

# Rohingya: Nurturing Roots Amidst Displacement – ‘A Tale of Resilience and Hope’

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## Abstract.

Bangladesh is currently hosting nearly 920,000 Rohingya refugees, according to the latest figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Most of these refugees have sought refuge in the *Coxs Bazar* district, which is currently the largest refugee settlement in the world. These people have experienced tremendous hardship and trauma that forced them to leave their homes. But over time, they have adapted to their new environment and embarked on a journey to find their homes in the camp. This article examines the artistic and space-making efforts of the Rohingya community, with a particular focus on their role in promoting Rohingya resilience and well-being.

From colorful *Shamiyana* installations to decorative wall paintings, making bamboo shelves, mud furniture, windows and balconies for their tiny houses and vegetable gardens, the Rohingya use their artistic skills to create a sense of belonging and preserve their cultural identity. These artistic expressions not only show the society's rich cultural heritage but also give people a sense of comfort and familiarity in an unfamiliar environment. In addition, the article highlights structured interventions such as the BRAC Humanitarian Play Lab decorating workshops and art therapy sessions for children, adolescents, women and men. These initiatives showcase the artistic prowess of the Rohingya community and its ability to foster geekiness and creative expression.

Such interactions can promote understanding, build resilience, build bridges between different groups and foster a sense of shared experience. The study aimed to assess current and past transitions in the Rohingya community using multiple methods, extracting raw data from journals, articles and reports and conducting observations, focus group discussions (FGDs) and workshops to capture the prevailing context. Overall, the findings of this study will shed light on the transformative power of arts, crafts and space-making activities to promote individual and collective identity in the Rohingya community. This will shed light on the fact that roots are not limited to a particular place, but exist within the individual, beyond physical boundaries.

**Keywords:** Rohingya, Identity, Community, Cross-Cultural Interactions, Adaptive Practices.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the immense challenges, the Rohingya community has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt, rebuild, and express their individual and collective identities through various artistic endeavors. This paper delves into the multifaceted cultural aspects of arts, crafts, and place-making activities within the Rohingya community, exploring their resilience and

creativity. In their daily camp life, the Rohingya display spontaneous artistic expressions like, adorning their living spaces with colorful Shamiyana or ceiling hangings and decorative wall paintings. For the Rohingya community, artistic expression plays a pivotal role in preserving their cultural identity and serves as a powerful means of communication. Formal community events, including co-creation workshops and playful sessions, play a vital role in creating a platform for creative expression and promoting overall well-being within the Rohingya community. Additionally, the Rohingya actively engage with residents of the host community through workshops and joint events, promoting awareness, resilience, and social cohesion.

This article aims to shed light on the transformative power of cultural elements and community engagement by exploring the art and place-making practices of the Rohingya community. It underscores how these activities serve as beacons of hope, promoting individual and collective well-being while preserving their rich cultural heritage and creating a profound sense of belonging in times of hardship.

*Figure 1 Rohingya refugees crossing Bangladesh border after displacement in October 19, 2017*



*Source: Prothom Alo*

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Great Exodus**

Approximately 750,000 ethnic Rohingya refugees fled their home country due to an invasion of targeted brutality that the Myanmar military began in August 2017 and sought shelter in Bangladesh, which is only across the border (International Crisis Group, 2019) . They joined thousands of other residents who had escaped previous incidents of violence and torture.

*Figure 2 Imagining dark episode of mass displacement*



*Source: Author*

## **2.2. Forced Migration**

The UNHCR (2021) claimed that the critical issue of the global refugee crisis requires rapid attention. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019), this phase includes refugees, internally displaced people, and in some cases, victims of trafficking. For instance, there has been a substantial amount of forced migration from Myanmar due to armed conflicts, military occupation, and the uncertainty of livelihoods.

The severe effects forced migration has on people and communities must be acknowledged (UNHCR, 2021). The rights and dignity of refugees and displaced people must be preserved and upheld; thus, as a community, we must act immediately to find solutions to these problems (UNHCR, 2021).

