

“Geo-Cultural” Identity and Addressing Statelessness: A Critical Analysis of Rohingya Refugees in the Context of Bangladesh

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Key Words:

Geo-Cultural
Identity; Justice;
Statelessness;
Rohingya Refugees;
Bangladesh;
Myanmar

Abstract

In 2017, Bangladesh, despite its status as a developing nation with limited resources, opened its borders to over one million Rohingya refugees fleeing military violence in Myanmar, highlighting a critical crisis of statelessness and forced displacement. It is important to recognize this crucial problem of statelessness and displacement experienced by the Rohingya people. While many academic papers focused on this phenomenon from the perspective of law and humanitarian issues, there was no sufficient discussion of how historical and territorial identities affect the formation of statelessness. In this regard, the present study investigates the role of geo-cultural identity, characterized by cultural, lingual, historical, and territorial characteristics, in the context of the issue under analysis. The research posits that statelessness cannot be understood only from the perspective of the legal situation since it is based on the refusal to acknowledge geo-cultural identity of the refugees. For this purpose, qualitative fieldwork, including ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews, was conducted with the refugees living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and humanitarian workers who helped to solve the problems of this group of people. The findings of this study prove that the refusal to acknowledge geo-cultural identity results in the structural injustice and marginalization of the refugees.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of statelessness represents one of the most pressing human rights crises of the contemporary world, with the Rohingya refugees emerging as one of its most visible and tragic embodiments. The year 2017 saw Bangladesh, as a developing country, exhibit great humanitarianism when it opened up its doors to over one million refugees who had fled a vicious military attack in Myanmar (UNHCR, 2017). The mass exodus, which is the result of years of persecution, not only indicates humanitarian issues but also points out the issues of statelessness and loss of identity. As stateless individuals and unrecognized victims of violence and displacement, the Rohingya community has lived a life of hardship and marginalization from Myanmar for many years.

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The Rohingya crisis has been examined in this paper with regards to the concept of geo-cultural identity, an approach that takes into consideration common cultural, language, history, and geography of a community (Hossain & Khan, 2023). The research highlights how the denial of geo-cultural identities results in the creation of statelessness. Being historically associated with the Arakan region, the Rohingya have constantly been subject to marginalization in Myanmar due to the denial of their geo-cultural identity. Unlike conventional liberal or rights-based approaches that often universalize solutions to statelessness; a geo-cultural perspective emphasizes the territorial and historical rootedness of cultural identities and the moral responsibilities that arise from shared regional histories and cross-border cultural continuities.

By examining the connection between geo-cultural identity and statelessness, this study contends that the protection of such identity is not a peripheral concern but a moral and political imperative. Without recognition and protection of geo-cultural identity, minority groups are vulnerable to marginalization, identity erosion, and eventual exclusion from the political community. Justice, in this view, is not merely the absence of discrimination but requires the active acknowledgment, safeguarding, and celebration of cultural and geographical diversity.

In doing so, this research not only contributes to the discourse on refugee rights and statelessness but also proposes a conceptual reorientation that redefines belonging and justice through culturally embedded and territorially informed perspectives. Situating the Rohingya experience within the broader theoretical framework of geo-cultural identity, this paper aims to offer a critical analysis of how identity, belonging, and justice intersect in the context of forced displacement. It ultimately advocates for a paradigm that recognizes the centrality of cultural and territorial rootedness in the struggle for rights, dignity, and meaningful inclusion.

2. Literature Review

The dilemma of the Rohingya people stands as one of the most traumatic examples of statelessness, forced displacement, identity-based exclusion, and overall historical injustice in the contemporary world. Statelessness, as Hannah Arendt (1951) argues, reflects the condition of having “no right to have rights,” where lack of citizenship translates into total political and social vulnerability. In Myanmar, this condition was institutionalized through the 1982 Citizenship Law, which excluded the Rohingya from recognized ethnic categories, classifying them as “non-nationals” (Southwick, 2015; CIA, Burma). This resulted in severe restrictions on movement, limited access to education, and insecure land tenure, which over time contributed to widespread human rights abuses, including forced labor, violence, and sexual assault (Ibrahim, 2016).

