Parnini et al., 2013). This long-running crisis erupted in 2012 when violence occurred after the rape and murder of a Buddhist Rakhine woman with the perpetrators allegedly Muslim Rohingya men, resulting in nearly two hundred people dead and around 140,000 Rohingya displaced (Letchamanan, 2013). Although the Rohingya community has suffered violence particularly from 1978 onwards, this ongoing process intensified again from 2016 through an intensive operation by the Tatmadaw. From 2017-2018, around 800,000 Rohingya people fled to Bangladesh (Habib et al, 2018). A qualitative study estimated that the Tatmadaw killed around 24,800 Rohingya people, while 18,500 Rohingya women and girls were raped (Habib et al, 2018). This precipitated the International Criminal Court’s investigation into crimes against humanity in 2019.

As we will see, we call for a new, more inclusive theoretical perspective that shifts the focus from the state criminal justice process to global inequalities, transnational crime, and

postcolonial politics. Seeking to break mainstream criminology's silence on genocide and the plight of the Rohingya people, we posit the value of a criminological inquiry formed not so much around the recognition of different cultural values but around a shared understanding of human value and needs through collaborative working between scholars of the global north and south. We now turn to the methodology underpinning this paper.

Methods

The data presented here was gathered by the lead author across 2017-2018 when he visited the refugee camps at Balukhali in Bangladesh. Data was collected by the researcher using in-depth interviews and participant observation inside the refugee camps, undertaking a form of criminological ethnography (Treadwell, 2019). The lead author was placed in a unique position to gain empirical insights into the real-world, lived experiences and testimonies of those who had witnessed, watched, and experienced the devastating outcomes of the crimes against the Rohingya in Myanmar. In refugee camps in Bangladesh, the lead author interviewed 14 adult male respondents and 13 adult females for several hours each. Among the 13 female respondents, 8 were over 50 years of age and 5 were in the age group 25-45 years. Among 14 male respondents, 6 were above 50 years of age and 8 were aged between 18-45 years. Two of the men had been community group leaders in their village in Rakhine. All had fled Myanmar when the violence of the security forces intensified.

The methodological approach to the study could form the topic of an entire paper, but here we restrict ourselves to describing the basics of the approach. The initial ethnographic data collection was situated in places where extreme violence is often normalised, meaning these zones of dehumanization and their documentation come with complex ethical quandaries. Ethnographic research is an embodied immersion within a field site, whereby researchers use a methodological 'sensibility' to understand people's complex social realities (Treadwell,

2019). Social researchers who research vulnerable and silenced populations value ethnographic approaches for their emphasis on contextual understanding, research relationships, researcher empathy and appreciative understanding of agency and structure (Treadwell 2019, Krause, 2021). Criminological ethnography as a sensibility is best attuned to considering the messy and nuanced realities of life in a process of ongoing reflection and data analysis (Treadwell, 2019; Krause, 2021).

In terms of research methodology and ethics, a common question relates to the ethnographer's capability to interview and work with traumatized survivors. Additionally, the impact of the wider cultural and linguistic consequences of twentieth century waves of extreme violence on the ethnographic method should also be considered. The notion of a "traumatized" population can easily lead ethnographers toward understanding their approach and subjects merely as a re-enactment of violence. During the data collection, many of the participants were in an acute state of emotional distress; they cried, relived horrendous traumas, revisited the death of family members, partners, and children. Yet, many stated that they were extremely grateful for the presence of a researcher who would *break the silence*. They said they wanted their stories and experiences recorded and their voices heard. When the lead author arrived at a Western university with the data and the potential for a collaborative re-examination of the study became clear, conversations about vicarious trauma, gaining access to the Rohingya refugees' camps (a difficult task, where there are safety and security issues) and other practicalities² emerged with a shared desire to consider what had happened. While the quotes here may not perfectly capture what was stated, the power to convey their experiences was apparent. Working together, the research team sought to establish some shared understanding which

² The lead author gained access through an NGO, which provided translator services. As the researcher faced language barriers, one of the biggest challenges in gathering data was Rohingya people speak a dialect of the Bengali language; few speak any English. Accordingly, he used two translators and what is presented here has been translated from Rohingya Bengali and subsequently Bengali into English.

stressed the importance of having the voices of the participants heard in accordance with their stated wishes.

