

Article

Religion at the Margins: Resistance to Secular Humanitarianism at the Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh

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Received: 16 July 2020; Accepted: 12 August 2020; Published: 16 August 2020



Abstract: This paper joins the growing body of work on Human Rights and Religion and examines the impacts of religious practices in protecting the socioeconomic and cultural rights of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh. Based on an empirical study at eight different camps in Kutupalong, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, this article documents how the refugees, through different Islamic religious activities and practices, protect their cultural identities, negotiate with the local governing agents, and maintain solidarity with the host communities in their camp lives. This article also describes how, in these camps, many secular humanitarian projects often get challenged, resisted, or rejected by the refugees since those fail to address their networked relations with religion. Drawing from a rich body of literature in forced migrations, socioeconomic human rights, and religious studies in the Global South, this article investigates how religion and religious activities cushion the refugees from different forms of marginalization that are often engendered by secular development agencies. This article further offers several insights for practitioners and policymakers to ensure socioeconomic and cultural integration in human rights activities in refugee camps in the Global South.

Keywords: Rohingya; refugee; religion; humanitarian aid; sustainable design; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The modern world, at present, is witnessing an unprecedented upsurge in forced displacements due to climate change, conflicts, wars, persecution, economic hardship, etc. (Silove et al. 2017). The emergence of refugee camps around the globe, housing millions of displaced population, is considered one of the biggest humanitarian crises of this century. In Southeast Asia, Rohingya persecution and massive displacement from Myanmar engendered one of the world's largest refugee concentrations in Bangladesh. For decades, the army-led Myanmar administration has ostracized the Rohingyas from their basic citizens' rights as the new citizenship law passed in 1982 excluded the Rohingyas from obtaining full citizenship in Myanmar. Since the late 1970s, persecuted Rohingyas have fled to Bangladeshi borderlands at different times and different volumes. Before the latest influx in 2017, about 400,000 refugees were already living in Bangladesh. The greatest influx of 2017 resulted in a number of 909,000 stateless Rohingyas residing in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas of Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh (Hussain et al. 2020). The majority of these refugees are residing in 34 extremely congested camps with an uncertain future as Myanmar is declining to accept them as citizens. As the Rohingyas have been living in Cox's Bazar for a while now and will continue living for an uncertain period of time, their initial humanitarian needs such as foods, shelter, health support, etc. have slowly started to convert in developmental challenges for Bangladesh as the host country (Hussain et al. 2020). Gradually, the local government and helping organizations have started to develop new governing systems and social supports that get rendered through different community engagement programs

to reduce many socio-economic tensions inside the camps. These programs address developmental issues such as education, skill-based learning, mental health support, awareness against gender and sex-based harassment, legal support, etc. Most of the cases these development programs and governing systems are designed and developed from a universal “refugee camp crises and modern solutions” perspective, which overlooks the contextual socio-cultural demands of the Rohingyas in the camp environment. This phenomenon often unknowingly create different forms of marginalization of the refugees inside the camps during the post-emergency phase. In response, the refugees often come up with different guerilla methods to overcome such marginalization. In many cases, these methods are backed by their Islamic religious values and practices. In other words, religious activities and practices often help the Rohingya refugees to attain their socio-economic and cultural rights in the camps. However, this phenomenon is still understudied in the mainstream design and development research to improve the Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh.

This article calls for attention toward the study of religion and human rights of the Rohingya refugees to address different development problems of the camp in a more inclusive way. Based on an ethnographic study with the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh, this article makes three distinct contributions in the study of religion and the refugee rights. First, this study reports the existing forms of marginalizations that the refugees are experiencing due to different secular development agencies in the camps. Second, this article advances the growing discourse around religion and socio-economic-cultural rights by documenting how through different Islamic values and practices the Rohingyas are responding toward such marginalizations. Third, this article explains how religiosity as a framework can better inform the design and development phases of policies, planning, and systems to ensure inclusion and sustainable living conditions in the camps.

2. Background and Related Work

2.1. Religious Background of Rohingya Crisis

For the past few decades, the Rohingya crisis has received profound attention from the world for its complicated political history, unsparing persecution scenarios, and massive cross-border migrations. However, sketching the detailed historical overview of the Rohingya crisis, from the colonial period to the present, goes beyond the scope of this paper. This section explores and documents how religion, as a dominating cultural factor, has played an essential role in this crisis.

Since its independence from the British rule in 1948, most of the state-led decisions around the Rohingya population have been underscored by their Religious differences. Being a Buddhist majority country, Myanmar revealed its notion of nationalism in the form of a hegemonic ideology (Washaly 2019). Washaly mentions that the ultra-nationalists of Myanmar believed they would bring Myanmar’s pre-colonial glory, when they would ensure a Buddhist order uncontaminated by foreign influences. While the nationalists brought the slogan ‘Burma for the Burmans’ to the fore, Buddhist Monks added a religious backdrop to this slogan by saying ‘to be Burman is to be Buddhist’ (Ullah 2017). Such notions of a strong nationalist view backed by religion gradually marginalized other religious communities, especially the Rohingyas. This marginalization, stigmatization (Ahmed 2009), and oppression toward the Rohingya population happened in different forms ranging from banning citizenship to mass killing.

Myanmar struggled with armed ethnic conflict and political instability for a long time after its independence in 1948 (Smith and Hassan 2012). After 1962’s military coup, a socialist informed military state reigned Myanmar for the next sixty years. During this time, the Rohingya Muslim population experienced tremendous abusive actions from the military government (Abdelkader 2013). Massive killing, raping, and torturing resulted in two massive expulsions in 1977 and 1992 and the neighboring country Bangladesh experienced a chronic refugee crisis (Smith and Hassan 2012). However, this was just the beginning of ethnic discrimination. The 1982 Citizenship Act in Myanmar recognized 135 national races to qualify for citizenship (Abdelkader 2013). This act ultimately excluded

the Rohingya Muslims from the citizenship benefit and coded them as “non-citizens”, “aliens”, and “illegal Bengali Immigrants” (Adam et al. 2017). Such denial from citizenship opened new episodes of persecution for the Rohingyas. On the one hand, there was no support from the state to save the Rohingyas from military abuse; on the other hand, the religion-backed nationalist views made it difficult for the Rohingya Muslims to live in Myanmar, which they have known as their homes for generations.

