

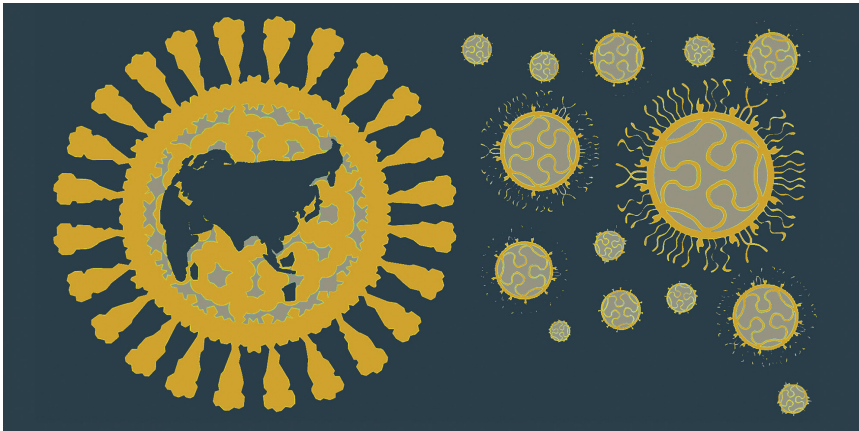
The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives
on Media, Political Issues

edited by

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME I – CULTURE, ART, MEDIA



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Contents

Introduction	7
<i>Giorgio Milanetti, Marinda Miranda, Marina Morbiducci</i>	
1. Tell a Story to End the Pandemic. COVID-19 and the Remedy of Narration: Instances from India and Italy	17
<i>Giorgio Milanetti</i>	
2. <i>Hamso hamṣāo</i> , <i>Coronavirus ko dūr bhagāo</i> : Hindi Satire and Humour as Psychological and Ideological Resources during the COVID-19 Crisis	37
<i>Fabio Mangraviti</i>	
3. Narrating the Pandemic: <i>Paṭacitrās</i> of West Bengal, India	71
<i>Sanjukta Das Gupta</i>	
4. Representation of COVID-19 in Bangladesh: From Mainstream to Alternative Visual Narratives	105
<i>Zakir Hussain Raju</i>	
5. Shooting Back: Photography and Videomaking to Confront the Silencing of Being Locked Up During the COVID-19 Lockdown in the Rohingya Refugee Camps of Bangladesh	129
<i>Mara Matta</i>	
6. Culture of Wearing and Keeping on Facemasks in Korea: Beyond Confucianism	171
<i>Antonetta L. Bruno</i>	
7. The Impact of the Coronavirus on the Japanese Verbal Arts (<i>wagei</i>)	191
<i>Matilde Mastrangelo</i>	

8. Same Issues, Different Perceptions: A Pilot Study of Pandemic Related Issues Among Italian and Japanese Populations 205
Marco Montanari, Simona Perone, Mika Omori, Ayano Kayo, Ingrid Barth
9. English as a Lingua Franca and the International Pandemic Discourse: Investigating the BA First-Year Students' Questionnaire Data Gained at Dept. of Oriental Studies, University of Rome Sapienza 219
Marina Morbiducci
- Authors' Bionotes 243

5. Shooting Back: Photography and Videomaking to Confront the Silencing of Being Locked Up During the COVID-19 Lockdown in the Rohingya Refugee Camps of Bangladesh

Mara Matta

The right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself.
Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, p. 44)

Abstract

Bangladesh hosts the world's largest refugee camp in the Ukhiya district of Cox's Bazar, a very beautiful but geopolitically sensitive and environmentally fragile coastal area. Kutupalong Camp is 'home' to almost one million Rohingyas who have fled Myanmar – their country – after various waves of violence. As UNHCR recently reported, in Cox's Bazar "the COVID-19 pandemic has made life even harder for some 880,000 Rohingya refugees living in camps as well as for thousands of impoverished Bangladeshis living in nearby communities" (2021). This article is part of an ongoing research study on the strategies of material and symbolic survival and the ways images and narratives – together with silences and absences – are employed to create another public sphere where Rohingya refugees can talk as *citizens of the world*. Starting from the political and philosophical considerations drawn from Hannah Arendt (1943; 1973) and Giorgio Agamben (1995; 1998) works on refugees, this preliminary contribution looks at the artistic and visual strategies that Rohingyas have begun devising during the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic to cope with the increasingly daunting outcomes of forced displacement in the Bangladeshi camps of Cox's Bazar.

Keywords: COVID-19; Rohingya refugees; Cox's Bazar; Kutupalong Camp; photography; cinema; regimes of visibility.

5.1. Introduction*

The Rohingyas are often described as one of the most persecuted people in the world¹. Their right to live in Myanmar as legal citizens has been repeatedly denied by the government, which refuses to include them among the 135 ethnic groups of the country². Deprived of legal recognition and citizenship rights, the Rohingyas are considered as *enemy aliens*³ and the Burmese government sees them as “illegal Bengali migrants” from neighbouring Bangladesh (Kipgen 2013, pp. 1–14). Bangladesh, on the other side, has accommodated them in temporary shelters and considers them “Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals” (FDMN)⁴. Every effort at proving that Rohingyas are Myanmar nationals has triggered more violence and hostility among the Burmese people. Despite their praised resilience and efforts at coping with calamities, fires, and all kind of diseases, among which we also count COVID-19, Rohingyas are still far from achieving what they have been asking for since the 1960s, that is, the recognition of their “right to have rights” (Arendt 1973, p. 298) and the reinstatement of their citizenship in Myanmar.

* I would like to thank all the people who have contributed to the present article, especially Shafiur Rahman, the contributing Rohingya photographers and all the people who have been interviewed.

¹ See, among others, Islam (2021, pp. 14–40).

² As Patrick Hein has pointed out, “The post-2011 electoral competition and struggle for power and state control reached unprecedented ethnicisation levels as Rohingyas were totally delegitimised by having their resident status converted from quasi-citizens (NRCs) via proxy permanent residents (white cardholders) to undocumented, *de facto* nonresidents.” (2018, p. 379)

³ The concept of ‘enemy alien’ has a long history and has been attracting renown attention in the last decades. As the recent book *War and Citizenship* (2021) by Daniela Caglioti highlights, such concept changed during time and can be considered the outcome of changes that occurred during the XIX and XX centuries, together with the development of the ideas of nation-state, nationality, and citizenship. Therefore, the definition of ‘enemy alien’ is never just applied to foreigners who enter a territory and appear to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it is a more complex concept that needs to be unpacked in different ways in different geopolitical spaces and historical times. See Caglioti (2021).

⁴ On 28 September 2017, the Foreign Affairs Secretary of Bangladesh, Minister M Shahidul Haque declared that the government had decided to call Rohingya people “forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals” instead of “refugees”. He also affirmed that, despite the controversy such label might create, Bangladesh was intentioned to raise the matter at the United Nations. See <<https://www.thedailystar.net/city/forcibly-displaced-myanmar-nationals-1469374>>.

In the last ten years, starting from June 2012, new waves of violence have struck the Rakhine State of Myanmar (Burma). The Burmese Army, supported by part of the Bamar Buddhists – the majoritarian ethnic and religious group – have targeted Rohingyas, causing the fleeing of thousands of people and leaving hundreds injured, internally dispersed, or dead.⁵ Many of those who managed to escape to other countries found shelter in Bangladesh. After the horrific attacks of 2017, Bangladesh witnessed an unprecedented inflow of Rohingya refugees, with the camps around Cox’s Bazar swelling up to one million people. At the time, the local population and the Bangladeshi government showed a positive response towards the asylum seekers, with media displaying a supportive attitude and calling for attention to the plight of the Rohingyas. In less than three years, however, and with COVID-19 hitting the shores of Cox’s Bazar, the narrative changed and the Rohingyas became a *threat* to Bangladesh’s national security and its public health system.

In the aftermath of the 2017 massacres and the new exodus of Rohingyas towards Bangladesh, Michael W. Charney addressed again this sensitive subject, trying to clarify the misunderstandings surrounding the origins of ethnic identities in the Rakhine state, once known as Arakan⁶. Arguing against the idea that these identities are “fixed and biological” and claiming that such misinterpretation has led to “to policy errors by the Government of Myanmar and NGOs on the ground in Rakhine⁷, Charney stated that, since 1962, the military junta and the government of Myanmar, including the current one, has been supporting an extreme form of ethno-nationalism that privileges the Buddhist Bamar “along unscientific, nineteenth century Orientalist notions of race.” (Ibid.) On such biased and false assumptions, he affirmed, “the 1982 citizenship laws [...] did not include Rohingya as a *Taingyintha* (national race)” (Ibid.), and the Rohingya have been denied their legitimate rights to citizenship.

⁵ On the Burmese politics regarding ethnicities and ‘minorities’, see, among others Burke (2016, pp. 258-283), Thawngmung (2016, pp. 527-547).

⁶ In the last few decades, various studies have been published on the history of Arakan and the origin of a Muslim enclave in what is nowadays the northern part of the Rakhine State. See, among others Chan (2005, pp. 396-420), Mohajan (2018, pp. 19-46), Haque (2017, pp. 454-469).

⁷ See Charney (2018). Available online at: <<https://eprints.soas.ac.uk>>.

The rigid labelling that characterized British colonial praxis translated into a progressive essentialising of local communities along the lines of ethnicity and religious belonging. Stripping Rakhine Muslims and Hindus, namely Rohingyas, of their citizenship and making them stateless in their own country, contributed to the impunity and the condoned violence against this ethnic group. Human Rights Watch (2013) has claimed that the horrible attacks perpetrated in June and October 2012 against the Rohingyas “were organized, incited, and committed by local Arakanese political party operatives, the Buddhist monkhood, and ordinary Arakanese, at times directly supported by state security forces⁸.” They concluded that the atrocities “committed against the Rohingya and Kaman Muslim communities in Arakan State beginning in June 2012 amount to crimes against humanity carried out as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing”. (Ibid.)