## **2.3. Rohingya & Their Last Hope**

It is generally agreed upon that the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar are currently the most oppressed minority in the world. The decades-long conflict between the Myanmar government and the Rohingya Muslims on matters of religious and ethnic discrimination is what led to the racist prosecution (Human Rights Council, 2020). Since their country's independence, the Rohingya Muslims have been subjected to countless violations of their human rights, including rape, torture, and assassination on a scale of magnitude. These have led to a prolonged refugee problem in Bangladesh, a nearby country. Thousands of Rohingya people are still living as refugees and are dependent on humanitarian help to survive. Some of them also experience severe border guard brutality in Myanmar.

*Figure 3 Kutupalong camp- the largest refugee camp in world after massive Rohingya influx*



*Source: Crisisgroup*

#### **2.4. Bangladesh's role on Rohingya refugee accommodation**

In Cox's Bazar District, 33 crowded camps are housing Rohingya migrants (Quiroz, 2023). As part of a plan by the government of Bangladesh to clear the camps of excess population, over 30,000 refugees have since 2021 transferred to Bhasan Char, an island in the Noakhali region (Humanitarian Response, 2023). Although Bangladesh has ratified the key human rights laws, it is neither a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the Statelessness Conventions. In Bangladesh, no single national law regulates how asylum and refugee claims are handled. Directives, letters, and other administrative tools are used by the government to coordinate the response to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

### **3. Adaptation Process of Finding Their Roots**

Refugees fleeing violence in Myanmar cross the Naf River into Bangladesh, seeking safety and security in makeshift camps. To meet these needs, the Bangladeshi government collaborates with foreign organizations to build designated refugee camps such as Cox's Bazar, Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Site, Ukhiya, and Teknaf (Banerjee, 2020). Basic shelters made of local materials are built, but as the number of refugees grows, living circumstances become congested. NGOs and the Rohingya community collaborate to enhance the camps, including the construction of schools, vocational training centers, and healthcare facilities. Water, sanitation, and food distribution facilities are also available to meet basic needs. Community centers and houses of worship promote social contact as well as religious activity. Since 2017, the Rohingyas have gone through several transformations as they adapted to their new surroundings and co-created their living environments.

#### **3.1. Informal process of homemaking**

##### **3.1.1. Through spontaneous artistic practices**

The lives of Rohingya refugees are profoundly impacted by art. They are able to portray their culture and experiences with remarkable depth and authenticity by using a variety of creative areas like as storytelling, music, dance, art, and writing. These creative forms not only preserve culture, but also provide them a feeling of purpose and connection to their identity.



*Figure 4 Artistic expressions of Rohingya Women in camp*



*Source: Author*

**Aesthetic and Cultural Enhancements:** Despite the difficult conditions, Rohingya refugees have improved the aesthetics of their shelters. They cover the walls with bright paintings and cultural themes, instilling a feeling of identity and cultural pride in their living environments

**Material Recycling and Repurposing:** The Rohingya community's creativity is seen in their material recycling and repurposing. They discover new applications for stuff that others may throw away, maximizing existing resources.

*Figure 5 Recycling food packagings for making prayer mat*



*Source: Author*

### **3.1.2. Through reshaping their given environment**

**Vegetable Gardens:** Despite limited space, many Rohingya refugees have planted tiny vegetable gardens near their shelters. Not only do these gardens supply fresh vegetables, but they also serve as a reminder of their agricultural heritage and self-sufficiency.

**Overhead Bamboo Platform (Machang) for Shade:** To escape the harsh heat and make the most of their limited living space, some migrants have constructed overhead bamboo platforms (machang) covered with greenery between the common circulation areas. These towering platforms provide shade and create a comfort in the transition.

**Multi-Functional Spaces:** Because of space constraints, many locations within shelters perform numerous functions. A corner, for example, might be used as a cooking area during the day and a sleeping area at night, optimizing the utilization of available space.



*Figure 6 Informal practices of building Machang and Incorporating Green*



*Source: Author*

**Children's Play Areas:** Due to limited space in camp environments, Rohingya parents have ingeniously created swings out of easily available and reused items in order to impart a feeling of normalcy and joy in their children's life. These simple yet charming additions provide youngsters with entertainment and a variety of play opportunities.