The Citizenship Act also ensured that the Rohingya Muslims would not be able to create any political identity or voice in the governing system (Washaly 2019). Although the development of Islam in Myanmar was not led by any special movement or by preachers, rather merely by the high birth-rate among Muslims (Biver 2014), the government often felt it as a threat toward the political stability. Hence, when several nationalists monks successfully ignited the blast of discrimination over other religions and led the crisis of ethnic cleansing, the government stayed put (Adam et al. 2017). Moreover, the government support toward the Buddhist majority communities in establishing academic organizations of Buddha, funding religious community activities, maintaining pagodas, setting up Buddhist shrines at non-Buddhist areas, etc. fueled the discriminating agencies (Adam et al. 2017). The absence of any form of institutional support from legal or religious institutions accentuated socio-political and cultural domination over the Rohingya Muslims.

With hundreds of other issues, such religious-backed discriminating actions caused the eruption of sectarian violence in June 2012 (Bashar 2012; Kipgen 2013; Zawacki 2012). The then President of Myanmar Thein Sein recommended the Rohingyas to go to a “third country” or UNHCR camps (Abdelkader 2013). The neighboring country Bangladesh, from time to time, received hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fleeing from Myanmar. Before the latest influx in 2017, about 400,000 refugees were already living in Bangladesh (Hussain et al. 2020). The greatest influx of 2017 resulted in a number of 909,000 stateless Rohingyas residing in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas of Cox’s Bazar district in Bangladesh (Hussain et al. 2020). The majority of these refugees are residing in 34 extremely congested camps with an uncertain future as Myanmar keeps declining to accept them as citizens.

2.2. Forced Mobilities, Human Rights, and Religion

Forced mobilities or migrations and human rights are widely discussed in different disciplinary literature ranging from law to urban planning to computer science, etc. Chetail asserts that the relationship between human rights and forced mobilities are more complex than they appear. On the one hand, the movements of the refugees can be traced and linked with the violation of human rights. On the other hand, the human right standards implemented in the refugee camps of the host countries define the distinctive tenets of international refugee law (Chetail 2014). Hence, in different literary works, different forms of human rights have been analyzed, discussed, documented, and designed with a backdrop of refugee crises. For instance, the security and protection of the refugees have been widely discussed in different scholarly works. McAdams et al. document how the idea of security of borders, of people, of institutions, of national identities, etc. gets complicated within the milieu of intricate mobility patterns of the refugees (McAdam 2008). Building on Foucault’s governmentality and biopolitics, Muller explores why forced mobilities should be examined through the paradox between globalization and security (Muller 2004). In the present day, the queries around human rights in the form of security have gone beyond the notion of borders. Gender politics, racial discrimination, sexual exploitation, child abuse, sex trafficking, etc. are being studied rigorously to limit human rights violations in the lives of refugees (Akhter and Kusakabe 2014; Casey 2011; Casimiro et al. 2007; Moussa 1998).

Another popular sector of research at the intersection of forced mobilities and human rights is the health sector (Gostin and Roberts 2015). Both physical and mental health issues are being discussed at different disciplinary domains to ensure proper health support to the displaced population. For example, in the Rohingya refugee scenario, the research domain is primarily dominated by the health sector. Medical and psychological well being have considered being one of the most important

fields of research in the post-emergency phase of Rohingya refugee camps (Ager et al. 2019; Chan et al. 2018; Rahman and Islam 2019). Milton et al. (2017) explains existing complex situations in the camps around medical, mental health, physical/sexual abuse, and call attention of the policymakers to address this situation. Zaman et al. (2019) shed light on marginalized Rohingya women in the camps and asks for proper health support for them. Design disciplines, for instance, architecture and urban planning, have shed light on different spatial aspects to provide the refugees with a healthy and sustainable living environment. On the one hand, scholars have discussed spatial qualities within the boundary of a camp. For example, based on their work in Jordan and Germany, Dalal et al. emphasize co-production of the spatial reality of refugee accommodations by softening the disciplinary powers embedded within the planning framework of the refugee camp (Dalal et al. 2018). Moore explores how a sustainable planning process can be utilized for a camp situation that has overcome its “emergency phase” (Moore 2017). These and many other works discuss how different design approaches ensure human rights in a camp environment. On the other hand, a significant portion of interdisciplinary work has brought to the fore issues around how to integrate migrants in the host countries’ urban system. For instance, Vaz et al. discuss how a spatially-explicit approach using a set of socio-economic variables can inform the Syrian refugees to find “location optima” in Toronto (Vaz et al. 2018). From infrastructure to technological advancement, forced mobilities and human rights have enriched design conversations at multiple scales, levels, and dimensions (Farishta 2014; Giada et al. 2003; Stickel et al. 2015).