Ian Holliday has also pointed out that “as Buddhist chauvinism develops among the Bamar majority, other Muslim groups are finding their citizenship status increasingly challenged. While not reduced to the level of the broadly stateless Rohingya, their rights are certainly being degraded.” (2014, pp. 409-10) This degradation continues, almost uninterrupted, since many decades, and it is reproduced, sometimes even reinforced, inside the camps. Kutupalong, which epitomizes the everlasting memory and the continuous absurdity of the camp as the “*nomos* of the modern world” (Agamben 1998), was set up in 1992, in the immediate aftermath of the Myanmar government’s *Operation Pyi Thaya* (Operation Clean up and Beautiful Nation) that unleashed the Burmese Army against the Rohingyas living in the northern part of the Rakhine state⁹. Once crossed the Naf River, the natural water border between Bangladesh and Myanmar, Rohingya refugees were divided and dispatched to different camps. Kutupalong quickly became the largest one, located along the coastline, prone to floods and landslides, and yet close enough to Myanmar to maintain alive some hope to return. The shelters are made of bamboo and tarpaulin, providing little protection during the winter and even less during the rainy and hot monsoon season. Fires, cyclones, scarcity of clean water,

⁸ See *Human Rights Watch Report on Burma* (2013), available online at: <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/burma>>.

⁹ On the atrocities of *Operation Pyi Thaya* and other crimes against humanity committed by the Burmese State against the Rohingyas, see Dussich (2018, pp. 4-24).

and the precarity of daily life make it difficult to envision a better future, especially for the majority of Kutupalong's residents, made up of children and young people.

The restrictions imposed by the Bangladesh government on Rohingya refugees, such as the prohibition of marriage between a Rohingya and a local Bangladeshi national, the interdiction for children to access the national school system, and other measures which are meant to keep Rohingyas in a state of precarity, have created a pervasive sense of alienation as they are enforced to discourage asylum seekers from pursuing permanent settlement in Bangladesh¹⁰.

5.2. COVID, Camps, Citizenship: Disease, Degradation, Denial

It has been three years since 11 March 2020, when the Director-General of WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic¹¹, driving countries worldwide to take drastic measures to curtail the virus and limit its

¹⁰ The present government, led by PM Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League Party, has been unendingly praised for her support to the Rohingya people. However, as it is clear from the paucity of studies which address this issue, there is no attention or concern by the international community regarding the precariousness of life and the repeated abuses inflicted on ethnic and religious 'minorities' in Bangladesh by gangs belonging to the majority (Bengali Sunni Muslims, constituting almost 90% of the total population), often with the support of the Bangladeshi security forces (police personnel, army soldiers, members of special battalions, etc.). Suppressing those voices that called for a recognition, inside the newly written Constitution of 1972, of the rights of the people which did not identify themselves as Bengali and/or Sunni Muslims, *Bongobondhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman affirmed the birth of a nation where those who were not Bangla-speaking Bengalis were *de facto* marginalized and *de jure* relegated to the status of 'ethnic minorities', 'sub-nationals' and 'small tribes' in their own territory. This form of ethnic and religious hypernationalism closely mirrors the one adopted by Myanmar, although Bangladesh – so far – has not modified its citizenship act in such draconian manners. India, however, did so in 2019, giving way to a sort of witch-hunting in its Northeastern regions to find and detain (in newly built 'detention camps' like the one in Assam) all the residents who were not entitled to citizenship. The majority of them appear to be Bengali speaking Muslims, labelled as 'infiltrators' and scrapped of any civic right. For more details on the question of indigeneity and minority rights in Bangladesh, see, among others, Brandt (2019, pp. 150-170), Zobaida (2017). For a brief discussion of the same issue in India, see Shleiter, de Maaker (2010, pp. 16-17). On the amendment of India Citizenship Act 2019, see, among others, Jayal (2019, pp. 33-50), Srivastava, Tiwari (2022, pp. 303-332).

¹¹ See WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020, available at: <<https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>>.

spread among the population. However, in refugee camps around the world, COVID-19 has often been perceived as *just* another of the multiple challenges that people face, sometimes not even the most threatening one. Although certainly an aggravating element of a life already made *bare* (Agamben 1998) by the situation that refugees and displaced people are forced to endure on a daily basis¹², the fear elicited by an invisible menace haunting their already precarious lives can be associated with the claustrophobic feeling that often embodies life spent in a camp. Locked inside fenced shelters, with army patrolling the area and officers monitoring their movements, refugees live in a sort of permanent lockdown, a limbo where they have to come to terms with all kinds of diseases, ailments and miseries. In this sense, as Agamben highlights, the concept of biopolitics emerges as coterminous with the norm of a “sovereign exception” (1998, p. 6), where biological life is located at the centre of the calculations of the modern State. (Ibid.) These power dynamics and “the original fiction of sovereignty” (Agamben 1995, p. 117) are thrown into crisis by the refugee, who is the only “imaginable figure” of our time that can break up the alleged “identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality” (Ibid.).

Giorgio Agamben (1995) and Hannah Arendt (1943) before him posit that refugees represent a disquieting issue for the nation-state because they challenge its system to the core, while also representing “the vanguard of their peoples [...]” (Arendt 1943, p. 274).

In her powerful essay *We Refugees*, Arendt lamented the fact that refugees actually “don’t like to be called refugees.” (1943, p. 3). In her ironic, almost sarcastic tone, she elaborated on what is to be a refugee and the pain that comes from the realization of one’s loss of identity and, sometimes, self-dignity. Arendt described the feeling of being *dis-placed* and the constant urge (that she despised but many felt necessary) towards ‘assimilation’, a strategy that, in certain conditions,

¹² The concept of *bare life* was developed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (originally published as *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, 1995), following insights into biopolitics by Foucault and the nexus between sovereign power, life ‘stripped bare, and totalitarian regimes in the works by Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. Agamben claims that his inquiry into such concepts “concerns precisely this hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power.” (1998, p. 6) He concludes that “the two analyses cannot be separated, and that the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.*” (Ibid., *emphasis in the original*)

appears as *the way* to not be suspected of unloyalty by the host country. However, no matter how much one tried to fit in, the haunting sense of being always out of place – and perhaps even out of rhythm, almost *asynchronous* – created much despair and an unbearable feeling of alienation to the point that, as Arendt denounced, those same refugees who displayed great levels of ‘optimism’ while in public were the ones who would then go home to kill themselves¹³.

Giorgio Agamben, reading through Arendt’s essay after more than 50 years (1995), has pointed out how her concerns are still valid today and has solicited renewed attention to some of her propositions, especially the one that the refugee is to be considered the “vanguard” of all the others, all of us, to come. Perceived as a threat from within by the nation-state that engenders such tragedy, and from without by others that have to tackle the consequent ‘human flows’, the statistics tell us that there are approximately 80 million people around the world who are either internally displaced (IDPs) or looking for asylum in other countries. Of these, 26 million are labelled ‘refugees’. These are numbers worth of a pandemic of abysmal proportions, of which Arendt warned us long before other global pandemics could be foreseen. This is not to say that refugees are equal to a public health threat. What I mean to subscribe to are Arendt’s and Agamben’s warnings regarding the failure of the nation-state to guarantee protection and ensure the recognition of rights to human beings for the simple fact that they are human and not, more specifically, citizens of some country.

Citizenship rights, bestowed on some and denied to others, have become a game of flipping coins and various countries got the terrible habit of scrapping people of their legal and civic rights to the point that *this* has become a viral threat, a weapon increasingly used to dehumanize and turn millions of people into “noncitizen residents” (Agamben 1995, p. 118), or, using Hammar’s terminology, “*denizens*”¹⁴ – which, as Agamben highlights, has the merit of showing that the

¹³ Arendt underlines how suicidal rates had exponentially gone up among the Jewish refugees. She repeatedly denounced such abnormal insistence on the necessity of being optimistic and performing optimism in every public occasion.

¹⁴ According to Tomas Hammar’s trichotomy model, there are three “entrance gates into the country” and three corresponding statuses for people who happen to be *aliens*, *denizens*, and *citizens*. Foreign citizens are labelled *aliens* if they have entered a new country without residence rights. In this case, their status is regulated by the government. *Denizens* are, instead, those foreign citizens who do acquire permanent

concept *citizen* is no longer adequate to describe the socio-political reality of modern states." (Ibid.) Such failure of the nation-state as a system of governance is brought even more under the spotlight when it turns human beings into refugees. Thus, Agamben invites us to start with this "unique figure" and imagine a new political space where we all occupy the place of a refugee, because it is through such figure that we can come "to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come" (Ibid., p. 114).

The space of the refugee, though, is a peculiar one, as Arendt had pointed out, as "[h]istory has forced the status of outlaws [...] (1943, p. 274) upon them. These outlaws, who speak the truth "even to the point of 'indecenty'" (Ibid.), nurture the awareness that their story is "tied up with that of all other nations", no matter how much effort is put into silencing, persecuting, and forcefully disappearing them.