Such exclusion reflects broader structural dynamics in which citizenship becomes a tool of ethno-religious boundary-making rather than inclusion (Islam *et al.*, 2025). As Mahmud (2025) notes, “Othering” is socially constructed through cultural and political hierarchies, producing material inequalities and legitimizing

systemic discrimination. Despite historical evidence of Rohingya presence in the Arakan region, they were gradually redefined as outsiders, indicating not only legal exclusion but also the erasure of historical belonging.

From a theoretical perspective, liberal multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995) argues for group-differentiated rights to ensure equality within diverse societies. However, critics such as Barry (2002) and Parekh (2006) highlight its limitations in contexts where states do not recognize diversity as legal. Moreover, theories of acculturation show that cultural marginalization produces psychological stress, identity confusion, and social exclusion (Baker *et al.*, 2012). Historical evidence from the Mrauk U Kingdom further illustrates that the region once supported plural cultural coexistence (Leider, 2018), where Buddhist and Muslim communities interacted within a shared political and cultural space. This historical reality challenges contemporary exclusionary national narratives that deny such long-standing diversity in the region. These accounts also reveal a key gap in the literature: they insufficiently explain how the denial of territorially rooted identity contributes to structural exclusion and statelessness, particularly in postcolonial state formation contexts such as Myanmar.

These limitations in existing theoretical approaches are reflected in state practices, where the failure to recognize historically embedded and territorially rooted identities becomes institutionalized through citizenship regimes. In such contexts, citizenship theory also reflects similar tensions. While T. H. Marshall (1997) conceptualizes citizenship as civil, political, and social rights, this assumes inclusive nationhood, which collapses in ethnically exclusive states. In Myanmar, successive regimes eroded earlier citizenship rights, culminating in the 1982 law that institutionalized hierarchical belonging based on “national races” (Haque, 2017). Through technical practices of “Othering” (Mahmud, 2025), Rohingya identity was reconstructed as foreign despite long-standing historical presence.

These structural exclusions intensified in the 1990s and culminated in mass violence in 2017, when military operations were described by the UN as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (UN Human Rights Council, 2018). This reflects Iris Marion Young’s (1990) concept of structural injustice, where oppression is embedded in institutional systems rather than isolated acts. The result was large-scale displacement and refugee flows, reinforcing cycles of marginalization.

From a justice perspective, Myanmar’s policies contradict Rawlsian principles of fairness (Rawls, 2005), Sen’s capability approach (2009), and Taylor’s politics of recognition (1994), all of which emphasize equality, freedom, and identity recognition. Instead, the Rohingya were deprived of both rights and capabilities, while their identity was systematically misrecognized. These theoretical violations were not abstract but became visible in earlier patterns of exclusion and displacement. During the 2000s, the Rohingya increasingly attracted limited international attention as “new boat people,” with many dying at sea while attempting dangerous migration routes to Thailand and Malaysia (Chris, 2008). Such episodes, along with repeated waves of forced movement, reflect what Sen’s

capability approach identifies as the denial of substantive freedoms necessary for security, agency, and dignity.

Refugee theory further shows that displacement is not only a humanitarian issue but a political condition. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugees through persecution-based criteria (UNHCR, 1951), yet in practice, refugees occupy a liminal “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998), where they receive protection without political membership. This is evident in Cox’s Bazar, where over one million Rohingya live under restricted conditions (UNHCR, 2024), highlighting the gap between survival and belonging. This form of liminality also points to a deeper unresolved issue: the absence of recognized historical and territorial identity that continues to structure exclusion even after displacement.