Along with the above-mentioned security, health, living environment and facilities, other human rights such as education, scopes of work, etc. are also brought to the fore from different disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives (Clark-Kazak 2010; Dryden-Peterson 2015; Wahab 2017; Werker 2007). Studies on social justice, equity, cultural freedom, etc. also stimulate essential discussions (Khera et al. 2014; Pavlish and Ho 2009) since social, economic, and cultural rights are now being considered as dominant human rights in the lives of the refugees (Ziebertz 2020). Religion, being one of the most influential social forces, also constitutes a significant body of knowledge in the context of forced mobilities and human rights. In many cases, as Gozdzia et al. mention, these refugee studies focus on the politicization of religious identity or religion’s role in conflict settings (Gozdzia et al. 2002). How religion and spiritual beliefs often help in the resettlement and reintegration of the forced migrants also are studied in many scholarly works (Gozdzia et al. 2002; Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012; Nawyn 2006; Ninh 2018). Many scholars bring the pluriverse of the diversity of religious perspectives and cultural identities to the fore to support and challenge already existing frameworks of refugee studies (Mavelli and Wilson 2016; Musalo 2007; Pickel 2018). Through an international comparative empirical study, Unser et al. examine what moderates the European young people’s attitude toward refugee rights: national context or religiosity (Unser and Ziebertz 2020). Another thread of research work considers religion as an important lens to look at other human rights-related issues in a refugee scenario. For instance, Bakali et al. studies existing educational programming in the Kutupalong Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh to better understand educational opportunities for the refugees, who have a strong background of religious education (Bakali and Wasty 2020). Ellis et al. explored how religious support systems helped to heal Somali adolescents’ mental health (Ellis et al. 2010). Fiddian-Qasmiyeh emphasizes creating a dialogic process between refugees and their political engagement with both secular and faith-based humanitarian systems (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011). Through a qualitative study, Wilkinson documents different forms of marginalization occur in a refugee context as international humanitarian systems start to dominate local faith actors (Wilkinson 2018). Palmer questions in her study on Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh when any meaningful engagement with religion is difficult to attain in the refugee context, how essential it is to claim the existence of Muslim solidarity in worldwide aid process (Palmer 2011).

These and many other studies have situated religion as an essential topic of discussion at the intersection of forced mobilities and human rights. However, in most of the studies, religion is seen as a peripheral socio-cultural factor that informs, shapes, and reshapes the understanding of human rights

in a contested context. As McMichael mentions, the role of religion in the day-to-day lives of refugees during forced migrations, displacement, and resettlement in a new place or camp was hardly studied till 2002 (McMichael 2002). The bottom-up analysis on how the forced migrants, through a myriad of religious practices and activities, often respond toward different cultural adversaries (induced by secular humanitarian projects) in a refugee camp to protect their human rights, is still understudied especially in the South Asian context of the refugee crisis.

2.3. Modernity, Secularism, and Humanitarian Projects in Refugee Camps

Now, we turn to the idea of Modernity associated with the post-crisis developmental actions in a refugee camp. The concept of Modernity is marked by a set of values, processes, technologies, and the time period when scientific revolution, industrialization, and capitalism rapidly expanded across the West (Sultana and Ahmed 2019). The popularity of modern scientific rationalities synonymous with ‘development’ eventually traveled beyond the West (Giddens 2013) and engendered a scale of ‘progress’ throughout the world marking the beginning of Globalization. As Escobar writes, “both modernity and development are spatial-cultural projects that require the continuous conquest of territories and people and their ecological and cultural transformation along the lines of rational, logocentric order” (Escobar 2003). Notions of development in the context of a refugee camp are also based on the ideas of modernity. From UNHCR’s Camp Strategy Guidance around planned settlements (UNHCR 2018) to local NGO’s actions related to successful aid distribution methods, central ideas of modernity can be traced in every humanitarian development-related actions in a refugee camp.

When a refugee camp pasts its emergency phase, it enters the developmental phase (Hall 2018) and comparatively longer term planning strategies become a requirement for healthy and peaceful camp life. Since the basic human necessities such as food, shelter, health service, etc. are usually taken care of in the emergency phase of a camp, detailed strategic plans are pursued in the development phase. These plans include a strategic organizational layout for the camp’s shelters, improved infrastructures, road networks, water and sanitation, facilities, etc. to limit operational frictions (Salehin et al. 2011; Stevenson and Sutton 2011; Van der Helm et al. 2017). These development plans also include projects that emphasize on the development of community life such as educational facilities, mental health support, technological facilities, local administrative hubs, economic activity zones, etc. (Dankova and Giner 2011). All these humanitarian projects contribute to the overall development of the camp lives of the refugees in a systemic way. However, in most of the cases, these projects are designed, developed, and implemented in a modernist manner, where functional rationalities often fail to address many humane necessities related to the refugees’ cultural identity, practices, religiosity, privacy concerns, etc. (Betts et al. 2017; Gabiam 2012; Wigley 2002). Hence, modernist approaches toward camp development often create problems in the day-to-day lives of the refugees. To address such limitations of modernity, Gozdzia et al. put forth the idea of religiosity as an overlooked topic in refugee studies among many other influential social factors (Gozdzia and Shandy 2002). According to them, the notion of externalizing religion from the core discussion of modernity and secular development agencies often limits dynamic conceptualizations of a refugee context. Ager et al. suggest to revisit the principles and practices of humanitarianism through the lens of religion to strengthen local humanitarian engagement in challenging contexts (Ager 2015). Based on a qualitative study on the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, Wilkinson sheds light on the limitations of secular boundaries within humanitarian responses and argues that secular-religious dynamics should essentially be addressed in humanitarian projects (Wilkinson 2019). Dutt Tiwari et al. explore how, in Delhi refugee context, faith-based communities, organizations, and humanitarian initiatives often provide essential safety nets, when many secular services fail (Dutt Tiwari et al. 2017). This article falls into the research scope of these scholars’ call for attention toward studies of religion in the context of humanitarian projects and critical examination of secular modes of development.

3. Methods

This article is based on an empirical study that investigates displacement, cultural marginalization, and religiosity in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. The essential objective of this study was to get a deeper understanding of the role of religious practices and activities in the struggling, stateless, and uncertain day-to-day lives of the refugees. This study consists of three main phases: (i) background study, (ii) field visit, and (iii) categorization and analysis of collected data. The first phase included a detail analysis of the historical background of the Rohingya Muslims, geo-political tensions around the refugee crisis, and collection of data from the growing inventory of the studies done on the existing Rohingya Refugee camps. This phase pointed toward a potential research gap at the intersection of Rohingya refugees, their socio-economic rights, and religion. This phase also suggested to focus more on studying the religious practices and activities of the refugees during the field visit.