The experiences presented here do not include those of children as the NGO that provided access to data collection understandably did not allow the researcher to collect data from them. Revisiting traumatic experiences in Myanmar and the flight from the country had the clear potential to further harm the participants' mental well-being. The involvement of work with the NGO helped to ensure that respondents were protected as far as possible when considering the intense victimization they had suffered. Additionally, while there are female adults in the sample, many women in the camp declined to participate in the research study. To understand this, we need to consider cultural sensibilities and the fact that these women were orthodox Muslims. They also frequently experienced high levels of sexual violence (Anwary, 2022; Habib et al, 2018), something little discussed in the interviews which suggests *some silences were indeed harder to break*.

Breaking the Silence on Ethnic Cleansing: The voices of Rohingya people

Due to the Tatmadaw's state-sponsored violence, the Rohingya people have been what Ullah (2016: 285) regards as 'systematically marginalized, persecuted, deprived of basic rights, and abused'. As mentioned, these abuses are longstanding. However, their experiences of an escalation in violence compelled those persecuted to leave. The Rohingya people that were interviewed knew they were being driven from their homes as they were forced to flee:

"In our village, Myanmar army came in the name of conducting meeting and called all village men into a hall and they closed that hall. Then they started harassing sexually and also raped many young girls. In front of me many married and unmarried girls were brutally raped. They also looted the whole village by taking money and jewelries from many houses.

Initially, army use to disturb us and also behave violently, but not this much. They started raping our village girls and also, they used petrol bombs to burn many of the houses, and in that attack my house got burnt.

This incident made many people, including us to leave our village.”

“One day I was working in home, suddenly, I heard that my neighbor was shouting and also heard some bullet sound. When I came out and saw that Myanmar army was firing randomly and burning many houses in my village. Then I went back side of my home to hide myself. Then army came inside my home, they burnt my mother alive and killed my husband with a big sword. Then they also killed my sister in law and her husband, but I was helpless and was not able to do anything at that time. I was the only one who is alive in my whole family. I escaped from my village with other people in my village.”

Nural, an eighteen-year-old male who fled Myanmar with his family at the height of the violence, recognized that the escalation of violence was the key driving force that generated the flight of his own family:

“Army came to village as usual for checking and patrolling. Suddenly, they started attacking with long swords and also firing. In that firing many village people were killed and injured and in that attack my uncle was also injured. The army also took many schoolgirls from school and they also raped most of them publicly and some were also killed during the sexual assault. They also completely undressed many girls and threatened to shoot, if they don't run publicly. My family (8 members

including me) left the village, along with many village people, when violence was at peak.”

A 55-year-old female, Razia, suggested that there was a marked increase in the experience of violence over a short period that precipitated her decision to flee:

“I lost my husband long back due heart disease and I have 2 sons. I have seen many violent incidents in our village for the last 30 years, but I never experienced such kind of extreme violence, which, I experienced last 2 months in Myanmar like beheading, random firing, public raping and plundering etc. The Myanmar army entered and started attacking our houses with petrol bombs and was randomly firing on us without any mercy. Luckily, we escaped from our village by hiding in an abandoned school, with some other people as well.”

Chit, a 60-year-old madrasa teacher and a man who enjoyed some status in the community, showed how decisions to flee were often made in a manner that could reflect opportunity and social class, even in the experience of flight:

“I belong to middle class family, and I am a madrasa schoolteacher. One day, I was teaching in the Madrasa School, suddenly I heard some firing sound and by hearing that sound, I become alert and also, I informed our village people. Then me and some of relatives planned and prepared to leave our village for our safety purpose. After few hours, we left our village along with many of our village people. We didn't face any kind of violence as we left our village before any attack by the army”.

When the researcher asked how he came to Bangladesh and in what condition he replied:

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3 *“After leaving our village, me and some of my relatives walked for 3*
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5 *days completely to shore sea from where we got boat to reach*
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7 *Bangladesh. As I am very old, I faced some issue while walking for so*
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9 *long, but my relatives helped. As the boat man is a distant relative to*
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11 *me, so we did not pay anything to the boat man. Then we finally*
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13 *reached Bangladesh without much struggle”.*
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18 Chit’s account of flight, where violence was not experienced and there was little exploitation,
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20 contrasts significantly with the experiences of most interviewees. Most had suffered
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22 **profoundly** in the flight to Bangladesh, but these differences form an important caveat where
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24 the experiences of those exposed to the most significant crimes against humanity may not be
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26 universal. The generative context of insecurity and instability must be part of what occurred
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28 in Myanmar, accompanied by the crossing of lines **between** colonial experience, demography,
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30 religion, and the psychology of group loyalty. Victims may not always articulate such
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32 narratives or allow these experiences to come to the fore, but such factors form an ever-existing
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34 backdrop to their plight. As Hintjens (2001: 25) has suggested of the Rwanda genocide:
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39 *“Rwanda's genocide of Tutsi in 1994 is the most dramatic example of*
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41 *‘race science’ in action since the Holocaust.... In both cases, the*
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43 *genocide option was arrived at during a time of economic and political*
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45 *crisis, and a mix of terror and bribery was used to gain popular*
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47 *compliance. To make the genocide thinkable, myths of origin were*
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49 *reinvented, and differential forms of citizenship enforced. Identity*
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51 *politics became a means of legitimizing collective violence and*
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53 *scapegoating, and a knife in the back of the civilian population as a*
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55 *whole, victims and victimizers alike”.*
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3 In a close echo of Hintjen's (2001) point, one of our interviewees, a 35-year-old community
4 leader, suggested the military's violence was directly related to the more pronounced
5 articulation of a Rohingya identity and collectivism:
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10 *"Once we started protesting for our rights, national identity card and*
11 *citizenship. The state authority and Myanmar army started focusing the*
12 *leader who is working for the welfare of the Rohingya community and*
13 *creating awareness among people. They also killed many of the leaders*
14 *like me and group of people who are more active in the group. They*
15 *were also focusing on the teachers and madrasa teachers who were*
16 *creating awareness among students. These teachers were also killed by*
17 *the Myanmar army very brutally by beheading them and executing*
18 *them publicly. By seeing and hearing these kinds of incidents, I and my*
19 *family left our village with whatever cash I could arrange.*
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34 While the plight of the Rohingya has garnered the bulk of international attention, it is far
35 from the only ethnic conflict in Myanmar. The Tatmadaw has been engaged in ethnic
36 conflict with not only Rohingya, but also the Kachin and Kokang peoples who live in
37 Northern Myanmar (Chung-Chi, 2015). Although various ceasefires have occurred,
38 tensions between the military and this group have grown in recent years. However,
39 violence towards the Rohingya has operated on a much larger scale and in a more
40 egregious fashion than violence towards either the Kachin or the Kokang, particularly
41 when it accelerated across 2016-2017.
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53 A key aspect of understanding crimes against humanity must be an understanding of the
54 generative drivers where causes may not be revealed by victim discourse alone. In
55 unpacking what happened in late 2016 in Myanmar and the immediate and longer-term
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drivers of the ethnic cleansing (Zawacki, 2013; Zarni and Cowley, 2014), we need victim testimony alongside a historical framing. This research was undertaken in the period before the 2021 coup returned Myanmar to a military dictatorship and thereby diminished optimism for democratic progress in a nation characterised by decades long ethnic conflict and violent state regimes. There has been widespread commentary on a trigger event in October 2016 when three units of the Myanmar border guard force were attacked, and nine officers were killed in raids believed to have been carried out by Muslim insurgents based in Bangladesh (Al Jazeera, 2016). However, to focus on an immediate trigger event fails to understand the longstanding history of conflict tied to place that can bring a focus on culture, religion and transnational relations into sharp relief.

Parts of Myanmar, for instance, are rich in both mineral and forest resources including oil and gas deposits. Turnell (2011) outlined how billions are generated annually through the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise which is accompanied by other revenue streams including mining and gems, financing the military and helping them to maintain control. Moreover, at the start of February 2021, elected members of the country's National League for Democracy (NLD), the then ruling party, were deposed by Myanmar's military, who declared the results of the country's November 2020 election invalid and declared a state of emergency. However, from 2010 a somewhat tentative democratic transition had been underway in Myanmar (Jones, 2014; Nehru, 2015). Elections in 2015 resulted in a majority victory for Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party. At the democratic elections in early November 2020 the pro-democracy NLD performed well again, winning 396 out of 476 seats in parliament: an even larger margin of victory than in the 2015 election. The military, however, faced a significant setback when its proxy party the Union Solidarity and Development Party won only 33 seats (Reuters, 2021), although they retained substantial power. This included the right to possess

one-quarter of the seats in the national parliament, enabled by Myanmar's 2008 constitutional arrangements which was crafted by the Senior General of the military at the time (Nehru, 2015).