However, existing literature on statelessness, citizenship, justice, and refugeehood remains largely fragmented across legal, political, and normative domains. Statelessness studies primarily focus on nationality law, refugee studies on displacement, justice theory on distribution and recognition, and citizenship debates on rights and inclusion. While these strands offer important insights, they rarely integrate them within a territorially grounded understanding of identity. Moreover, liberal multiculturalism tends to universalize minority rights frameworks without adequately addressing postcolonial contexts shaped by ethno-nationalist state formation, as evident in Myanmar. As a result, the Rohingya crisis exposes the limitations of approaches that assume inclusive state institutions and overlook the historical and geographical foundations of belonging. What is missing, therefore, is a conceptual framework that connects geography, historical continuity, and political identity. Geo-Cultural Identity Theory addresses this gap by arguing that identity is formed through enduring relationships between people, territory, and collective memory. From this perspective, the denial of geo-cultural identity is not a secondary issue but a foundational cause that precedes and produces legal statelessness, exclusion, and displacement.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design, where data were collected through two complementary qualitative methods: ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic observation provided contextual insights into participants' everyday lives, living conditions, mobility restrictions, and community interactions, while semi-structured interviews enabled both Rohingya refugees and humanitarian workers to share their experiences and perspectives on identity, belonging, exclusion, and refugee governance. Data generated from these methods were analyzed thematically and interpreted through the framework of Geo-Cultural Identity Theory to examine how the denial of historically rooted identity contributes to statelessness, structural injustice, and forced displacement.

3.1 Study Area

Cox’s Bazar district in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh was selected as the core research site for this study, as it currently hosts the largest concentration of Rohingya refugees in the world (UNHCR, 2025). The refugee settlements are primarily located in Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas, including the Kutupalong–Balukhali Expansion Site and surrounding camps (IOM, 2023). These camps accommodate over one million Rohingya who fled Myanmar following successive waves of violence, particularly the mass displacement in August 2017 (UN Human Rights Council, 2018).

The camps are characterized by densely populated settlements constructed on hilly terrain, with limited infrastructure and restricted mobility. Cox’s Bazar provides an appropriate setting for this research because it enables engagement not only with Rohingya refugees experiencing statelessness and forced displacement, but also with humanitarian workers, local administrators, and NGO personnel directly involved in camp governance and service provision.

For the purpose of this study, selected blocks within Kutupalong and Balukhali camps were visited to conduct interviews and observations. The sites were chosen to ensure accessibility, security, and diversity of participants in terms of age, gender, and professional involvement.

3.2 Participants

The sample was selected in two phases. In the first phase, Rohingya refugee participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of different age groups, gender categories, and displacement experiences. A total of 15 Rohingya participants (8 male and 7 female) were interviewed. These participants included community leaders (majhis), teachers in learning centers, small-scale camp volunteers, and general camp residents. Their ages ranged from 20 to 65 years. The purpose of selecting diverse participants was to capture varying perceptions of identity, citizenship, belonging, and justice. In the second phase, 10 humanitarian and development workers were interviewed. These participants included NGO officials, camp management personnel, healthcare workers, and protection officers working with Rohingya communities. They were selected through purposive sampling techniques. These interviews aimed to explore institutional perspectives on statelessness, refugee governance, identity recognition, and repatriation debates. Thus, a total of 25 participants were included in the study.

In addition to the interview participants, five focal households were purposively selected for ethnographic observation with the assistance of NGO personnel, camp volunteers, and community welfare workers who were familiar with the camp population. The selected households were multi-generational, comprising family members such as grandparents, parents, and children, and had experienced prolonged displacement, severe livelihood challenges, and other forms of vulnerability. These households were chosen to provide rich contextual insights into the everyday realities of statelessness, identity exclusion, and camp life.

3.3 Data Collection

Data for this study was collected between January and December 2025 through five field visits to Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Each visit lasted four days. Before the commencement of data collection, the purpose and objectives of the research were clearly explained to all participants, ensuring informed consent and voluntary participation. Most participants cooperated openly and shared their experiences with considerable willingness, although a few initially expressed hesitation due to concerns about sensitivity and safety. In such cases, the researcher fully respected their decision and did not encourage them to continue. Given the vulnerability of refugee populations, particular ethical care (like, avoiding direct questions about experiences of sexual violence or torture unless participants chose to raise these issues themselves; allowing participants to skip questions or end the interview at any time) was taken throughout the process to avoid re-traumatization and to remain sensitive to political and emotional contexts.