The second phase of the study involved a three-week-long ethnographic study at the Kutupalong Rohingya Refugee camp area in Ukhiya Upazila Cox's Bazar in December 2019–January 2020. The ethnographer was born and raised in Bangladesh, and hence received the permission to access the camps from the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC). The study was conducted in 8 different camps in Ukhiya: Camp 1E, 4, 4E, 7, 9, 10, 12, and 17. This study has four main components: (i) camp visit and observation of daily activities at household and community level, (ii) interviews and focus group discussions with camp residents and host community, (iii) visual documentation (photos, videos, sketches), and (iv) interviews and focus group discussion with NGO workers, architects, and urban planners, who are associated in different projects at the camps.

The RRRC permitted access to the camps during Bangladeshi working days (Sunday to Thursday) for three weeks. The data collection time was limited to 8 h per day since no “outsiders”, except for the government officials were allowed in the camps after 4:00 p.m. To better utilize this limited time at the physical camps, the interviews and focus group discussions with NGO workers, architects, and urban planners were done in the weekends after 4:00 p.m. on the weekdays. Hence, camp visit days were uninterrupted and fully utilized to collect data from observations, interviews, and FGDs. The study sites were primarily shortlisted based on the development phase of the camps (old or new), presence and density of humanitarian services in a particular camp, locations of hybrid camps and density of local inhabitants, locations of religious centers, etc. To finalize the camps for field study and to get an access to the community people, I reached out to people in my social network, who were involved with different NGOs in different humanitarian projects. Two practicing architects from my social network became my primary informants. Both of them worked in the camps for more than two years and were involved in building administrative and community facility buildings in the camps. The locations of the study camps were finalized based on my primary informants' suggestions and their field experience while working with the refugee community. Their already established social networks in the camps helped me to achieve the trust of the refugee participants. Through my primary informants, I got introduced to administrative refugee leaders of the camps I visited, popularly known as Majhi (described later). Later, the Majhis from each camp became the ‘gatekeepers’ (Lofland and Lofland 1971) of their camps and helped me to conduct participatory observations, FGDs, and interviews in their camps.

The participants for the interviews were selected through a snowball sampling (Goodman 1961). I started with the Majhi of each camp first, whom my primary informants knew from before. Then, we expanded the participation pool using the social networks of the Majhis. The ages of the participants ranged from 18–70 years. Both men and women participated in semi-structured one-to-one interviews. However, the FGDs were done in gender-based separate groups and the group size ranged from 3–5 people. Participation in this ethnographic field study was completely voluntary and unpaid. Verbal consent was taken before interviewing each participant. Each interview was 20–30 min long on average. The FGDs were usually an hour long. The interview and FGDs were conducted in both Bangla and Rohingya languages. Most of the interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with

the permission of the participants. The study was wrapped up when a theoretical saturation was reached (Pandit 1996), when additional interviews started adding very little information.

The third phase of this study involved the categorization and analysis of the collected data. The interview and FGD recordings were transcribed and translated in Bangla first with the help of a local Bangladeshi from my social network, who was born and raised in Cox's Bazar and can understand and speak Rohingya language. Later, I translated those interviews and FGDs from Bangla to English. In total, this study produced 25 semi-structured interviews, 6 focus group discussions, 110 h of observation, 200 pages of field notes, more than 1300 photographs, and 2 h of video footage. The anonymized data (interviews, field notes, and FGDs) were then analyzed using open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998).

4. Findings

The data collected from the fieldwork reveal a wide variety of ways how, in a stateless, refugee situation, religious values, and practices help the marginalized refugees protect their cultural identities, raise their voice against different forms of oppression, and help them to develop solidarity with local communities. To better articulate the findings, I group them into three categories: (i) Protection (at an individual level), (ii) Negotiation (among the refugees in a community), and (iii) Collaboration (between refugee and host communities). In the subsections below, I present the impact of religious practices on each of them.

4.1. Protection

Religious values and practices often help the individual Rohingyas to protect their cultural identities as 'Rohingya' during the transitional phase of their lives in the camps. Here, I am sharing the story of Nafisa to elaborate on such situations, where religion provides a Rohingya Refugee woman with protection.

I met Nafisa (pseudo name), a 26 year-old Rohingya woman in the camp 4 Extension (4E) at Kutupalong. One of my primary informants took me to a beautiful Women Friendly Space (WFS, a local NGO initiative), locally known as "shantikhana" or peaceful place that he and his team designed and constructed for the refugee women as a BRAC initiative. Although designed by male architects, like any other WFSs in the camps, men were not allowed inside the bamboo-made, courtyard oriented, circular-shaped, one storied structure. I left my informant at the gate and entered the compound. A female representative (Bangladeshi) from the NGO, who was in charge of that WFS, welcomed me. She gave me a tour inside the center and described which room was being used for what purpose. Apart from the staff's office rooms, there were 3 bigger rooms for women to gather and participate in different skill-based learning workshops, Sexual and Gender-based protection programs, etc. There were two to three smaller rooms for 'case management' (psycho-social counseling or preliminary level legal advising services), infant feeding room, storage space, etc. Almost all the rooms were filled with women and their children. Some were sewing, some were chatting, and some were just sitting on the veranda watching their kids playing. After the tour, the NGO representative in-charge introduced me to Nafisa as the head of the Rohingya volunteers working at that WFS. She was sitting quietly on a bench in the veranda, right beside the courtyard.