As outlawed avant-gardists, many refugees received the news of the COVID-19 pandemic as yet another absurd element of their tragic play and saw it almost like a mockery of their fate. Already looked down and locked up in most of the countries that build camps to accommodate them, many refugees were at first suspicious, and then utterly afraid, of the strategies that governments were devising to 'protect' them from the virus. In the Ukhiya District of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, inside the world's largest refugee camp, the news that a viral and potentially deadly illness was fast spreading solicited the government to enforce drastic measures on the already limited freedom of movement of the Rohingyas. The news about COVID-19, therefore, was often received by the refugees locked in the camps with dismissal, doubt, concern, and even amusement. The camp was fenced by barbed iron wire and the access to internet connection had been completely cut off since a few months when more restrictive measures were put into place and enforced at gun point. The feelings of disconcerted disbelief turned into fear, panic, and anxiety about the *real* danger that refugees were facing. In a time when life vulnerability is further exacerbated by what Judith Butler calls an "accelerating condition of precarity" (2015, p. 10), photography, videomaking, music, and poetry, became venues for escaping (without escapism) the harsh reality of everyday life, where the lockdown

residence but do not undergo a form of naturalisation process. For more details, see Hammar (1990).

plunged Rohingyas into an increasingly dreadful state of misery and silencing. Among the narratives emerging from the Rohingya camps, documented in the book edited by Imtiaz A. Hussain (2022), scholar Raisa Rasheeka looked at those related to the time of the spreading of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Rasheeka highlights the fact that, while Bangladesh was enforcing a nationwide lockdown that “brought with it an all-too-familiar economic shock to the already underprivileged populations” (2022, p. 191), for Rohingyas these measures, such as “the call to stay home has been causing anxiety that has little to do with COVID-19 itself.” (Ibid.) For refugee women, this was an even more daunting situation to cope with, as it added new violence to an already dramatic situation. As Rasheeka concludes:

The Rohingya women are not vulnerable because they live in camps. They are not vulnerable because they have no place to go. They are not weak because they are locked up in the same house with their abusers due to COVID-19. They are vulnerable because they have been made vulnerable through social, legal, religious and political structure since their birth. One true COVID-19 consequence: these already vulnerable women have become even more vulnerable by taking away the illusion of security they were blanketed under. (2022, pp. 202-203)

To confront this gloomy scenario and also involve young women in the process of overcoming further disenfranchisement and potential new violence, art became a site for channelling creative energies and deploy what Barbara Mizstal calls ‘civic creativity’, a form of creativity that “provides us with ideas on how to democratize and humanize the workings of modern societies” (2007, p. 64, also quot. in Mendes 2023, p. 2). Using imagination to act upon the imposed silence and invisibilization of everyday existence, Rohingya youths turned into artists, activists and public intellectuals who refused to let the lockdown imposed by COVID-19 become another tragic act in their unfolding drama.

Engaging “civic imagination” (Jenkins et al. 2020) to speak up and break the silence, they have begun fashioning new artistic venues for nurturing some *optimism* about their future. And although we need to be wary of such optimism, in the same way Arendt was distrustful of the kind displayed by her fellow Jews, it is crucial to listen to it and make all possible efforts to lift the curtain of silence that nation-states have been trying to lower on refugees, including the Rohingyas.

5.3. Of Images and Imagination during COVID-19: Present Absences and Haunting Silences

In a time of crisis like the one engendered by COVID-19, when citizens of every country appeared to be coming together under a renowned sense of community and global citizenship, the images and the tales emerging from Cox's Bazar refugee camps contradict simplistic narratives, forcing the spectators to leave their comfort zone and listen to dissonant and discordant microhistories. The role that images and imagination play in shaping histories from the camps are of particular interest in the frame of their civic engagement. Arjun Appadurai defines imagination as a very important "social force" (1996; 2000) in the context of globalization. As he clarifies:

If globalization is characterised by disjunctive flows that generate acute problems of social well-being, one positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics of globalization is the role of the imagination in social life (Appadurai 1996). The imagination is no longer a matter of individual genius, escapism from ordinary life, or just a dimension of aesthetics. It is a faculty that informs the daily lives of ordinary people in myriad ways: It allows people to consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic association and collaboration, often across national boundaries. (Appadurai 2000, p. 6)

This "role of the imagination as a popular, social, collective fact in the era of globalization" (Ibid.) and the importance that Appadurai acknowledges to "its split character" (Ibid.) – as a force that can both discipline and control modern citizens, but also support and nurture "collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life" (Ibid.) – is also essential in creating a new regime of visibility and "countervisuality", defined by Nicholas Mirzoeff as "the right to look", a Derridean expression pointing to "the terms on which reality is to be understood" (2011, p. 28), in opposition to forms of visibility imposed by the state, the media, the international organizations and other systems of power.

The Arendtian "right to have rights" gets extended here to "the right to look" as a fundamental one in reclaiming a space for agency and a time for 'being real': it is, in fact, the core issue of what gets to be mediated and represented that is questioned and reassessed in the works made by the Rohingyas, as they are constantly subjected to forms of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1975). In her classic essay on *Visual*

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Laura Mulvey applied a psychoanalytical concept firstly developed by Freud to discuss the representation of women in classic cinema. The mainstream cinematic gaze was, according to her, modelling women as objects “to be looked at” by a (usually) male, patriarchal gaze. Such gaze could be *voyeuristic* or *fetishist*, projecting women in a twisted way, either in a negative or in an idealized form. This theoretical framework of the “to-be-looked-at-ness” affects in similar ways – patronizing and moralistic – the regimes of portrayal and surveillance that regard and come to define the refugee, where their *refugeeness* becomes naturalized, essentialized, and almost the only identity that sticks to people forced to flee their country.

This naturalization conflated into victimizing images of the Rohingyas and has disempowered them and silenced their voices to the point that they appear in some recent documentaries like *Rohingya* (2020), directed by the renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, and the award-winning *Wandering: A Rohingya Story*, by Canadian filmmakers Olivier Higgins and Mélanie Carrier (2020), as ghost-like figures who walk into camera and off camera, leaving behind some sort of spectral aura.

The emergence of COVID-19 in March 2020, while these documentaries were in post-production and ready to hit festivals around the world, turned into an opportunity for some Rohingya youths. Occupying the space left vacant by the NGOs and mainstream media, all barred from the camps at the beginning of the pandemic, and making the most of the haunting silence that fell upon the camps, Rohingya youths organized themselves into art collectives and began to fill the vacuum and confront the plight of the *double pandemic* afflicting them: the *voicelessness* that often accompanies statelessness, and the unfolding drama of the COVID-19, with its curtain of silences and absences amplifying the sense of suspended life that people endure when forced into exile.

5.3.1. Spectral Figurantes in ‘Our’ Eyes. Documentaries on the Rohingyas

At the crossroads of statelessness and citizenship, at the borders between South and Southeast Asia, various marginalized communities struggle to reclaim their rightful place. Despite some positive efforts at limiting the damages in the refugee camps, Hussain and the contributors to *Rohingya Camp Narratives: Tales From the ‘Lesser Roads’ Traveled*,

poignantly highlight that there are “tales less told” and “pathways less traveled” (2022) that demand attention beyond the issues of bare survival. Rohingya refugees live side by side with other minoritized groups like the Buddhist Rakhines and the Marmas, for instance, but also share the space with millions of local Bangladeshis whose lives have been made more difficult by the presence of the camps. The solidarity and the efforts shown by the local community have slowly waned out after 2017’s new inflows and resentment and conflict have started to emerge.

When COVID-19 hit Bangladesh, Rohingyas found themselves escaping this double threat hunting and haunting their lives: the pandemic and the military. The latter has always been a pervasive presence in their life, albeit often *invisibilized*. What remains perceptible and clear even today is the tightening net of power that imposes surveillance and restricts people’s mobility, finding strong social consensus not just among the Burmese Buddhist population, but also among the Bangladeshi Muslims who have been presented with the agenda of necessary ‘securitization’ of citizens. Fencing the shelters, enforcing relocations towards unescapable floating sites, preventing refugees to go out from the camps to work, or simply access internet cafés, are all systems of control that have been affecting the lives of millions of Rohingyas living at the limits of such dehumanizing system – the nation-state – no matter if their own country or a hosting one.

While the world was caught off guard by the COVID-19 pandemic, slowly plunging into various waves of lockdowns and staring at the macabre performance of anonymous coffins being carried away from hospitals in a procession of unending mourning, in Kutupalong Camp things were beginning to change from surreal to hyperreal. After the attacks of August 2017, which had called new attention to the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh – where international organizations, photographers, and filmmakers had immediately flocked to record ‘a Rohingya story’ for the world to witness –, in March 2020 things suddenly fell creepily quiet. The staff of the various organizations operating in the camps were thrown out. The Wi-Fi had been cut off (and stayed off for months) and a spectral silence had engulfed Kutupalong. However, the crews of famous documentaries such as the one directed by the Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei, *Rohingya* (2020), and the one jointly co-directed by the Canadian filmmakers Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins, *Wandering: A Rohingya Story* (2020), were in post-production and ready to hit the international film festivals.

Wandering, shot “with the invaluable participation of refugees from the Kutupalong camp”, as the Vimeo version of the film underlines, was going to be released worldwide to much acclaim. This documentary, recipient of numerous international awards, was inspired by the photo project of Canadian documentary photographer Renaud Philippe and edited following the words of the Rohingya refugee poet Kala Miya (Kalam). The filmmakers, in their own words, wished to “dare to use art and cinema to reach out to people and bring witness to this reality”¹⁵. Following this statement, we see two kids reversed on a bamboo mat, inside what we assume to be one of the shelters in Kutupalong Camp. Concurrently one hears a boy whose voice pans slowly over the bodies of the children, hovering on them as if it were a disembodied sound, *the voice of a ghost*. As a matter of fact, he is saying: “As a kid, I believed in ghosts. I was told some are good. Some are bad.” The sequence cuts to another photograph of another reversed body of a child, half covered by a *lungi*, in a dark room whose grey concrete floor occupies most of the space. The voice appears haunting them and conveys to the spectator an uncanny feeling, as the viewer is not sure whether the children are actually asleep or dead.

These words dictate the pace of the entire film, as we wander around the maze that is Kutupalong, silently following the lives of people who might feel they are *already dead*. In an interview, Renaud Philippe affirms that the film did not want to go into the politics of the Rohingya issue, but rather “show their beauty despite the context in which they are living, hoping you’ll feel the humans behind the problem.” (Ibid.) The director Mélanie Carrier adds that “The story and poetry of Rohingya refugee Kala Mia, who was an important collaborator in the field, became a carrying element of the film’s narrative framework. His poems and story are carried by the voice of our friend Mohammed Shofi.” We then see Mohammed Shofi, also a poet, introducing himself from a snowing site that we discover is Québec, Canada, where he has relocated after spending 18 years of his life in Kutupalong. Mélanie Carrier ends her presentation by saying: “We hope that this film, which focuses first and foremost on the human condition, will bring to you meaning, reflections, and encounters.” (Ibid.) This last word – ‘encounters’ – is a delivered promise, although in a rather complicated manner.