**Balconies and Verandas:** Rohingya refugees have taken use of available resources to build balconies and verandas outside their shelters. These areas provide additional space for socializing, resting, and engaging in daily tasks.

**Front area as Tea Stalls:** To make the most of every square inch, some innovative people have converted the front area of their shelters into tea stalls. They sell basic items and handicrafts here in order to support their families and develop a feeling of communal commerce.

**Community meeting Areas:** The Rohingya have established and designated community meeting areas in the camps. These locations serve as gathering places for people to socialize, share tales, and establish a feeling of community.

*Figure 7 Reshaping built environment in terms of communal needs*



*Source: Author*

### 3.2. Structured interventions of co-creating and place-making

The formal process of co-creating and place making, which focuses on rediscovering the Rohingya people's identity, entails several processes and collaboration amongst different stakeholders. To have an actual impact on the Rohingya community, it was crucial to establish engagement areas that encourage open and honest discourse. BRAC humanitarian play lab initiative is one of those engagement sectors which interact with the community to extract their past memories to cultivate their future ready environment. Through this process, we gain vital views, experiences, and goals from the community by organizing consultations, focus group discussions, and workshops. It is critical to prioritize Rohingya involvement in decision-making processes while respecting cultural sensitivities and guaranteeing inclusion.

#### 3.2.1. Humanitarian Play Lab decoration with children and adolescents

In 2018, the workshops were for the Humanitarian Play Lab decoration workshop with Rohingya womens, childrens and adolescents. The first step of this exercise was to introduce a group art session with children in the Play Labs. Even the youngest participants effectively constructed this ancient type of art, which is often used in Myanmar for house adornment. The Play Labs were converted into brilliant paintings packed with colorful themes and storylines as teenagers participated. The painting workshop acted as a warm-up for their creative adventure, prompting them to passionately and creatively paint the walls and doors of the Play Labs.

*Figure 8 Activities of HPL with children*



*Source: Author*



### 3.2.2. Humanitarian Play Lab decoration with women and adolescents

To transform a sense of home into the Play Labs, Rohingya mothers, and women from the wider community were invited to make colorful *Shamiyanas* for the Humanitarian Play Labs. In this exercise, older and younger women first enthusiastically drew different designs on paper and then created *Shamiyanas* with fabrics of different colors. Young adolescents also helped them in this process.

*Figure 9 Activities with Women*



*Source: Author*

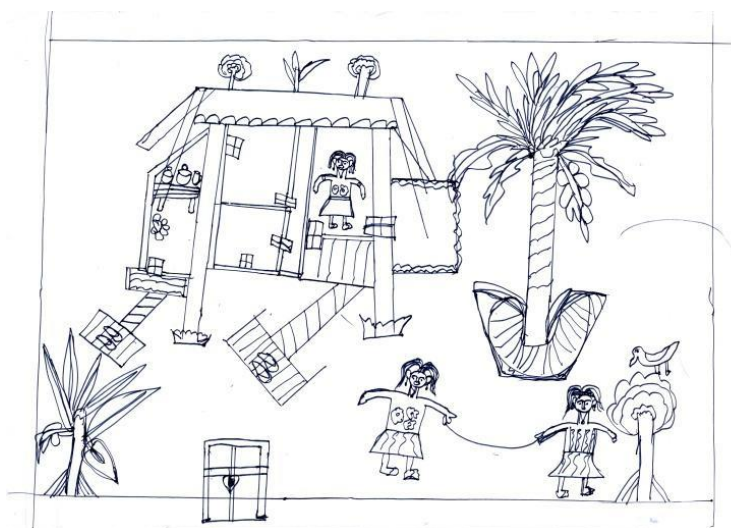
### 3.2.3. Art based Focus Group Discussion with Rohingya women

In an attempt to create culturally appropriate play spaces for Rohingya children and involve parents in the process, we invited Rohingya mothers and women to share stories about their habitats in Myanmar. Following are three visual stories created by Rohingya women in their homes in Myanmar.