Nafisa spoke to me in fluent Bangla. She mentioned that she came to Bangladesh in August 2017 and since then she had been learning how to speak in Bangla so that surviving in the camp could become easier for her. For her fluency in speaking Bangla language, she was selected to work as a volunteer at Shantikhana (WFS). I sat on the bench with her and listened to her story of becoming a refugee.

Nafisa and her family came from a Myanmar village named Maragi. She couldn't tell me exactly where her village was located, how far it was from the Bangladesh border, or in which direction they came to the border. One night, in the middle of August in 2017, the "army" attacked Nafisa's village. They started to kill people, rape women, vandalize, and burn households. Nafisa, her parents, her son,

and her 5 siblings (4 sisters, 1 brother) ran away from their house leaving Nafisa's 90 year-old grandma behind. There was no time to manage transportation to carry the old lady with them. "We left *Dadi* (grandmother) behind and she was burnt alive." Nafisa stopped talking for a while. Then, she started explaining how they ended up in this camp.

"With a boat, we reached to Teknaf. There we stayed for two weeks. We could eat some dry foods once a day. Then, one day, a huge "gari" (vehicle, not sure it was a bus or a truck) arrived. That gari brought us to Kutupalong. Once we arrived, they (UNHCR) told us to build our own shelter. They gave us a "terpol" (canvas for tents) and 10 bamboos. My Abbu (father) built a temporary shelter with those. A few days later they moved us to this Camp 4E. They built this house for us. This new shelter is a very small one. We sleep in the same room. 7 people in one room. Abbu sometimes works when the NGOs call. Other than that, none of my family members work. We are entirely dependent on the ration."—Nafisa, 26 years old, female.

She told me how much she missed her house in Maragi Village. Her husband left her when her son was 2 years old. Since then, she had been living at her parents' house. She was the oldest among all her siblings. Three of her siblings were school-going kids. The other two (girls) mostly stayed at home, waiting to be married off. Nafisa continued,

"We are from a very reputed Muslim family. My father was a businessman. We had our own house. Our house had 3 rooms—one guest room, 2 bedrooms, and a kitchen. We had a separate bathroom and a cattle house. We had many trees around our house. Those trees worked as 'purdah' (screening) from male outsiders. I had a flower garden with 12 different species. In a separate land, we planted potatoes, eggplants, and other vegetables. We had banana trees, Mango tree. We had jack fruit and lemon trees, coconut trees, etc. Near our kitchen, there were two coconut trees, 5 betel nut trees, and a guava tree. Our seasonal income from these trees often used to exceed 20 thousand takas¹."—Nafisa, 26 years old, female.

Nafisa suddenly offered me a visit to her shelter, which was located at a walking distance from Shantikhana. I informed the WFS in-charge and my primary informant that I was going to Nafisa's house. The WFS in-charge sent another male volunteer with us. Before leaving Shantikhana, she wore her Burkha (traditional Islamic attire) and took her umbrella with her. I came to know from her that the Burkha and umbrella are symbols of dignity for the upper-class Rohingya women. Nafisa walked in front of me and showed me her camp "neighborhood". As we reached near her shelter, she pointed toward a small kitchen garden adjacent to a narrow lane. That space was a public space and should not be owned or used for personal purposes by camp residents. However, she planted the vegetable seeds by herself and claimed that 3 feet by 8 feet of land as her kitchen garden. I asked her if her neighbors raised any complaints against her garden. She nodded her head, yes, they did at the beginning. Once vegetables started to grow in her garden, she shared those with her neighbors as a Sunnah (the way of the Prophet Muhammad). After that, no one complained and she kept growing her little garden to keep the memory of her Myanmar's village house garden alive.

The entry path toward her shelter was covered by a screen made out of cement bags. She collected those cement bags from nearby washing facility construction sites in the camp and sewed those together to make a screen. The screen worked as a Purdah and provided Nafisa's family with privacy from the street level. I went inside her shelter with her. Three of her younger sisters were making hang-able, paper-made, decorative showpieces for their roof. They were sitting on the muddy floor of one of the three zones their shelter had. The second zone was being used as a kitchen, and the third zone was basically a prayer room, where Nafisa and her child slept at night. Nafisa's father built

¹ Nafisa mentioned Bangladeshi Taka as currency so that I could understand the value of her family's earning from their fruit garden.

temporary partitions with bamboo and empty cement bags inside their shelter to make those three separate zones.

Her parents were not at home, when I was visiting. I asked Nafisa why she was cooking in such a closed room with a high risk of fire inside her shelter. There were community kitchens in the camp, where there were provisions for women to cook in a safe environment. Nafisa let me know that she always had a separate kitchen in her house in Maragi village. As a part of their cultural praxis, she and her family didn't share their *chula* (stove) with anyone else from outside. Since in the camp there was no option for building a separate private kitchen outside the shelter, Nafisa preferred to cook inside her shelter rather going to a shared kitchen. She added,

"I have never cooked using others' stove. Families like ours do not do that. Moreover, going to another place (community kitchen), carrying the raw foods and utensils there, and coming home with cooked food on a daily basis—this is not convenient for us at all. My neighboring women and I want to maintain proper purdah. Going to a distant place for cooking doesn't help us much as many male members of the camp spend their time sitting at the street corners and often end up teasing women pedestrians."—Nafisa, 26 years old, female.

Finally, I asked Nafisa about her future hope. She answered with a bright smile on her face that she wanted to go back to a "safe" Myanmar as a dignified Rohingya woman with proper citizenship. She didn't see herself staying in the camp for a long time. It was a transitional period for her and in this transitional period, she didn't want to lose her cultural identities as a Rohingya woman. Hence, whenever possible, she kept practicing many of their cultural attributes ranging from dress codes to cooking systems. However, in a camp situation, when the lifestyle of a refugees is largely dependent on the organizational systems developed by the host country and other national and international organizations, cultural identities for a woman like Nafisa receive the least or no priority.