¹⁵ Available at: <<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/wanderingfilm/552732497?autoplay=1>>.

Rohingya, the third film of Ai Weiwei's trilogy on human mobilities, also appears to have the wish to *re-humanize* his subjects, following them in their daily lives without ever intervening in the scenes with dialogues or filmed interviews. His silent camera-eye observes, looking and being looked-at, sometimes even disrupting the human flow of people who pass by, running errands, playing, cooking, taking showers, burying their dead, or simply walking around. Ai Weiwei's camera intrudes and creates ruptures in the everyday of the Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar. We assume the refugees know what Ai Weiwei and his crew are doing and *why*, but nobody talks straight into camera, except for one little girl who sings a song without any subtitles to tell us what the lyrics mean. To make sense of what we are watching through verbal explanations or subtitled dialogues does not seem to be the aim of Ai's documentary. There are no dialogues throughout the two hours film and the only *noise* is that of children cheerfully playing in the muddy fields, jumping around, and sometimes mocking the filmmakers. There is no moment of 'real' silence; we always either hear the sound of the busy camp's life or some off-screen music, with the *Ave Maria* of Schubert being the most allusive and evocative one – almost conveying the idea of the camp as a giant nativity populated by many Madonnas with child. Silence is a presence in the ponds, the alleys, the huts, the mosques, and the graveyards that dot Kutupalong. Ai Weiwei never uses voice-over or other strategies to inform the viewers of the *special* status of the people in the film. Only at the very end of the documentary we are told that the Rohingyas are persecuted and considered victims of an ongoing genocide in Myanmar.

The "everydayness of silence" (Good 2021; Weller 2021) is the most resonant feature, occupying the soundscape of the documentary and framing the Rohingyas in the refugee camp as *just humans*. If these moving images are also 'moving' in a subtler sense, as images that inspire empathy and feelings of compassionate solidarity, this is something that needs to be established. They are polished and craftily beautiful, in their stark simplicity. And yet, as Susan Sontag (1967) has highlighted, this use of silence as a modern feature of art is not devoid of what can be conceived as 'deceitfulness'. Sontag, writing about the silence of artists, argues that it can be seen as "a zone of meditation, preparation for spiritual ripening, an ordeal that ends in gaining the right to speak¹⁶." Silence as an absence of speech becomes meaningful

¹⁶ See Sontag (1967), *The Aesthetics of Silence*, in "Aspen". In 1969, the essay was published

when self-inflicted: it is, in its absence, a powerful speech. However, silence can also de-historicize those people that the artist wished to re-humanize by silencing them. We must also posit, as Robert Weller has done, that verbalized narratives are not always the best way to overcome violence or trauma. The relevance of silence as a constitutive element of the everyday is something we need to acknowledge. Byron J. Good, taking into account Weller's work in China and Taiwan, and applying Sadeq Rahimi's concepts on the *hauntology of everyday life*, explains this "everydayness of silence" as necessary to make it possible to see, like in a *chiaroscuro*:

the rhythms of everyday village life, including cycles of rituals, and efforts at repair through partial re-establishment of rhythms of ritual life in sequestered sites of the new, massive housing structures. Ghosts there are, and some haunt, while others suffer from being torn from temples and buried. But the focus here is on quite a different understanding of silences as constitutive of the everyday.

Quoting from Rahimi, he adds:

What *The Hauntology of Everyday Life* is meant to put forward is that the very space of everyday life is so filled with ghosts that nobody can avoid them – in fact, that the very experience of everyday life is built around a process that we can call hauntological, and whose major by-product is a steady stream of ghosts. (Good 2021, p. 521)

In Ai Weiwei's documentary, then, we are positioned at the threshold of an un/speakability, with all its ambiguous signification: silence forces – rather uncomfortably as the film lasts more than two hours – the spectator into a voyeuristic consumption of the *normalcy* of the Rohingyas' lives, and yet it also raises the question of the dynamics of power and the imposed silencing on people who (we know) are persecuted and locked in a refugee camp. There is nothing normal about this normalcy. Or, as Weller puts it, "the absence of speech" does not represent "a blank slate [...]". Silence "is filled with the multitudes of potential meanings, but refuses to resolve, simplify, and unify those meanings" (Weller 2021, p. 485, also quot. in Good 2021, p. 521). We do not witness obvious signs of crimes or violence against the refugees,

again, in its extended version, in a collection of essays titled *Styles of Radical Will*, 1969. I consulted the original version published on the journal "Aspen" (1967).

who appear to go by their daily chores as many others in Bangladesh. If we did not know that these people were asylum seekers escaping genocide, we would not immediately make sense of this condition. They *happen to be* Rohingyas, asylum seekers from Myanmar who are fleeing from genocidal violence at the hands of the Burmese regime. But Ai Weiwei does nothing to delve into this aspect of their history, to the point that their silence appears as an embedded and constitutive part of some form of ritual process (Weller 2021).

In the same way, that silence underlies special moments within a rite and dictates the rhythm of the whole ritual, in Ai Weiwei's *Rohingya*, one confronts this nativity's scenes, anticipating the mourning that the ancient story thought us to expect: the torture and the death of the son of God. The quality of the 'haunting' of everydayness emerges in this spectacle of daily life, with this "steady stream of ghosts" that ceaselessly provoke our gaze into searching for something more particular, more spectral (or saintlier?) than *just* their humanness. If Ai Weiwei's intention was to present us with a 'stream of ghosts' and imply that Rohingyas only *appear* to be living, but in a liminal space which is similar to the lives of a walking dead, we cannot be sure. Interpretation of art, as Sontag has taught us, is a shallow and philistine act that "poisons our sensibilities" (Sontag 1966, p. 7). In her own words:

In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.

Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings." It is to turn the world into this world. ("This world"! As if there were any other.) The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have. (Sontag 1966, p. 7)

Ai's documentary, if anything, has the capacity of making us truly "nervous", as real art should do. (Ibid.). Trying to interpret it would equate, if we were to follow Sontag, to an act of taming his art, in order to make it "manageable, comformable" (1966, p. 8). Ai Weiwei's *Rohigya* presents, without actually aspiring to *represent*, shows without truly *exposing*, narrates without resorting to speech, the ambiguity and indeterminacy of human lives of people who are (although we do not

immediately realize it unless we are aware of it) locked inside a camp and barely surviving at the outskirts of civic rights and legal entitlements. Forcing us into their lives, into an almost unbearable flow of non-verbal sounds filled only by the rumour of the everyday – and the everydayness of silence –, we increasingly feel a disquieting sense of alienation and end up overwhelmed by this normalcy, which is all but tolerable. We feel haunted by the images, nervous at the countergazes that look at us through the camera, questioning our passive interest in voyeuristically watching ‘them’ without taking any particular stance, rather inane or indolent.

Ai Weiwei composes a challenging work of art, but, as Sontag would argue “so far as any audience consists of sentient beings in a situation, there can be no such thing as having no response at all.” (Sontag 1969, *online version*) However, response and responsibility do not equate. The audience is left admiring these evocative, even visionary, works by accomplished filmmakers without realizing that: COVID-19 has been percolating through the fences and wandering along the lanes of Kutupalong; the Bangladesh government has constructed a floating jail on Bhasan Char to confine thousands of refugees; the killing fields of Myanmar have not gone silent and we need to shake off our acquiescence looking at less “comfortable” and comfortable art.

5.3.2. Bangladeshi Artists Frame the Rohingyas: Escaping the Humanitarian Perspective

At the break of COVID-19 in Cox’s Bazar, Kutupalong Camp became truly a site of *spectral encounters*, where many photographers and filmmakers converged with the intention of digging out the beauty and the dignity of the human condition of the Rohingyas. The refugees, secluded in the camps and forced into an even more disconnected life of *present absentees*, had to endure enormous difficulties imposed by the lockdown. Without any clear information or proper measures to contrast the spread of the virus, Rohingyas experienced both a sense of abandonment (as the NGOs and media were leaving the camps) and a feeling of claustrophobia, with communication cut off and fences up.

During the months that preceded the official declaration that the global pandemic had also reached the camps, the Bangladeshi filmmaker Rafiqul Anwar Russell shot and released the documentary *A Mandolin in Exile* (2020), where he followed the daily survival of a

Rohingya refugee who endures a difficult life by playing his beloved mandolin. Self-taught and incapable of reading or writing, music and songs are his only surviving strategy to navigate life at the threshold of death. His melodies and lyrics, infused with nostalgia for what has been lost and the distressful memories of the people murdered by the Burmese Army, are shared and appreciated by other Rohingyas, who invite him to perform on special occasions despite the dissenting opinion of some religious people who consider his actions to be against Islamic precepts. When a *huzur* confiscates his mandolin and tells him to live without it for a month and then come back to retrieve it, the musician replies asking the religious man to explain the difference between a dead and a living person. The *huzur* is perplexed but the musician anticipates his answer and tells him that the mandolin is what makes him feel alive. Music is the only thing that stands in between a hopeless existence and a somehow purposeful life. The film takes us around the camp but, notwithstanding the fact that Rafiqul Anwar Russell also strives for an artistic rendition of the atypical and somehow eccentric figure of the 'man-with-the-mandolin', his documentary offers a portrayal of refugees which is some shots away from the problematic beautification of tragedy that appears as the idiosyncratic characteristic of other films on the Rohingyas.