Since 2016, violence has intensified and marked San Suu Kyi's fall as a global figure of sympathy. As Bi (2018) outlines, the Rohingya were heavily targeted by the military and yet the Kokang and the Kachin population did not face the same violence as the Rohingya, perhaps because they both possess long-running support from China. In contrast, the Rohingya have very little external support outside Bangladesh. Accordingly, conflict with Rohingya for the Tatmadaw was useful and arguably set the stage for the 2021 military coup. Rather than considering the inhumanity in the military's action against the Rohingya, we must understand the functionalism of large-scale ethnic conflict in supporting Myanmar's military rulers' efforts to regain and retain power (Bi, 2018). As such, the political advantage military leaders gained from ethnic conflict is in stark contrast to those cleansed and silenced. From the relative safety of a refugee camp in Bangladesh, having been fortunate to have survived, Rohingya people did not articulate such understandings but understandably exposed their immediate precariousness and challenges:

"With the god's grace, we are surviving here, and we should not blame people who are helping us in many ways. As far as, food is concern it is sufficient for us which is offered in the distribution center. But from the day they started giving food items, they only give as same food items like rice, dal, oil, and other masala items. We don't get food items like meat, eggs or vegetables and we don't have any kind of earning through which we can buy such things to eat. Physical environment is very bad here and hygiene is also not able to maintain because of overcrowding. As a woman, I am very uncomfortable in using toilet, which is common and not even me, many women feel same

way like me. Because of physical environment people here usually get fever and other health issue but NGO and Bangladesh government is providing us medical support which we use whenever we fall sick. One main problem is the shelter house which is made up only out of plastic covering and bamboo stick, which is not strong enough to withstand any serious weather condition. It is summer because of which it is hotter, though, we are living here, but we are afraid of rainy season”.

Another interviewee described how being displaced created not only a sense of loss and trauma; but a reality marked by a **profound sense of** threat, anxiety and uncertainty that kept people focusing **upon** the **debilitating** immediacy of their situation:

“Currently there are many problems in the refugee camps. One of the major issues is non availability of water. Even after installing tube well, water is not coming properly as often tube well gets damaged because of which we have to go to another block to carry water which is very difficult for us, especially, old people like me. Weather is also a problem and most of shelters are made of plastic covering which absorb heat very much and it became difficult for us to live. Toilet and sanitation are also a major problem here especially for women and girls. Apart from that, electricity is not available here because of which we don’t know what is happening in nighttime”.

Having escaped the military’s repression in Myanmar, many survivors were faced with further inhumanity through conditions in the refugee camps. As Soundararjan (2019) has outlined, this included poor infrastructure involving overcrowding, a lack of sanitation, insufficient access to clean drinking water and the absence of electricity. Scholars have noted how this results in

the emergence of waterborne diseases including cholera, typhoid and diarrhoea, with around 64,000 cases of Acute Watery Diarrhoea reported in April 2019 alone in the Rohingya refugee camps, with 40% of cases amongst children aged under five (Akhter et al, 2020).

Conclusions

This paper's findings outlined original qualitative data that exposed the plight of the Rohingya during the height of Myanmar's state-sponsored military brutality across 2016-2017. This included how the military attacked their villages and homes, engaged in sexual violence against Rohingya girls and women and murdered many Rohingya people often through setting individuals and whole villages alight. Many interviewees had lost loved ones – family, friends, and neighbours – during the height of the violence. Some individuals left what few possessions they still had behind and fled particularly to neighbouring Bangladesh, often by boat in an attempt to survive. The findings section also contextualised the data with analysis of the long-running and complex nature of the ethnic conflict in Myanmar, which cannot be solely attributed to the legacy of colonialism as it brings into focus issues surrounding both religion and culture.

Indeed, some critics of new and contemporary forms of criminological theory have suggested that they, and especially new realist approaches, have demonstrated a concerning tendency to ignore race or simplify the decolonisation of criminology (Philips et al, 2020; Moosavi, 2020). Others have highlighted criminology's lack of concern with crimes against humanity like genocide (Karstedt et al, 2021; Kazyrytski, 2022; Maier-Katkin, et al, 2009). In this article, we have tried to *break this silence* on genocide through a collaborative research approach between academics in the global north and south regarding the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, involving original data gleaned through an ethnographic study. In consequence, we have been able to push beyond often abstracted theoretical accounts and shed empirical light upon the

Rohingya's traumatic lived experiences and complex sentiments, giving a voice to one of the most persecuted minorities in the world who have been the victim of the crime of all crimes.