In the study based on ethnography, data regarding the life-style and behavioral pattern of the participants can be collected through observations, interviewing, documents and artifacts (Fetterman, 2019; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Spradley, 2016) but the most demanding ethnographic data collection procedures are thought to be observation and interviewing (Creswell, 2019). In the first phase of each field visit, the researcher spent extended periods within the camp environment observing daily life, social interaction, mobility restrictions, institutional arrangements, and living conditions. According to Jorgensen (1989), observing the participants can create an opportunity for the investigator to change his role from being an outsider to an insider to the participants. Over each four-day visit, three days were largely devoted to observing selected households and community spaces. Field notes were recorded on spatial organization, social relations, and informal discussions, with occasional brief conversations to clarify participants' everyday experiences. This observational engagement helped to capture how statelessness and identity exclusion are embedded in routine practices and lived environments.

In the second phase of data collection, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with all 25 participants. Each interview lasted between 20–40 minutes depending on participant comfort and availability. Interviews with Rohingya participants were conducted in Bengali with assistance from local interpreters when necessary. Interviews with humanitarian workers were conducted in English or Bengali based on preference. The flexible interview format allowed participants to narrate their personal histories and lived experiences in their own words, while also enabling the researcher to explore deeper reflections on belonging, identity, and justice. This approach created space for participants to express how displacement, exclusion, and everyday uncertainty shape their understanding of geo-cultural identity and political recognition.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study followed qualitative data analysis procedures as outlined by [Creswell \(2019\)](#). All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Since most Rohingya participants were not fluent in English or standard Bengali, interviews were conducted with the assistance of local interpreters familiar with the Rohingya dialect. In many cases, the Rohingya dialect shares similarities with the Chittagonian dialect spoken in the region, which facilitated communication. The interpreters translated participants' responses into Bengali during the interviews, and these responses were later translated into English during transcription for consistency. Field notes from observations were also incorporated into the overall data set to enrich contextual interpretation.

Data analysis proceeded through a systematic and iterative process. Initially, all transcripts and field notes were organized into a unified database to ensure coherence and accessibility of the material. Following this, initial coding was conducted using margin notes and analytic memos, which helped identify recurring ideas such as identity denial, documentation barriers, historical belonging, experiences of injustice, displacement trauma, and institutional exclusion. In the next stage, 25 preliminary codes were generated and gradually refined and merged into broader conceptual groupings through thematic coding. These codes were then grouped into four analytically coherent and theoretically grounded themes that directly correspond to the structure of the Findings and Discussion section: (1) Experiences of Statelessness and Legal Exclusion, (2) Consequences of Statelessness: Injustice and Human Rights Violation, (3) Everyday Forms of Structural Injustice, and (4) Geo-Cultural Identity and Historical Belonging.

Finally, these themes were interpreted through the framework of Geo-Cultural Identity Theory and normative theories of justice. The analysis aimed not only to describe lived experiences but to connect them with broader philosophical debates on citizenship, political morality, identity and historical injustice.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Experiences of Statelessness and Legal Exclusion

Underlying the problem is the basic question of citizenship and affiliation. Denial of citizenship cannot be viewed just as a legal oddity, but as a political construct based on historic displacement and discrimination. The Rohingyas have been deliberately alienated from the idea of the state; hence their deprivation of basic rights such as freedom of movement, education, political participation, and access to laws. This fact is best captured by the experiences of the respondents. One of the Rohingyas interviewed stated that "we were born there, our parents, and grandparents lived there, but according to the government, we never belonged. Deprived of citizenship, we were nobody." (Respondent 02, male, 55 years old).

The legal exclusion, however, was not merely a case of administrative practice, rather it represented the manifestation of more extensive structural

processes of marginalization. As discussed in the literature, statelessness is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that entails not just legal exclusion, but also political disenfranchisement and social marginalization based on identity politics. In the case of the Rohingya people, citizenship law served as the mechanism of boundary making, which created the national identity based on exclusionary ethno-religious lines. The refusal to grant citizenship therefore became a means for denying the group's long-standing presence and history. Indeed, this deeper form of dispossession can be seen in the experiences of the participants who stated, "It was not only that we didn't have papers, but they wanted to erase our history. We were told we were foreigners, but that was the land of our forefathers." (Participant 08, male, 40).