Although we are also forced into wandering around the camp, as Russell's camera follows the mandolin's peregrinations, we are not as overwhelmed as by the lyrical entrapment of the words of the Rohingya poet Kalam. In Higgins and Carrier's *Wandering*, for instance, one is so emotionally entranced by the voice-over of Shofi, which hovers on the human figures and haunts their bodies to the point of shadowing their existence, that we are caught in the poetic emplotment and cannot give meaning to what we see. The feeling is, paradoxically, alienating: the beauty appears to reinforce the emotion of consuming a voyeuristic spectacle of life and death, so interwoven that it is difficult to say where one begins and the other ends. The vivaciousness of children, bathing at a well or running down makeshift bridges, is counterposed by the slow wandering of a woman whose face has signs of burns; the flying of kites in the sky is followed by the sad eyes of a teenager who has been permanently crippled; and the ancient face of a man who walks on crutches, struggling to go up and down the sloping hills, is contrasted by the peaceful sleep of a baby in a swinging cradle. All of them, though, share this equally precarious life in a place where we are

all *flâneurs* following one million silent beings who live crammed in a maze of 13 square kilometres.

In Russell's *A Mandolin in Exile*, the Bangladeshi filmmaker is forced to carry his camera around and forsake the perfect framing of the scenes for the sake of running after the life of the mandolin and his player. A wobbling camera wanders around the lanes and catches glimpses of life in Kutupalong just before COVID-19 strikes it. They walk by graveyards and talk about the frequent deaths of children, the burial of corpses, and memories. In the process of editing the film, Russell certainly left many sequences and many stories out of the frame. And yet, we are made to believe that there is some degree of 'authenticity' in this story, as it is seemingly less crafted or polished than the others. We all know that this is an illusionary effect and that, as Anjali Gera Roy writes when looking at studies on Partition's survivors, "[their] memories exhibit not a spontaneous recall but an emplotment of a cluster of events in a narrative structure." (2020, p. 10) Rohingya refugees, like other survivors, have learned to retell their stories over and over again, not just during the hearings with the security forces at the border, but also for humanitarian and media agencies that get to sell their narratives and images around the world. They engage in a process of scripting and, as Roy warns us, "[t]his scripting of their lives into coherent narratives casts doubt on the elevation of survivor testimonies as pure, real, and authentic and places them on the same level as literary and historical texts." (Ibid.)

What concerns us here is exactly the mastering of this process of appropriating the right to this process of emplotment and scripting. Once we accept that there is no such a thing as an authentic and real narrative of the violent experiences Rohingyas live through, as these remain virtually un conveyable in their traumatic reality, and once we come to terms with the fact that survivors of violence often need to leave aside such narration "to emphasize tropes of courage, resourcefulness, fortitude and resilience that enabled their overcoming of personal trauma" (Ibid.), we can strive to understand the ways Rohingya refugees themselves embraced photography, film, music, and storytelling to narrate their stories in their own voices. This does not amount to a rejection of what other documentaries or photo exhibitions have shown of 'their world'. Sontag would laugh at such expression, in the acknowledgement that there is not such a thing as 'their world', 'this world' or any other world as a given beyond interpretation. We are

always caught in regimes of visibility and counter-visibility. In Kutupalong, when COVID-19 hit its premises, Rohingyas' worlds were affected in their representation: the virus seemed to explode the narratives from a dimension of surreal, spectral lives into one of hyperreal existences, as beings reclaiming a right to be, a right to speak, a "right to have rights" in the midst of a global pandemic where nothing and nobody was safe.

Precarity had entered everyone's home, and the refugees decided it was time to talk for themselves as part of a community of global citizens – as humanity appeared to be the only collective where they could aspire to be entitled to full citizenship.

5.4. Counter-visibility and COVID-19. Rohingyas Reclaim their Right to Their Own Images and Imagination

In the middle of misery in Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State, I delivered the soul of poetry. That's the resource I find within me. Through writing poetry, I find hope on the edge of the sword, I find courage under the rain of bullets and I find strength in the ocean of fire¹⁷. (Mayyu Ali)

On 28th March 2023, after three years of pandemic, the Bangladeshi blogger Rezwan, who covers and bridge-blog Bangladesh and South Asia on *Global Voices* in both English and Bangla languages, published a piece titled "Photos stolen, compensation denied: The plight of Rohingya Photographers. International media and non-profits have used photos by Rohingyas without credit¹⁸."

In this article, Rezwan interviews the British-Bangladeshi photographer Shafiur Rahman, who has been actively campaigning for years on behalf of the Rohingyas and, during the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, launched the Rohingya Photography Competition to offer a platform to Rohingyas for showcasing their photos and images from the camps¹⁹. After three years the competition began, Rahman reported that thousands of photos were uploaded and shared by Rohingya youths living in camps in Bangladesh. Sadly, though,

¹⁷ See <<https://rohingya-voice.com/poetry/>>.

¹⁸ See <<https://globalvoices.org/2023/03/28/photos-stolen-compensation-denied-plights-of-rohingya-photographers/>>.

¹⁹ See <<https://rohingyaphoto.com/>>.

even after the display of much interest and talent among the refugees, various international media agencies, and even humanitarian organizations, still feel entitled to steal Rohingyas' images and publish them without either consent or compensation:

These Rohingya refugees don't have a voice in general; for decades, some of their voices were highlighted by visiting journalists and were sometimes filtered before they reached the outside world of the camps. Nevertheless, a number of young Rohingya refugees are using their phone cameras or professional cameras to document their lives in the refugee camps and tell their own stories using social media.

[...] In recent years there have been a number of incidents where some of these Rohingya photographers found that their photos were used by international non-profits, and media houses without consent or paying for them. This runs counter to the fundamental values of journalistic integrity and ethical behaviour that underpin the notion of accountable journalism and professionalism. Moreover, the struggles of these photographers to claim their rights remain often unheard²⁰.

In the interview carried out by Rezwan with photographer and journalist Shafiur Rahman, the latter further elaborates:

In recent years, Oxfam has been running "Oxfam's Rohingya Arts Campaign." It grandly claims to have "created the space for Rohingya artists and activists to share their perspectives through poetry, painting, photography, film, creative writing or any other artistic medium." This is of course an empty boast, a classic NGO tactic of bigging up small projects to an unrecognisable level. But imagine my disappointment when I discovered that Oxfam, which has been claiming to provide this art platform, had used photographs by Rohingya refugees without permission or compensation and without any acknowledgement. The fact that Oxfam has used the work of Rohingya photographers for their own benefit, and again I repeat, without consultation and without considering their rights and interests, is antithetical to the very idea of providing an arts platform. It is unacceptable for any organisation, especially one with a mission to alleviate poverty and injustice, to exploit refugees for their own gain like this. (Ibid.)

It is in this scenario of overt and covert exploitations, where also conscious artists-activists like Rahman intervened to open up spaces for

²⁰ See note 21.

voicing dissent and expressing refugees' concerns, fears, aspirations, and hopes, that the Rohingyas have begun exploring their possibilities to tell their own stories. COVID-19 seemingly opened up a Pandora Box and set loose all kinds of repressed feelings, concealed emotions, and latent imaginings. The silence of the media and the absence of NGO's workers – both banned from the camps at the beginning of the pandemic outbreak – provided an unforeseen space and set a different rhythm to Rohingyas' lives, abandoned and yet 'set free to explore their imagination and employ their own narratives.

Adrienne Rich analysed the way silence can offer a creative space for allowing people to speak *their truth*, to create their own poetry which otherwise remains in the space of the unspeakable. She wrote that "Silence [...] can be fertilizing, it can bathe the imagination, it can [...] be the nimbus of a way of life, a condition of vision." (Rich 1997, p. 322) Acknowledging, though, that silence can also be a strategy of oppression, Rich also emphasized how poetry and, we might add, other forms of lyrical visions, can be rendered through the calculated use of silence and absence. Things resurface and float as if reinvigorated from this silencing of the noise of violence, the rumour of daily existence inside this anthill-like refugee camp, crammed with people whose lives are made redundant and marginal by oppressive systems of power. In similar situations, the poet can use silence to work on "what *is there* to be absorbed and worked on," but also, as Rich stated, poetry can adopt as its material "what is missing, *desaparecido*, rendered unspeakable, thus unthinkable." In her own words:

It is through these invisible holes in reality that poetry makes its way – certainly for women and other marginalized subjects and for disempowered and colonized peoples generally, but ultimately for all who practice any art at its deeper levels. The impulse to create begins – often terribly and fearfully – in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence, and the first question we might ask any poem is, *What kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?* (Rich 1997, p. 322)

These are also the questions that the Rohingya Photography Competition appeared to raise when its initiator Shafiur Rahman (with whom I got the chance to speak over the phone during two semi-structured interviews) decided to launch it. The most interesting thing, Rahman recounted, was the fact that before COVID-19, Rohingyas would

respond to every question raised by an interviewer with an urge to retell their story of the violence, the plight, and the tragedy of being a persecuted people. They would show an “organic impulse to take photos”, says Rahman, but it was obviously “affected by organizations and their needs of ‘specific retellings’ of their narratives”.