#### ***Story of Fatima Apa***

*Fatima Apa took her time to draw her previous home from Myanmar and explained, "It was a two-storied building with a tin-shed roof. Our house was elevated from the ground, and the space underneath was used for storage. The kitchen space was separated from the main house and accessed from the outside. The floor was made with Shegun Kath (wood). We had wooden framed Khirkiri (casement windows) for ventilation on the wall. There were many flower plants near the house. Betel nut trees were planted along with the boundary to give shade from heated sunlight inside the premises.*

Figure 10 Drawing of Fatima (Rohingya Woman)



Source: Author

### 3.2.4. Creating Playscapes with Rohingya men, children and adolescents

In this engagement, children, adolescents, fathers, and local men collaborated to design play spaces using available materials. They started by drawing their favorite games and playing spaces on paper. The transformative Brac indoor playground project aimed to incorporate the community's ideas and desires.

CFS 23, located near the connecting roads of CAMP 3, was initially a clustered shelter with limited space. To make it suitable for play activities, the space was cleaned up and transformed into a small-scale open area. Rebounded perforated openings were created for cross ventilation and proper lighting, enhancing the environment. The eastern facade was opened widely with a hanging Jhap.

During previous FGDs, the community suggested various play ideas, but space constraints were a concern. To address this, two swings (DOLNA) were hung at the center, providing an ergonomic distance between them for safety. Additionally, two traditional floor-oriented games, SI KUT KUT, and REDI DI FEDI, were created.

To provide future shading, numerous plants of different species were planted around the Brac indoor playground, which initially lacked vegetation. The community and children actively participated in painting the space, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in the space.



Figure 11 CFS 23(Camp 03) transformation into community Playground



Source: Author

4. Cultural proliferation

Due to cross-cultural interaction, the Rohingya community discovered their newfound hope for survival. They came with nothing but their cultural and religious beliefs. Some things translated well with the place-making process, and some transformed while they were amid adaptation and negotiation. Furthermore, some of their traits severed all ties with them, which was inevitable for their living.

Table 1 Analyzed features in process of Place-making

|                    |                      |                       |
|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Continued Features | Transformed Features | Transfigured Features |
|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain their religious belief &amp; festivals.</li> <li>• Maintain culture and tradition in clothing.</li> <li>• Similar dialect as host community eases their communication and preserves cultural knowledge through oral traditions and folktales.</li> <li>• Continued practice art in daily activities.</li> <li>• Maintained their food preservation methods.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating green spaces adjacent to shelters as their previous practice</li> <li>• Platforms covered with greenery to escape the heat and find comfort in common areas.</li> <li>• Indigenously create swings from recycled materials, bringing a sense of joy to their children.</li> <li>• Build Semi Outdoor verandas for socializing.</li> <li>• Transform the front of homesteads into tea stalls, promoting communal commerce.</li> <li>• Decorating with paintings and cultural themes.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional bamboo, wood and thatch homes</li> <li>• Traditional livelihoods such as farming and fishing</li> <li>• Only male participation in Income generation and female also came in possession.</li> <li>• Myanmar's formal education is limited in camps, leading to adopt informal learning and vocational education for skill-based learning.</li> </ul> |
|--|--|---|

Source: Author

## 5. Conclusion

The sequential processes of co-creation and place-making within the Rohingya community result in a transformational environment with several significant results. These processes include community participation, cultural mapping, capacity building, collaborative design, cultural infrastructure construction, and cultural events. The participation of Rohingya in designing their surroundings gives them a sense of responsibility and empowerment, which helps them heal and recover from past traumas. Rediscovering and sustaining Rohingya traditions transforms the environment into a living memorial to their ancestors, creating cultural pride, belonging, and continuity. Through cooperation, communication, and shared experiences, the transformational environment builds social cohesiveness, allowing the Rohingya community to advocate for their rights and strive toward a brighter future. Learning, skill development, and economic independence are made possible through accessible educational facilities and capacity-building initiatives. The atmosphere fosters cultural pride and prepares the next generations to uphold Rohingya customs. The community may regain its cultural identity, promote social cohesiveness, and empower future generations via co-creating and place-making.

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