The implications of their marginalization were demonstrated through cycles of violence and forcible expulsion. Being stateless rendered the Rohingya vulnerable as they lacked institutional backing, which made them susceptible to abuse. One participant explained: "The reason why no one protected us when the military arrived is because we are stateless people; therefore, we lack any sort of power." (Participant 10, female, 35). In terms of institutions, humanitarian workers also identified the high levels of vulnerability exhibited by the Rohingya women. For instance, one protection officer commented: "Our organization works with many survivors of sexual assault. The women recounted to us that at the time of the attack, there was absolutely nothing by way of protection for them. They did not even dare report what happened to them as they knew that they did not have any rights whatsoever." (Humanitarian Participant 4, female, 32). Here, statelessness is associated with both invisibility and impunity, especially regarding gendered violence.

Analyzing the situation from a wider perspective, it becomes clear that being stateless is more than just a problem related to law, since it is, rather, a political issue caused by injustice in the past. Indeed, as [Arendt \(1951\)](#) explains, the status of being stateless denotes one's "no right to have rights," implying that in this case the lack of citizenship entails total vulnerability, both politically and socially. Citizenship, in other words, does not play the role of a universal means of belonging but serves as the means of exclusion. This reflects the idea that the concept of citizenship is itself a controversial and politicized notion.

In addition, the example of the Rohingyas demonstrates how statelessness is inevitably intertwined with refugeehood. After being displaced, the stateless Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar find themselves caught up in states of prolonged liminality. Neither citizens of Myanmar nor citizens of Bangladesh, these individuals are denied formal rights, making them politically insignificant even if their existence is physically protected. "We are safe from any violence here," said one 20-year-old Rohingya male refugee named Participant 07, "but we do not exist as full human beings since we cannot move around anywhere, cannot earn our living, and still have no nation."

In the end, the phenomenon of statelessness among the Rohingyas reveals the shortcomings of the existing legal or humanitarian approaches. To solve their problems, one needs to change the conceptualization of citizenship itself. It should not be considered anymore as a tool of exclusion used by states, but as a human right based on historically established affiliation and self-respect of those affected. Thus, from the point of view of geo-cultural identity, the historically developed connection of the Rohingyas to the Arakan (Rakhine) area can serve as the basis of this transformation.

4.2 Consequences of Statelessness: Injustice and Human Rights Violation

The phenomenon of statelessness, which can be described as a lack of legal recognition by any state, is a serious form of structural injustice that leaves one deprived of essential civil, political, and socio-economic rights. The significance of statelessness, as discussed in the literature, is that citizenship is the main prerequisite for enjoying those rights, which means that denial of it leads to systematic exclusion from socio-cultural structures. When discussing statelessness in the Rohingya case, the phenomenon goes far beyond its legal dimensions to become a way of life characterized by deprivation, marginalization, and exclusion.

The findings obtained during the research have proved the substantial influence of statelessness on daily routine of participants. Specifically, impossibility to receive education, healthcare services, and obtain jobs has been mentioned frequently among interviews' answers. For instance, an interviewed person stated that: "Without possessing any legal status we cannot neither learn nor do what other people do; our entire existence is under constant restriction." (Participant 3, male, 24 years old). In this case, statelessness leads to additional poverty among people.

In addition to economic and social exclusion, statelessness leaves refugees open to greater vulnerabilities to abuse and exploitation. Since they do not enjoy legal protection, the refugee status of the Rohingya leaves them vulnerable to various forms of maltreatment and arbitrary treatment. As one respondent said, "It was scary because we did not have any protection; we didn't even have the protection of our own community. In case anything happens, we don't have any place to seek redress." (Participant 11, female, 38).

Consequences of statelessness extend to severe psychological and social implications. Feelings of invisibility, loss of dignity, and uncertainty regarding the future were mentioned by the participants as well. As stated by Participant 13, a woman aged 30, "We feel as if no country sees us. We live, yet we do not have identity." Such perceptions are consistent with those expressed in [Arendt's \(1951\)](#) book, which states that due to the lack of citizenship, individuals do not have "the right to have rights."

One of the important insights gained through interviews with the Rohingya people is that statelessness is simultaneously a reason and consequence of injustice. The refusal to grant citizenship to Rohingya citizens allowed years of persecution and ultimately resulted in mass displacement and prolonged refugeehood status of

the population. In Bangladesh, despite being physically safe, the lack of legal status creates a situation of permanent uncertainty for the refugee population. Participant 6, a man aged 41, states that “We managed to escape violence, yet we are not free. Lacking citizenship deprives us of security for the future.”