In such a context, Nafisa's religious values and practices, such as Purdah or veiling/screening system, sharing foods with neighbours, etc. helped her to protect her cultural identities at an individual level. No one could force her to go to a community kitchen since it's against her religious values associated with the *purdah* or the veiling system. No one destroyed her little vegetable garden, as it was considered a good deed from religious perspectives. Even though she was encroaching over unused "public" land, no one complained about it to the authority. The empty cement-bag made screening at the entry path toward her shelter provided Nafisa with a small, additional space in front of her shelter, where she and her neighboring women can chat in the afternoons. I collected this and many other stories like Nafisa's from the camp demonstrate how religious values and practices, being mediated through different 'micro-scale' spatial transformations, actually help Refugee women like Nafisa to protect their cultural identities.

4.2. Negotiation

Inside the camp, refugee Rohingyas often go through different forms of socio-political tensions in their day-to-day lives. My fieldwork reveals that in such cases religion plays an important role in negotiations. In the following case, I document how the autonomous power of the administrative leader—majhi², inside a camp, often get balanced with the presence of the religious leaders and hence negotiations around any social or financial disputes in the camp receive attention from both organizational and spiritual authorities ensuring a more democratic solution.

Majhi Badshah Mia (pseudo name, 40 years old) from Camp 1E gave me a short trip to his block on a sunny Monday morning. He was selected as the representative of approx. 200 families in the

² In the camps, under the direct supervision of local Government Rohingya refugees are organized under the leadership of a group of community leaders, known as 'Majhi'. In general, every majhi is responsible for 50–300 families or a block in a camp. In the larger camps, several block-majhis work under the leadership of a 'head majhi' or 'camp majhi'.

southern portion of the camp. In fact, he came to Bangladesh from Myanmar in 2014. Since then, he had been working at Cox's Bazar city as a restaurant manager. In early 2017, he brought his immediate family members to Cox's Bazar from Myanmar. After the major influx of the Rohingyas in August 2017, Badshah Mia and his family were brought to this camp and the then Camp-in-charge made him one of the Majhis in Camp 1E since he could speak both the Bangla and Rohingya languages fluently. According to Badshah Mia, a majhi works as a bridge between the local government and the Rohingyas. From ration distribution to construction work or campaign, a majhi is responsible for everything related to his camp. Badshah Mia, therefore, was one of the most powerful men in his block. When I asked him if there was anyone as powerful as him in his area, he answered that the *Imam* of the mosque in his block was considered to be an important, famous, and wise religious leader and Badshah Mia maintained a very good relationship with the Imam.

Badshah Mia and I then went to the mosque to meet the Imam. The mosque compound was located almost at the heart of Badshah Mia's block. The compound consisted of two large structures: a prayer hall on the west and a *Moktob* or the Quran learning center on the south side of a small, central courtyard. The prayer hall was a (approx.) 30 feet long and 20 feet wide bamboo-made, single space building with a mud floor covered with "*pati*" (bamboo mat) for the Muslims to stand on during the prayers. The *Moktob* was a sheltered, columnar space of around 300 sft with no walls, where children (both boys and girls) under 10 years came everyday to learn how to read the Holy Quran from the Imam. In the mosque compound, there were a few elements, for example, a tube well for ablution, a small latrine at one corner of the courtyard, and a few benches under the extended roof of the prayer hall facing toward the courtyard. Since the Imam was busy, I joined the small team of four Rohingya men, who were sitting on those benches and chatting among themselves.

From that group, I came to know about other functional uses of that mosque compound except for the prayers. The compound was the only place in the block, where a large number of people could gather. The group believed that their congested camp blocks were planned with very small pockets of open spaces to discourage large refugee gatherings. Hence, from announcing important messages on behalf of the local government to solving small social disputes, the mosque compound plays an important role in the camp lives of the Rohingyas. Although the Majhi, theoretically, held the power to control his block, he didn't have any designated office space for working in his block. Badshah Mia told me that he was entirely dependent on the space of the mosque compound to conduct any work that required a group of people to get involved in. However, since any kind of large social gathering inside the camp was prohibited by the local government, Badshah Mia was bound to inform the CIC officer every time he had to summon people at the mosque compound for any reason other than the prayers.

Apart from the spatial support, Badshah Mia sometimes felt dependent on the Imam for solving communal disputes. In many cases, community people received decisions from the Imam as a spiritual leader, more happily than the Majhi as a community leader. Badshah Mia said,

"Disagreement on an issue with the neighbors is a common scenario here in my block. One day, two neighbors had a fight over a chicken. Let me tell you the story. Abbas, took a chicken from his neighbor Shajjad's small poultry farm, without Shajjad's permission. Abbas claimed that his wife had asked permission from Shajjad's wife before taking the chicken and Shajjad's wife did not have any problem. Abbas was trying to marry off his elder daughter to a boy from the eastern block. That day the boy's family came to see³ Abbas's daughter. Abbas did not have any cash to buy some chicken for his guests from the local market. Therefore, he took one from Shajjad's poultry farm with Shajjad's wife's permission since Shajjad was not at home. However, Shajjad complained to me that he was the owner of the chicken, how could Abbas take it without even asking him? I told Abbas to pay

³ It is common in Rohingya culture that during an arranged marriage groom's family come to meet the "potential" bride at her house and ask questions to test her religious and domestic knowledge.

Shajjad for the chicken immediately. Abbas denied to pay and said that he did not have any cash to pay Shajjad. Shajjad was very angry and started to shout at Abbas. I called them both at the mosque after Asr prayer. I also let the Imam know the situation and asked him to help me solve the dispute. At the meeting, the Imam explained to Shajjad why Islam said it was a good thing to help a father, who was trying to marry off his daughter. He convinced Shajjad that unknowingly he actually had done a great deed by giving his chicken to Abbas and Allah would give him reward in return. The Imam told to Abbas that Abbas should invite Shajjad at his daughter's wedding and treat him well to express gratitude for his help. Both of them calmed down after the Imam's speech. I always try to keep a very good relation with the Imam to keep the community as peaceful as possible."—Badshah Mia, 40 years old, male.