As Moosavi (2019: 259) has suggested: "criminology is dominated by white men from the United States and the United Kingdom in respects to which criminological scholarship is most widely published, cited and taught. This is not because such scholars are most capable of producing the best criminological scholarship but because of socio-historic factors that have crafted a distinct narrative about whose knowledge is superior, which results in the privileging of Western criminologists." This privileging is apparent in all respects. Whilst most scholars are notionally welcoming of contemporary attempts to create a more diverse criminology and to challenge the narrowness of current academic representation, some of the voices now calling for the 'decolonisation of criminology' engage in what Moosavi (2020: 348) refers to as 'tokenistic decolonisation'. Here, little is offered in moving beyond the standard scholarly critiques of key Western-centric theoretical frameworks. In addition there is a scarcity of praxis in promoting the voices of those who are victims of the crimes of all crimes in the global south or in elucidating the structural factors that have detrimentally impacted upon non-Western criminology.

If Moosavi (2019: 260) is correct that - "criminology remains Westerncentric because of a complex mixture of orientalist attitudes, neoliberal pressures, limited non-Western scholarship, non-Western inferiority complexes and discrimination against non-Western scholars and scholarship" - then this collaborative attempt to consider the genocide in Myanmar and Bangladesh that has united scholars across geographical boundaries might be far more valuable than mere lamentation of the current state of disciplinary inertia. Indeed, it may not be possible to distinguish between Western and non-Western (or northern and southern) knowledge given human history has involved so much reciprocal exchange that neatly demarcated binaries of West and non-West do not exist.

Perhaps, then, a better way forward might partially lie in the international ethnographic networks suggested by contemporary realist scholars (Winlow and Hall, 2019). Such ethnographic networks can help researchers push beyond the existing limitations of postcolonial and mainstream theoretical accounts of genocide and extreme violence by directing complex empirical light onto the lived experiences of individuals across both the global north and south, particularly regarding issues that are under-researched. These collaborative networks can help to gather the complex sentiments of individuals across geographical boundaries, who in this case had endured multiple forms of trauma due to Myanmar military's long-running persecution against them. Such networks can also help to further connect history and contemporary structural processes to people's subjective lives, cultivating more complex and collaborative scholarly understandings. Legacies of colonialism and its extraction of value are clearly contextual, forming background factors in the current violence in Myanmar. But as we aimed to show here, the drivers of that violence today are far more complex than the legacy of colonial power alone. Neither can the violence be understood simply in the articulated experiences of victims. However, those victims' voices reveal a harrowing reality – the human effects of the crime of all crimes - that cannot be easily ignored.

The greatest issue in contemporary criminology might be a failure to recognise that the overarching return to social constructionism and the multifaceted hierarchies of identity that are core to so much of the progressive calls for inclusivity of marginalised voices fails to establish shared interests, values and commonalities that cut across all social groups. Instead, they seek to constantly play upon the peripheries that differentiate people in the global north and south - sex and gender, social class, race, ethnic or caste groups, skin pigmentation, languages spoken and so forth – differences rather than both our shared humanity and collective values.

While it may be realistic to claim that there will always be suppressed individuals (Bhambra 2007), we ought to accept that contemporary genocide is not simply framed by historical factors

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2
3 like colonial legacies, but enacted by ordinary men, neither sadistic nor dysfunctional, who are
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5 often driven by powerful narratives that can drive, meld and harden perceptions, biases and
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7 outlooks. Critical realists such as Roy Bhaskar have encouraged a reconsideration of the nature
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9 of the world that is not one of ever plurality. The classic example offered by Bhaskar (2013)
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11 is of Isaiah Berlin's observations on Germany under Nazi party rule, and the four statements -
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13 the country was depopulated; Millions of people died; Millions of people were killed; Millions
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15 of people were massacred - as descriptors of the Holocaust. As Bhaskar (2013) notes, while
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17 all four are indeed true as descriptions of the murder of six million people, the last statement is
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19 the most evaluative and accurate description of the reality. In Myanmar, from the postcolonial
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21 to the present, inter-ethnic relations became very real when zero-sum thinking on ultra-
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23 nationalism and identity hardened ethnic divides with deadly consequences, precisely because
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25 the generals had power to send in the troops. In many ways, the state-sponsored violence of the
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27 Tatmadaw can be seen as the powerful militarisation of ethnicity captured so well by one
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29 Rohingya woman in 2016: "It is an ethnic cleansing, they massacred only the Rohingya"ⁱ.
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ⁱ These words, the perfect conclusion to this paper, were not spoken to the lead author but to a Cable News Network reporter in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the biggest refugee camp in the world in 2016. There were similar sentiments expressed in the lead author's ethnographic research; but as this so aptly captured the reality of what happened in Myanmar we have used these words.