Statelessness is not simply a legal anomaly but a systemic form of injustice that undermines human dignity, restricts life opportunities, and perpetuates vulnerability. Addressing this condition requires more than humanitarian assistance; it demands a rights-based approach centered on legal recognition, inclusion, and the restoration of citizenship.

4.3 Everyday Forms of Structural Injustice

The marginalization of the Rohingya in Myanmar was more than simply the denial of citizenship rights; rather, it extended into many areas of daily life in which injustice was enacted in the form of regulation and social exclusion (Young, 2011). The structural injustices were performed through administrative systems of control, local enforcement, and social exclusion, creating the normalization of discrimination and inequality as a regular aspect of existence. Injustice for the Rohingya was therefore experienced not only during periods of conflict but in their day-to-day administration and control within movement, family dynamics, education, and work.

Movement regulations constituted one of the most common forms of restrictions imposed by the government. The Rohingya population in Rakhine State was prohibited from moving out of their settlements, and sometimes required permission even if they intended to move around within those same spaces. This severely limited mobility and prevented the ability to attend markets, go to hospitals, and even go to school. As one of the interviewees explained, “We were prohibited from leaving our villages unless we had permission to do so. We were prohibited from going anywhere else.” (Participant 4, male, 40). Such territorial restrictions were mechanisms that served to segregate the Rohingya population, alienating them from society.

Personal freedom, including marriage and family planning, were not left untouched either. The process of getting married often entailed obtaining government permission, along with other difficulties. In certain instances, limitations were imposed regarding the number of children a particular family was allowed to have. “To get married, we had to obtain permission from the state. We couldn’t have a family without permission,” mentioned one participant. (Participant 9, female, 32 years old). The fact that intimate relations became the target of state control is indicative of the extent to which political forces were involved in regulating social practices.

Children’s education and healthcare were equally limited by state actions. Rohingya kids were prevented from attending school; moreover, the issue of their access to healthcare facilities was complicated by the necessity to obtain permission to travel there. “Children couldn’t study like other kids. It was hard to go to hospitals

because we had to receive permission first,” said one respondent. (Participant 5, male, 45 years old). Such restrictions not only affected their well-being in the present but also contributed to cultural disintegration in the future.

Structural exclusion characterized economic activity as well. Restrictions on formal employment for the Rohingya, combined with barriers to access to land, market opportunities, and capital, pushed many people into vulnerable and informal economic arrangements. One participant explained, “We couldn’t work freely. There were many things we couldn’t do and weren’t safe doing.” (Participant 1, male, 38). Such practices contributed to dependency and entrenched poverty among already marginalized groups, removing them from their historically grounded economic traditions.

All these practices illustrate that injustice in Myanmar was neither occasional nor momentary but rather structural and ongoing. The monitoring of movement, the organization of social relations, educational activities, and economic activity were components of a larger structure of control meant to exclude the Rohingya from society. “It wasn’t just the violence, but in general our lives were regulated by the government in all aspects,” said one participant. (Participant 3, male, 50).

The conclusion to be drawn from all this evidence is that the Rohingya people were victims of structural injustice in their everyday experiences before and leading up to violence. Such conditions highlight that statelessness is lived not only through legal exclusion but through the routine denial of dignity, autonomy, and basic human capabilities, rooted in the broader negation of their geo-cultural identity and historical belonging.

4.4. Geo-Cultural Identity and Historical Belonging

The results of this research show that the situation of the Rohingya people cannot be fully understood from the point of view of legality; on the contrary, the problem needs to be analyzed within the framework of geographical and cultural identity and belonging to the area. Geo-Cultural Identity theory asserts that identity is defined by the mutual influence of geography, history, culture, and collective memory (Talukder, 2013; Watson, 2017; Ullah, 2022; Hossain & Khan, 2023). According to it, belonging is not provided by the authorities but is based on historical ties between people, their location, and cultural practices. Identity for the Rohingya people is based on the region of Arakan (Rakhine), where numerous generations of people lived and formed distinctive linguistic, religious, and cultural features.