Authorities and agencies either needed happy-clappy folks to support their humanitarian interventions or wished to portray the tragedy of the refugees to campaign for donors. And this is actually what Rohingyas learned to narrate. When Rahman visited the camps for the first time in 2016, his impression was that Rohingyas were insistent in showing the circumstances they faced: “When I first went there in 2016, people just wanted to tell their own story. Here comes a journalist: this is *the* story. There was a passionate insistence on telling what they had experienced.” (*personal interview*, 2 March 2023). “During Covid,” though, Rahman explained:

Rohingya kids were the ones taking the interviews and recording the complaints about insufficient testing, restrictions on accessing markets, and other matters of concern for their daily lives. They seemed to act upon the realization that ‘None is here, so we need to tell the world what’s happening in the camps.’ It was not a process of *reflecting on* their life, but more an *advocating* for support. (*emphasis added*)

The situation, between March and May 2020, escalated this feeling of the necessity to find their own voice, because COVID-19 was, by then, a reality also for the refugees locked in Kutupalong. Things went from bad to worse: “[...] the camps were really congested; food was bad; health care was hardly suitable. It became truly important to get messages out. [...] Because, of course, these refugees do not have a written language, so it was crucial to communicate by using visuals.” (*Ibid.*)

Rahman had visited the camps 34 times since 2016 and knew very well the abysmal conditions of refugees’ lives. He had taken photographs of them, written articles to denounce the violence, advocated for the betterment of life in the camps, and listened to countless Rohingyas’ stories of loss and survival. Yet, at the beginning of the pandemic, the scenario suddenly changed. There was another kind of fear in the camps, related not so much to the fact that Bangladesh had begun to transfer refugees to the jail-island of Bhasan Char or had already cut down internet ‘for security reasons’ and reinforced the iron

barbed fences all around Kutupalong. As Rahman explained to me, there was a constant anxiety regarding these issues, but the fear now was linked more to the tragic stories around “the quarantine of the Malay ship”²¹, which created a surreal state of terror as the times seemed really “apocalyptic, as if they were at the end of time”:

The main fear was: if you go to a quarantine, you’d never come back. And if you wore a mask, you were labelled a ‘Covid carrier’. It was so difficult to get to the front of a queue, and many people could not get their food rations. And you needed to have a mask to queue; and if you had a mask then people will think you were infected! So, it was very complicated. (Ibid.)

Such time-space needed to be navigated in alternative manners – and perhaps could only be navigated by creating a hyperreality where to finally find a space to articulate concerns and aspirations alike. As some Rohingya activists have pointed out in an article titled *Voice and power at the intersection of art, technology and advocacy*, published on the “Forced Migration Review” in 2022, “in many places, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing access restrictions for international actors accelerated the shift towards increased leadership roles for local organisations and community members.” (Hero et al. 2022, p. 16) The role played by digital technology was also crucial in spreading information about COVID-19 and guiding the response by Rohingyas: “Social media in particular has become a space where Rohingya activists interact without their voices being filtered or constrained.” (Ibid.) Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, together with TikTok and other platforms, helped Rohingya refugees to share “daily

²¹ Despite the appeal of many international organizations, Malaysia turned away some Rohingyas’ boats trying to reach the country in April 2020. As Amnesty International’s website reported:

On 16 April, the Royal Malaysian Navy turned back a boat carrying about 200 Rohingya women, men and children, while reportedly providing food to those on board. The Malaysian government has cited COVID-19 measures as justification for turning boats away from their coast. On 15 April, the Bangladesh Coast Guard rescued 396 Rohingya people from a large boat. The boat had been turned back by the Malaysian authorities and is believed to have been at sea for two months.

Early reports stated that 32 people on the boat died at sea, but the figure is now thought to be almost double that. UNHCR – the UN refugee agency – says that the survivors are severely malnourished and dehydrated.

See Amnesty International, COVID-19 no excuse to sacrifice Rohingya lives at sea, available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/covid-no-excuse-sacrifice-lives-more-rohingya-seek-safety-boat/>>.

insights into the fear, boredom and deprivation of refugees' lives as well as their joys, aspirations and wish to return one day to their homes and homeland." (Ibid.)

While Sahat Zia Hero and his collaborators carefully stress the importance of the activities linked to advocacy and the use of digital media to support such campaigns, they also clarify that COVID-19 ushered in a time for experimenting with artistic projects:

The last few years have seen the emergence of a range of arts-based initiatives, including *Artolution*, the *Rohingya Photography Competition*, and IOM's *Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre*, plus exciting Rohingya-led initiatives such as *Omar's Film School*, the *Art Garden Rohingya*, and *Rohingyatographer Magazine*.

Such efforts are helping to open up more spaces where Rohingya can reflect upon past traumas, critically engage with current issues and directly articulate their aspirations while exercising agency over narratives and representation. (Hero et al. 2022, p. 17)

Like Rahman, also Hero is aware of the pitfalls that are endangered by an imagination stifled by the requirements of international organizations and mainstream media. Rohingyas got used to being narrated in specific manners and portrayed in a certain light. However, COVID-19 now presented a chance to work around these possible setbacks. Not simply because the camps had become an off-limit zone, but also because the pandemic was a global plight, not something peculiar to the Rohingyas. Refugees were affected as others around the world, beyond class lines, citizenship rights, and national boundaries. COVID-19 was affecting millions around the world, also in countries where big donors were based. In its global spreading, it created a sense of humanity being *truly* interconnected, despite the fenced camps pointing to the "state of exception" (Agamben 1998) that its residents were forced to endure.

With people living under the duress of quarantines and lockdowns, there was a chance to connect and reclaim the status of humans among humans, rather than projecting the specialness of the refugee. COVID-19 offered a space of silence and a time of absence where to recast themselves. And what better way to partake of humanity than using art?

5.4.1. The Art Garden Rohingya: the Art of Being ‘Human’

Rohingyas’ Lives are always Lockdown and Shutdown.

So, another pandemic, named COVID-19 come door to door every corner in the world.

It is another option to make us Lockdown again. It’s kept us Lockdown now.

Also, during this COVID-19’s operation time came another Amphan Cyclone, which also kept us Lockdown and Shutdown from all communication.

Where can we give our information, and who save us, by giving their life?

Rohingyas’ Lives are always Lockdown and Shutdown.

Ya Allah please save all humans from the pandemic and give understanding skills,

that you can do everything in the world, what you want, without any doubt.

We hope you will not keep us in Lockdown and Shutdown for long time in the future.

Thanks to Allah and keep peacefulness all the living things in the world.1

— Syedul Mostafa²²

Photography and photojournalism, but also poetry and videomaking, became the main areas where Rohingyas felt they could actively intervene “increasingly taking a leading role in framing their lives and narratives.” (Ibid.) Refugees could speak of their own lives and dreams, striving to break free from a certain stereotypical and fixed frame of victimhood. They began hoping that people around the world could go beyond their contingent tragedy and see that they were as human as all the others. As much as the others could now feel as vulnerable as a refugee to surreal, sudden, situations of ‘suspension of

²² The verses of this poem were penned by the Rohingya poet Syedul Mostafa. It appears in its entirety at the beginning of a White Paper published online in 2020 by a collective of three civil society organizations: Athan; The Peace and Development Initiative – Kintha; and Rohingya Youth Association; and the Cyberlaw Clinic and the International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School. See *Lockdown and Shutdown. Exposing the Impacts of Recent Network Disruptions in Myanmar and Bangladesh*, available online at: <<https://clinic.cyber.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2021/01/Lockdowns-and-Shutdowns.pdf>>

normalcy' in their everydayness, precipitated by the inhumane conditions of COVID-19's threat pending on the whole humanity.

Some Rohingya youths, especially among those who had always tried to explore and support arts as a suitable and important venue for identity expression and cultural protection, saw this as an important break to finally talk about their 'truth'. The Art Garden Rohingya, which had begun its activities one year before the pandemic started, was created by the Rohingya author, human rights activist, and photographer Mayyu Ali and his friends to raise concerns about the dangerous state of their language and their cultural practices. As Ali himself explains:

On March 21, 2019, my friends and I established *Art Garden Rohingya*, an online platform that has been documenting and reviving Rohingya culture, language, literature, and art. We have hundreds of budding Rohingya artists, including several women, who write poetry, draw paintings, and sing songs in Rohingya. (Ali 2021)²³

Looking at their cultural heritage and the traditional modes of artistic expression, Ali explains the importance of orality and folk songs in Rohingya's experience of preserving their history throughout the centuries:

Once upon a time, when there was no pen and paper in Arakan, our Rohingya ancestors recorded the memories of wars, battles, kings, kingdoms, love, tragedy, and disasters by composing folk songs, folktales, riddles, and proverbs.

In this way they left lessons and morals to be passed to their children and grandchildren. Collectively, they represent a saga that began with the ancient Rohingya culture and flows through our heritage, connecting our language to our land and carrying the values and wisdom of our ancestors who came before us in Arakan. (Ibid.)

When plunged into the tragedy of COVID-19, the Rohingya poets of this collective, already very active on social media – where they present themselves (on Twitter, for instance) as the “[f]irst Rohingya commu-

²³ These excerpts are taken from a paper published online titled *A Language in Crisis: Rohingya*, written by Mayyu Ali for the online blog “Cultural Survival” (7th December 2021, accessed on the 21st March 2023). Available online at: <<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/language-crisis-rohingya>>.

nity-led online art website. We #revive and #promote Rohingya art and culture. We #empower and #encourage Rohingya writers and artists²⁴ began directly addressing the fear of the pandemic and supporting the world battle to raise awareness. This youth wished to show that they could act as a conscious and responsible global citizen, but also yearned to make themselves heard and seen for their artistic interventions. The “civic creativity” that they exercised amidst the refugee community in the camps was, perhaps, also aimed at getting them outside the physical and symbolic barriers of the fences. As Giorgio Agamben had argued, taking the insight from Hannah Arendt, the camp represents the principle according to which everything is possible and permitted: “If this particular juridico-political structure of the camps—whose task is precisely to create a stable exception—is not understood, the incredible things that happened there remain completely unintelligible.” (1998, p. 170) If this “zone of indistinction” (Ibid.) is a borderland where the threshold between “outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit” (Ibid.) is nullified or blurred to the point of invisibility, the camp becomes a space where every atrocity is acceptable, since its inhabitants do not possess any rights. And yet, conscious of this possibility of everything, the young poets of the Art Garden Rohingya collective decided to look at this dreadful situation with the hope that exactly the suspension of their abnormal everydayness could provide a chance to be considered not just the recipients of care, but the caring and conscious young citizens of a larger, interdependent, global family.