I have heard similar stories from many other sources that although a majhi, theoretically, is counted as the leader of a block in a camp, in reality, his power is often balanced, resisted, or challenged by the local religious leaders, like Imam in Badshah Mia's story. Imams are often considered as their "own representative" for the Rohingyas as these leaders are not "agents" of the local government like Majhis. For many Rohingyas, religious leaders are the voice for them and from them toward the authorities and a way to balance Majhis' sole power dominance. Badshah Mia's story explains how the communal hope of living peacefully in a democratic way in the camp often gets mediated through religious personnel, spaces, and practices. In other words, religion reinforces negotiations to balance power hierarchies inside a camp environment to support communal hopes around peaceful coexistence.

4.3. Collaboration

My field study demonstrated that religious values and practices often ensure a sustained practice of solidarity among the Rohingya refugee communities and the Bangladeshi host communities in hybrid camps. In Kutupalong and Nayapara, there are several hybrid camps, where host communities and the refugee communities live side by side. In many of these hybrid camps, refugee settlements were built on the already existing local farmer or fishermen communities in Cox's Bazar. In my fieldwork, I found cases, where in the courtyard of one host family's household, five refugee shelters were built, leaving no space for the owners to lead their normal lives. I visited one such hybrid camp, where I met Amir Ali (pseudo name, in his 60s), a local Bangladeshi farmer, who was sharing his land with more than a hundred of Rohingya families.

Amir Ali was not at home when I arrived with the help of a Rohingya volunteer provided by the block majhi. We waited at a small, bamboo-made, temporary tea stall outside his house. There I met two other Rohingya refugee men, who were sitting on one of the two bamboo benches in front of the tea stall. After working for more than two and a half weeks with the Rohingyas, I could understand and to some extent speak Rohingya language (which has a similarity with Chittagonian Bangla) by then. Therefore, I sat on the empty bench in front of the tea stall and started talking to the Rohingya tea stall owner and his customers. When I told them that I wanted to meet Amir Ali, all of them said to me that Amir Ali was an extremely well-behaved gentleman. The land on which they built their shelters was basically Amir Ali's land. He let the camp grow on his land without a second thought.

Amir Ali joined us after his Duhur prayer. Someone from somewhere brought a chair for Amir Ali. Amir Ali sat with us and started asking my whereabouts. He was familiar with the university from where I did my undergrad. He asked me about which part of Bangladesh I was originally from, where I was staying at Cox's Bazar, how did I come to his camp, if was I working with any NGO, etc. Gradually, Amir Ali started to become easy with me and, after half an hour of casual conversation, he shared his story with me.

Amir Ali inherited almost a bigha of land (approx 27,000 sq feet) including farmland, fruit gardens, ponds, etc. from his father. He and his family (1 wife, 6 children) were entirely dependent on the income generated from their land-based agricultural production. As the Rohingyas started to arrive in his village from August 2017, the courtyard of Amir Ali's house started to crowd with exhausted, injured Rohingya people. He provided them with food and initial support. Gradually,

Governmental and non-governmental organizations started to manage the situation, built series of shelters on different parts of Amir Ali's land and ensured that they were going to take care of the financial loss Amir Ali might face due to severe hamper in his agricultural production. Amir Ali said to me,

"My family did not have much food for ourselves during the Rohingya influx. However, we shared whatever we had with them. We did that just for one reason. They were our Muslim brothers and sisters. If I did not help them, Allah would not help me in the future. After a few days we had no food left for ourselves, our savings were at stake too. A and B NGOs told us that if we, the landowners of this area put our lands on leases, they would built shelters for the Rohingyas and pay us intermittently for using our lands. We agreed. However, A and B do not pay us regularly. Most of the cases they postpone payments. I have to go to their office and sometimes after waiting for a whole day, I come back empty-handed. Right now, I have lost all of my lands to this camp people. The pond water is polluted by the latrines. I cannot collect fruits or vegetables from my trees as the Rohingya people are eating those. I have no control over my own property except for my house." —Amir Ali, 60 years old, male.

Although (apparently) Rohingya people were the reason behind his suffering and there was no sign of getting his land back soon, Amir Ali was not resentful of the Rohingyas at all. Despite of all the financial loss, he never blamed the Rohingyas. He never had a fight with any Rohingya families, who were living on his land. Instead, he blamed the mismanagement of the governing bodies to whom host community people became residual as international funding was coming only for the Rohingyas, not for the host communities. When I asked Amir Ali about his future hope and aspirations, he replied,

"I am an old man. I know I am at the end of my life journey. I do not see myself capable of farming my land again. Even if they (Rohingyas) leave today, this land won't be fertile enough to produce crops in the next 5 years. Maybe, my sons, grandsons will be able to work again on our land. However, if you ask me, Chacha (uncle), are you happy? My answer will be Alhamdulillah. I am happy that I have helped this many Muslims with my food, my land, my vegetables, my fruits, my fishes (from his ponds). I know Allah will reward me for this in the afterlife." —Amir Ali, 60 years old, male.

After a while, Amir Ali left for his Asr prayer. I kept talking to the Rohingya man, who brought the chair for Amir Ali. His name was Abdul (pseudo name, 22 years old). Abdul told me that he believed, Amir Ali collaborated with the refugees since they were Muslims. They prayed together in the same mosque, they celebrated Eid together. In the month of Ramadan, Abdul's mother often used to send Iftar (evening meal) to Amir Ali's house as a sign of their gratitude toward Amir Ali. Not only Abdul's family but also other refugee families tried to do the same. Through these religious practices, they created a strong bond with Amir Ali.