Respondents constantly expressed their deep historical ties to their native territory and disagreed with the narrative according to which they are seen by governments as “outsiders.” As one of the participants put it: “Our grandparents and their parents lived there. It was not just a territory, but a place we belonged to.” (Participant 3, male, 48). The phenomenon described in this quote corresponds to what Talukder (2013) defines as geo-cultural belongingness in identity.

The findings further illustrate the systematic denial of this geo-cultural identity in the construction of the Myanmar nation. Excluding the Rohingya from recognized ethnic groups and official histories is not just a matter of law but also a denial of their culture and territory. As Participant 11, a male aged 42, put it, “They say we are not from there, but they forget our history. They want to erase our name and our place.” In line with the view of Ullah (2022), geo-cultural identity theory recognizes territorial and cultural rights as basic human rights.

This denial of geo-cultural identity has major implications for justice. Although citizenship is a legal status, it requires more than just legal recognition of the individual or group in question. Instead, it requires acceptance of their identity and history. This is an aspect that was emphasized by participants, who said, “We do not want just papers but our identity and history to be recognized.” (Participant 7, female, 29). Indeed, the results reveal that the elimination of the geo-cultural identity leads directly to statelessness and displacement. By undermining the relationship of the Rohingya people with land, language, and culture, the state de-territorializes the geo-cultural identity of the individuals. “First, they told us that we are not from there, then they took away everything from us. This is why we left.” (Participant 5, male, 50).

According to the theory of geo-cultural identity, then, the Rohingya crisis is much more than a matter of failure to acknowledge the citizenship status of these individuals. It is a serious act of justice since the Rohingya people are denied their history, culture, and geo-cultural identity that needs to be addressed. Last but not least, the theory of geo-cultural identity offers an important insight into the problem of identity, territory, and justice. “We feel incomplete without our land and identity. For us, justice means recognition of who we are.” (Participant 9, female, 35).

5. Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis represents one of the most urgent humanitarian and moral challenges of our time, marked by statelessness, forced displacement, and systemic injustice. This study argues that these injustices are rooted not merely in legal exclusion but in the denial of geo-cultural identity, the historically grounded connection between people, place, culture, and collective memory. The findings demonstrate that statelessness, in the Rohingya case, is not simply a legal condition but the outcome of a deeper process of identity erasure. By denying the Rohingya’s historical presence in the Arakan (Rakhine) region, Myanmar’s state policies, most notably the 1982 Citizenship Law, have transformed a historically rooted community into outsiders within their own homeland.

The study further suggests that this denial of geo-cultural identity produces layered and continuous forms of injustice. Restrictions on movement, education, livelihood, and personal autonomy are not isolated practices but mechanisms that reinforce exclusion and marginalization. In this context, statelessness becomes a lived experience, shaping everyday life through insecurity, marginalization, and lack of opportunity. The Rohingya experience shows a clear pattern: denial of

identity leads to statelessness, and statelessness leads to forced displacement and prolonged suffering.

Bangladesh’s role in hosting over a million Rohingya refugees since 2017 reflects significant humanitarian commitment, yet it does not offer a durable solution. Justice requires more than temporary refuge; it demands the restoration of dignity through the recognition of geo-cultural identity. In this regard, Geo-Cultural Identity Theory provides a normative framework and challenges mainstream approaches to citizenship and multiculturalism that treat identity in abstract terms, instead emphasizing the importance of historical rootedness and territorial belonging. For the Rohingya, justice must involve not only the restoration of citizenship but also the acknowledgment of their historical presence, the protection of their cultural practices, and the guarantee of safe and dignified return. This study brings to a close that the denial of geo-cultural identity is a primary driver of statelessness and injustice. Addressing the Rohingya crisis therefore requires a rethinking of citizenship and justice, one that recognizes identity as historically and geographically embedded; without such recognition, exclusion and marginalization will persist.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size is relatively small and limited to selected camps in Cox’s Bazar, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, data collection relied on interpreters for Rohingya participants, which may have influenced the nuance and precision of translated responses. The sensitive nature of the research context and access constraints within refugee camps may also have limited deeper exploration of certain experiences. Future research could expand the geographical scope, include longitudinal perspectives, and further examine the role of geo-cultural identity in other contexts of statelessness and displacement.

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