In June 2020, when the virus had already reached Cox’s Bazar and the Rohingya camps²⁵, one of the few female poets of the collective, Jamalida Rafique, published online her poem *A Child Amid COVID-19*:

I’m a child, worried, scared,
 a world of uncertainty
 I feel alarmed, fearful of this virus,
 spreading everywhere.
 This virus is not a joke,

²⁴ The *Art Garden Rohingya’s* work can be followed online on various platforms. On Twitter, they are to be found at the hashtag @ArtRohingya. They are also active on Facebook and have a website platform at: <www.theartgardenrohingya.com>.

²⁵ COVID-19 was firstly reported in the Rohingya Camps in May 2020. Media covered the news and international agencies warned the Bangladeshi authorities of potential disaster inside the camps. Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/15/first-coronavirus-case-found-in-bangladesh-rohingya-refugee-camps>>.

it kills anyone, at anytime and anywhere. Judging by looks of things,
 social distancing has saved
 so have our health-workers
 been risking their lives
 working restlessy
 every day and night.

PLEASE STAY AT HOME,
 SO YOU CAN LIVE UP ANOTHER DAY
 AND SLEEP ANOTHER NIGHT²⁶.

The poem, which came up their website <www.theartgardenrohingya.com/a-child-amid-covid-19> on the 9th of June 2020, carries also the hashtag, by now viral as COVID itself, of: #*StayAtHomeStay-Safe*²⁷. The fact that her poem begins with a personal statement regarding her own feelings of fear, her own anguished state of being a fragile child is, in the second stanza, followed by a broadening focus on the fact that “[t]his virus is not a joke, it kills anyone, at anytime and anywhere.” She thinks of the health-workers risking their lives, she advocates for social distancing and adds, in capital letters, a plead to her readers to “please stay home”. She is not the only one who calls upon her followers to stay safe. Nur Sadek, another young Rohingya poet and humanitarian worker living in Kutupalong who also contributes articles and poetry for the online journal “The Rohingya Post”²⁸, wrote on a short piece:

As Rohingya refugees fled the genocide in Myanmar, now we are stuck
 in the pandemic. And we are losing hope, the hope of being safe in the

²⁶ Many Rohingya youths used social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to publish online their writings and post photos and videos from of life inside the camps. Jamalida Rafique has a Twitter account that can be accessed here: <https://twitter.com/i/flow/login?redirect_after_login=%2FJamalidaIRL>.

²⁷ Available at: <<http://www.theartgardenrohingya.com/a-child-amid-covid-19/>>.

²⁸ “The inspiration behind the launching of www.thestateless.com, now “The Rohingya Post” (www.rohingyapost.com) came in June 2012 when the Burmese government and Rakhine extremist groups instigated the campaigns genocide against the Rohingya people in Arakan (Rakhine State). It was extremely important time to disseminate the truth behind the scenes of the atrocities to the global audience who has very limited information on the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar (Burma).” This online journal has been running since 2012 and is accessed on different platforms. See <<https://www.rohingyapost.com/about/>>.

camp and the hope of returning to our birthplace in Myanmar with human rights, justice and dignity.

Now I am in the camp trying to abide instructions in order to combat Covid-19 by wearing mask and practising hand-washing, etc.

I am also keeping my hope through the poetry. Today I am here with a poem On Covid-19 for you All...

Nur Sadek talks of practicing handwashing and wearing a mask as a sort of rites shared by all the people around the world, a form of global war against COVID where, as the title of his poem suggests, the “mask is the best weapon”. He also presents the pride of the Rohingyas who, when everyone was struggling to curtail the spread of the pandemic, can proudly say that “Covid-19 couldn’t infect 5 per cent of Rohingya so Covid-19 is powerless.” Sadek wishes to affirm the strength of the Rohingyas, rather than their assumed vulnerability. His poem concludes with the same plea of Rafique, “Take it easy, Abide instructions/ Stay at home and save your lives”, but first he reaffirms that refugees have been born to face these difficulties and are overcoming them:

We were born to face challenges.
And yes it’s an exam for all of us,
Pass the exam with a pen and chase the coronavirus with a mask away.

The virus is just like rain,
When the rain comes we take an umbrella.
Now Covid-19 came, take a mask like you took umbrella for the rain.
The life is just like a circle, we may need to face many challenges to wander this circle²⁹.

The poem by Sadek, despite his short introduction on his feelings of hopelessness, actually stresses the resilience and the almost casual manner of looking at COVID-19 *as if* it were a natural event, like a rainy day in the life of a Rohingya. You protect yourself from the rains, but you don’t make a big fuss about such an event, as “life is just like a circle” and Rohingyas have learned to “wander this circle”. The idea of *wandering*, of being forced into a peripatetic existence where they have to “face many challenges” – COVID being simply one of them and

²⁹ Available at: <<https://www.rohingyapost.com/mask-is-the-best-weapon-genocide-made-us-refugees-and-covid-19-making-us-hopeless/>>.

nothing more – presents the reader with a sense of powerful agency by the youth who is giving voice to this emotion. COVID is, for him, “powerless.” It can be easily managed and defeated abiding by a few rules and rituals. In Kutupalong, like in other sort of camp, “politics becomes biopolitics” (Ibid.) and Nur Sadek is probably right to feel that COVID-19 is not what he should fear as “powerful” in stripping him of his rights or even rob him of his life. As a stateless Rohingya kept in precarious and guarded shelters, we may agree with Agamben that

it would be more honest and, above all, more useful carefully to investigate the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime. (At this point, in fact, everything had truly become possible.) (Agamben 1998, p. 171)

From this palpable fear of real atrocities, it derives the necessity felt by other Rohingya youths to break the silence, to avoid being turned into ghosts, invisible and affected by *unspeakability*, a worse disease than COVID-19 for those infected and affected by it.

5.4.2. Of Dreams and Death, Films and Fantasies

As Shafiur Rahman has aptly pointed out during one of our phone conversations, “the plight of ‘authenticity’, of being caught in between images that either sensationalize or victimize the Rohingya” is an issue that can be hardly overlooked. We might want to see it as a threat in itself, a form of violence, and we might hazard to say that these misrepresentations also push refugees into a state of *hyperreality*. In post-modern societies, Jean Baudrillard posited, reality is hypermediated and people are confronted with the death of the real³⁰, because whatever comes to us exists as a simulation of reality. What is disquieting, though, is the fact that our consciousness becomes increasingly incapable of making a distinction between what is out there and the way it is represented. Fiction and reality overlap: when both fade away to the point of leaving only an imaginary map of a certain landscape

³⁰ Baudrillard insists on this concept in many of his publications. In his famous work *Simulacra and Simulation*, he points out that “[t]he great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation.” See Baudrillard (1994, p. 43).

or soundscape, or *sensoryscape*, then we are left facing the hyperreal. A world haunted by what was and what might be, but it is nor the former nor the latter.

The risk of perpetrating the misleading image of a “happy-clappy version of the camp”, as Rahman underlined, is a real one. These camps become populated by smiling children and brave refugees ready to share their “positive narratives” of resilience and hope. However, even hope turns into a shadowing presence, a present absence that haunts rather than sustains Rohingyas’ lives. The beautification of their lives, the *hero fiction* of the heroification Rohingyas, the romanticizing of the tragedy which unfolds in front of our eyes – these are all interventions that raise issues that are not at all new to those who work on images. And yet, discarding aesthetics in favour of a supposed ‘authenticity’ is equally problematic. As Susan Sontag maintained:

Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don’t have the look that comes from being “properly” lighted and composed, because the photographer either is an amateur or—just as serviceable— has adopted one of several familiar anti-art styles. By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative—all widely distributed images of suffering now stand under that suspicion—and less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification. (Sontag 2003, pp. 26-27)

What Sontag underscored is the fact that photos taken by amateurish photographers and images shot by people who are not fully trained in images-capturing technology might sell well on the market of authenticity, as the relative lack of craftsmanship or polishness can be subjected to the interpretation (another word Sontag was suspicious of) of being endowed with a degree of *genuineness*. These images, like the ones stolen from the media agencies by Rohingya photographers operating in the camps, appeared to acquire great value during COVID-19. When the agencies realized that they could not access these zones anymore, they asked their ‘men in the camp’ to send out photographs and stories, bestowing on them the right to speak also for others, and simultaneously engendering a more compassionate reaction from viewers and spectators, who were duly informed that Rohingya refugees had turned into photographers and filmmakers and had begun sharing *their own stories*. What this meant for many young refugees in the camp was a jostling exercise of taking up responsibility

for the camps' narratives, while making sure to save the face of the donors, on one side, and the expectations of their elders, on the other. A negotiation that might lock them up in this threatening hyperreality made of 'virtual Rohingya's lives'.

Among the first Rohingyas to pick up this challenge and get down to business were Omar Faruque and Saidul Huq, who began hunting for news during the pandemic lockdown and the Internet shutdown in 2020, finally ending up with the aspiration of creating the first film school inside the Kutupalong Camp. As their Facebook page states:

@RohingyaFilmSchool has transformed to Omar's Film School in memorial of our founder Omar Faruque who tragically died earlier this year. Please 'FOLLOW' us for the LATEST NEWS from the #Rohingya #Refugee camps

Omar's Film School has established in 2020 with some Rohingya emerging youth to train youth on photography and videography.

Omar's Film School objectives are -

- 1) To train Youth on Photography and Videography.
- 2) To make awareness video in Rohingya Camp.
- 3) To make documentary video on Rohingya Tradition and History.
- 4) To make interactive educational videos to ease the barrier of access to education.
- 5) To show NGO's activities in Rohingya Camp.

Among the one million Rohingyas, there are many different life stories of different people, from those stories we want to bring out some courageous and inspiring story of Rohingya refugees.

OFS also recording and documenting camp news and making some informative videos on the coronavirus in the Rohingya language³¹.

In December 2022, during an interview published on the Bangladeshi newspaper "The Daily Star", Saidul Huq briefly retold the story behind this enterprise, affirming that "Our world is our camp. We could not even dream of anything beyond it"³². He then sets to elucidate how the Rohingya Film School, renamed Omar's Film School after the sad and

³¹ See <<https://www.facebook.com/OFS2020/>>.