Although not everyone from the host community I met on my field study was as calm as Amir Ali while helping the Rohingyas, everyone connected their present suffering with future reward from the Almighty. On the one hand, this spiritual hope was helping the locals to console themselves and to tolerate the existing financial, spatial, social, cultural, and psychological tensions that appeared in their lives with the Rohingyas, which hardly received attention from the humanitarian development projects. On the other hand, the Rohingyas were trying to "payback" to the locals like Amir Ali through different activities and practices backed by their common religiosity. Through these collaborative approaches, they were trying to live peacefully in those hybrid camps.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In the sections above, I have presented briefly the religious background of the Rohingya crisis and their present situation in Bangladesh. I have discussed the current social setting inside the Kutupalong and Nayapara camp areas. Then, I documented three different cases, at three different contexts and scales to explain how in the complex socio-cultural setting of the refugee settlements,

religion plays crucial roles in the lives of the refugees. Each of the case documentations points toward a transitional social system, where religious values, and practices provide the persecuted, displaced, stateless refugees with a cushion against different forms of adversities in the camps. Religion also gives voice to the refugees to attain their demands from local government or NGOs. These cases also demonstrate how bonding through religious values creates a platform of solidarity, which still is helping the host and the refugee communities sustain together. The findings of this articles generate some important takeaways for religion studies that are presented in the following paragraphs.

First, through empirical cases, this article essentially brings to the fore that secular development agencies in the camps often engender different forms of marginalizations. In most of the cases, secularities get mediated through many humanitarian projects, which sideline religious-backed cultural praxis of the refugees. Oftentimes, already existing struggles of the marginals get enhanced by such secular notions of development. For example, the community kitchen projects in the refugee camps were initiated from a secular, rational, and scientific notion to provide Rohingya women with safe, hygienic, and cost effective cooking facilities. Nonetheless, for the refugee women like Nafisa, this project intensified cultural discomfort, gendered troubles, and social vulnerabilities. Such secular notions, hence, create a gap between humanitarian projects and the receiving ends and generate different forms of marginalization. To bridge this gap and to reduce further marginalization, with other cultural studies, contextual religious literacy is essential for any humanitarian projects to protect the rights of the refugees.

Second, this article documents how through different Islamic values and practices Rohingya refugees respond, balance, even resist power domination of the secular administrative authority in the camp context. Traditional faith-based actors of the Rohingya community, for example, mullahs (Islamic theologians), moulvis (qualified Islamic teachers), imams (lead prayer in a mosque), et al. are considered as important and powerful people in Rohingya community (Tay et al. 2018). Through an empirical case, this article depicts how these religious leaders utilize their culturally embedded social power to balance the sole power of secular administrative leader, Majhi. With their religiosity-backed socio-cultural knowledge of their community, they often prevent many marginalizing initiatives by secular systems. Effective implementation of religious values and practices not only offer balance toward power hierarchies in the day-to-day lives of the refugees, but also connect the refugees with the host community as they share a common religious background. The last case in this article shows how host community's hospitality, backed by religious solidarity, often questions international humanitarian standards and principles and produces a safety net, when secular standards fail. This article calls for attention toward harnessing the power of such religious values and practices in humanitarian projects so that sustainable living conditions can be assured for both host and refugee communities.

Third, this fieldwork initiates several important implications for designers and policymakers, who are working to ensure human rights among the Rohingya Refugee communities. This study shows how, through spatial interventions at different scales, religiosity gets materialized and help the most marginalized protect their cultural identities. This phenomenon calls for attention to integrate both cultural identities and religiosity in any kind of spatial design decisions ranging from individual shelters to public facilities to greater camp settlement planning. For example, individual shelters should come with proper provision for cooking. Washing facilities for women should not be placed at highly visible or male-dominated locations. Designing a bunch of women-friendly centers is not enough. Planners and architects should come up with ideas that can provide the religious women their own lanes, own verandas, own corners, own streetscapes for socializing among themselves like men. Every spatial design decision, development, and implementation should be inclusive, and equally sensitive toward all faith-based groups and genders. Since the major portions of the camps have already been constructed to support the immediate humanitarian needs, this paper asks for revisiting those settlement plans to initiate micro-scale spatial adjustments, informed by the religious studies, to make the camps more inclusive, and socially sustainable. This study also suggests an urgent necessity to the include study of religion in designing social interventions such as child-education, adult education

to promote awareness against sexual and gender-based violence, skill-based development programs, health awareness, etc. Such an initiative will make more impact on general refugees as they will be able to understand the impacts of these social interventions from both communal and spiritual perspectives. On the one hand, such religion-informed social interventions will make individuals knowledgeable about their communal and spiritual agencies and responsibilities. On the other hand, it will enhance the positive bonding between administrative and religious leaders, and hence will create more transparent platforms for social negotiations.

Finally, this paper tries to broaden the scope of religion-informed design and ethnographic study in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. Such studies can also inform the design, development, and management of other refugee camps, where religiosity plays a crucial role but hardly gets recognized by the policymakers, designers, and host localities/countries. Better studied, better-informed decisions can reduce the number of failed developmental projects and increase the possibilities for inclusive designs in camp contexts ranging from architectural to technological design. Well-informed, sensitive, and inclusive policies, on the one hand, can empower the marginals. On the other hand, such policies can reduce fundamentalism and communal violence in the refugee camp context.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to Shegufta Newaz, John Wagner, Nadyeli Quiroz, Saad Ben Mustafa, Rizvi Hassan, Khwaja Nuzhat Zerin Fatmi, Samina Tahsin Soumika, et al. for helping me in various ways to conduct my field work.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

WFS Women Friendly Space

RRRC Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner

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