³² Available at: <<https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/oxfam-human-rights-day-special-magazine-2022/news/three-generations-stateless-3193491>>. [Online edition without page numbers]

unforeseen demise of the young Omar in May 2020, came into being. The “School”, as the journal reports, is meant to train young Rohingyas in the arts of photography and videography, “to produce awareness videos around the Rohingya camps and produce documentaries on Rohingya Tradition and History.” In Saiful’s recorded words:

There are tens of thousands of Rohingyas in the camp. These stories need to be told before the global audience and preserved [...].

But what haunts me is that, like me, my children are also stateless. When I think of it, I cannot sleep. [...]

My dreams would be fulfilled if I were in my country. What scares me is that the global community seems to be forgetting about it with every passing day. The Rohingya issue is fading away. [...]

A person without a country is like a body without a heart.

The journalist concludes that, despite the fact that Saidul states so “with misty eyes as his voice chokes”, however “Saidul is hopeful.” One cannot avoid being presented with a Sisyphean image, but also to be reminded of the flaunted optimism that Arendt saw in her fellow Jews, who perhaps also spoke to their sympathetic audience with misty eyes, albeit in a different climate. Arendt scorned this pretence and frowned upon the optimism expected from the refugees who, sometimes, ended their own lives after reassuring everyone that they were “very optimistic”. Saidul’s heart, as the journalist describes, “bleeds when he ponders over the fact that it is now three generations that are stateless.” Just a few lines before, the article reports the anguished words of Saidul, who does not depict him in such optimistic and hopeful tones: “There is no escape, it seems. And when I think of that, I feel like ending my life. It is devastating to see that my children’s world is also confined to the camp.”

The camp and its rules appear to suffocate the aspirations of Rohingya youths. To be creative and resourceful in such a gloomy scenario is something that is difficult to imagine, especially with COVID-19 descending upon Kutupalong. And yet Saidul, like Omar and his brother, became committed to telling the ‘truth’ of their existence. In the words of Omar’s brother, Faruk, who spoke to me over the phone during one of the interviews in February 2023, they decided to do whatever they could to support their community exactly when COVID-19 further

doomed their hopes. At that time, Faruk told me, they felt as if they had been “left behind.” Everyone left the camps, and the Internet shutdown amplified the feeling of isolation. Faruk explained to me how Omar, pretending to be a Bangladeshi, would go out and collect information to share on social media. They used offline sharing applications, like AirDrop for iPhones and SHAREit for Android mobiles. These apps allowed them to send messages and even videos to family and friends for them to watch and learn about the virus and the measures to adopt to protect themselves from it. Rohingya, he further explained to me, “can climb up the hills or even climb on some tall trees: from there they could get the signals and listen or send messages, videos, pictures, etc.”. By the time things got established, though, Omar suddenly died aged 19. He was declared dead for a heart failure, but the circumstances of his death cannot be clarified. His dream of creating a film school was fulfilled by his brother and other friends, with the support from agencies like UNHCR: *World [sic] must not to forget the daily struggles of Rohingya who remain inside Myanmar. They’re still facing discrimination, horrifying violence and intensifying conflict every day.*” (Omar’s Film School, emphasis in the original)

To carry forward this manifesto of preventing forgetfulness and silencing, the school’s founders realized that they needed better training and professional equipment. Their wish to create something ‘useful’ brought into the spotlight also the interplay between the aesthetics and the ethics of *visibility*. Playing on this idea of the amateur refugee who strives to use art to find his/her own voice can pose some setbacks, as the ones evidenced by Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy (2021) in their study of Syrian refugees in Turkey. While many humanitarian organizations support such efforts with the goal of breaking silence and conveying the ‘authentic’ voices of refugees to the public and promote a sympathetic response, these same projects might also “force artists to conform and identify with this category [refugee], silencing more complex processes of identification and subjectivity, communal historical continuities and personal loss, as well as artistic endeavours and labour demands.” (Chatzipanagiotidou, Murphy 2021, p. 464)

It is in the interplay between visibility and invisibility, where silence becomes a life-saving strategy for the refugees who navigate its depths, that the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced and set loose certain rules, forcing Rohingya to take a stance and choose between the total ‘unspeakability’

and unknowability (Weller 2017) that their condition of suffering imposed, and the necessity of reclaiming a voice and visibility.

Rollywood, another Rohingya Film Production Team established in February 2020³³ also realized a 13 minutes short film on COVID-19, broadcasted on YouTube simply as “A Rohingya short film on Corona virus”³⁴. Introducing the film on their Facebook page, on the 6th April 2020 the Rollywood team stated:

Guys, here is our latest piece on Corona virus.
 We are so sorry for low quality of the video.
 We will do with high quality next time.
 Keep in touch with us.
 Wash your hands
 Wear face mask
 Keep social distance
 Stay home
 Stay safe
 Safe [*sic*] your community by following the rules³⁵.

The film shows a group of young Rohingyas who endure the mockery of some peers and other challenges until they prove that the virus is real and everyone needs to take the measures prescribed. The message is kept simple and yet there is a lot of attention to plot and storyline, showing that Rohingya youths are aware of the power of the visual media and wish to exploit it to the full.

5.5. Conclusion

There is an increasing number of young Rohingya artists who, equipped with their skills and a lot of determination, are capitalizing on their talent (and sometimes the support of some professionals) to develop their interest in the arts of photography, filmmaking and storytelling. Using the space left vacant by agencies, journalists and NGOs, Rohingyas are exploring art venues and create film schools, photo magazines and archives of memories and histories. How the conditions of a global pandemic stimulated such creativity inside the

³³ Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/RollywoodRohingyaFilm/>>.

³⁴ Available at: <<https://youtu.be/-68IEBiaqGo>>.

³⁵ Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/RollywoodRohingyaFilm/>>.

world's largest refugee camp is a story that deserves to be told, not least because it brings to the forefront the questions of the humanitarian noise and crippled agency, especially when refugees' voices are constantly mediated and interpreted by others who have a vested interest in refugees *performing their role right*, to paraphrase Judith Butler.

As Dilpreet Bhullar highlighted, "[m]ore often than not, in public discourse, the refugees are reduced to a 'threat from the other'." (2022, p. 257) To counterpose such widespread notion, refugees have taken to social media platforms in order to find a free space and an empowering site where to "create, produce and disseminate refugee voice" (Ibid., p. 266). Looking at the way Butler has addressed human precarity and the "global obligation imposed upon us to find political and economic forms that minimize precarity and establish economic political equality" (2012, p. 150), Bhullar warns that this perceived obligation might engender "a political sympathy that is punctuated by the dependency syndrome instead of political solidarity shared among the equals". (2022, p. 266). In his thought-provoking essay on "The Vulnerability of Visual Vocabulary on Refugee Representation: The Voyage of Boatwomen Rohingya", Bhullar posits that there is a real danger that certain images of "subservience" might override "depoliticization crescendos".

Along Susan Sontag's argument exposed in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) that viewers who see some photos and media portrayals of suffering people (but are located at a distance from them) might develop a sense of disconnection, even of relief, from the tragic reality they are witnessing in a mediated manner, Bhullar is keen to look into the possibility of finding spaces "for art inventions to restore the faith in humanity and subvert the conventional gaze of looking at the portrayals of the refugees." (2022, p. 257)

Lynda Mannik, whilst rejecting Sontag's idea that media photographs end up haunting the spectator rather than providing the viewer with some information, agrees with Judith Butler (2005, p. 824) that the images provided by media give some evidence but are always framed in order to construct and confirm specific "political ideologies" (Mannik 2012, p. 262). In general, she adds:

media representations and other visual portrayals of refugees replace personal expression, individualised political perspectives or any other sign of subjectivity or intelligence on the part of the individuals involved with standardised, internationally recognised depictions. (Ibid.)

Both Bhullar and Mannik seem to follow Floya Anthias' proposition that it is not possible to present a linear narrative of the tribulations of migrants and refugees, either during their journeys or when they finally (without certainty) land in a new place to seek refuge. All these stories, Anthias would maintain, are necessarily "produced in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices" (Anthias 2002, p. 511, also quot. in Bhullar 2022, p. 266).

These narrative practices, though, seem to have favoured more invisibility and the ambiguity of silence and did nothing to debunk stereotypes and spectral representations of Rohingya's lives in the camps. On the contrary, much as "invisibility is damning," (Mannik 2012, p. 264), "misrepresentation can be just as damaging." (Ibid.) In time of crisis, as the one globally unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, national governments reacted to curtail the damages and made an effort to reduce the social and economic impacts that such events produced on the population. However, in Kutupalong, the news of COVID-19 were received without much panic from the local residents. The news about the global pandemic of COVID-19 arrived as a suspicious, but the Rohingya refugees firstly dismissed them as untrue, and secondly came to suspect the virus to be a lie, another strategy to entrap them or dislodge them from their shelters.

In this volatile atmosphere of fear and distrust, the fencing of the Kutupalong Camp and the cutting down of Internet connection plunged the Kutupalong residents in an exacerbated state of anxiety where all the suggested measures to prevent people from contracting the virus were dismissed as bogus and considered yet another mechanism of surveillance to restrict the mobility of the already confined and semi-reclused Rohingyas. It was this deafening silence, this uncanny scenario, that might have fuelled such an explosion of "creative imagination".

For young Rohingyas, it could be impossible to leave that space where every form of tragedy is made possible. It might even be unlikely to leave or permanently go out of the camps. However, it was possible and plausible to resort to photography, poetry, music, and films to recover a voice, fight against the haunting images projected on them, and present alternative, perhaps even powerful (if not totally empowering) ways to make their voices heard. This, in due time and with more access to media, training and technical equipment, might help to contrast both the negative representations of Rohingya refugees that were spread after 2017 and also contribute to Rohingyas' struggle for achieving their rights.

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