



# Constructing Rohingya Identity: An Analysis of Media Process and Self-Representations

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## Abstract

Considered as “one of the most prosecuted people in the world” by United Nations, Rohingyas are depicted as impoverished, stateless and inhumanely treated minority group in mainstream media such as BBC and CNN. However, these images are constructed during the media process and this study tries to find the self-representation of Rohingyas themselves through archive research and interviews where the Rohingya activists and normal Rohingya families are involved. The representation and discourse system are as well analyzed to explain the formation of multi-image of Rohingyas.

**Keywords:** Representation; Media; Rohingyas

## Introduction

Rohingyas are an ethnic minority group who has resided in Buddhist Myanmar for centuries. According to the statistics, in the Southeast Asian countries, there were approximately 1.1 million Rohingyas living, most of them Muslim [1]. Rohingyas have their own language which is called Rohingya or Ruaingga and the dialect was different from the other languages spoken throughout Myanmar. They are not considered as belonging to any one of the 135 official ethnic groups living there and their citizenships in Myanmar were denied by the Myanmar government in 1982 which has since rendered them stateless. Majority of the Rohingyas in Myanmar live in the western coastal state of Rakhine, which is one of the poorest states in the country. With a few basic amenities for living and little chance of improvement, they have had to live in the ghetto-like camps. They are not permitted to leave these camps unless they obtain permission from the government [1].

The issue of Rohingyas came to the world’s attention recently when they were persecuted by the Myanmar government in 2016. During that time, the news of the atrocities against the community was overwhelming on the

internet and the mainstream media. In the news ‘Unite to stop Rohingyas persecution’ (2016), in 2016 Rohingyas persecution in Myanmar, nine security officers were killed at the Bangladesh border by unidentified assailants and a systematic persecution and massacres have started [2]. The murder was considered as an excuse by describing Rohingyas as extremists. In the one and a half month after the incident, thousands of Rohingyas were killed, arrested, raped, tortured with their houses burnt. Nearly all the Rohingyas’ villages were declared as a security zone where the United Nations could not deliver any aids to around 150,000 Rohingyas. To prevent the documentation and recording of the persecution, the Myanmar government and the army have banned any relief agencies, human rights observers and journalists from entering the security zone and they have denied the claim of committing human rights violations. This persecution is believed to be an ethnic cleansing and the situation of Rohingyas has not been improved [2]. The situation got worse in 2017 during which time the persecution continued. This time, the violence targeting Rohingyas took place in Rakhine State creating yet another humanitarian crisis for the community. Women and girls were raped and many of them faced the prospect of giving birth [3]. However, in light of the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, their de facto leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi did not admit that Rohingyas were a target of any state-sponsored violence. In her speech to the Myanmar parliament on 19 September 2016, she denied that there were any armed clashes or clearance operations happened [4].

Rohingyas are believed to be a potential threat to Myanmar despite not having any legal status in terms of their citizenship. Due to the discrimination, ongoing violence and persecution of the community in most of the Buddhist countries including and around Myanmar, United Nations has classified them as one of the most persecuted refugee groups in the world. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas have had to escape and leave Myanmar to other neighboring countries (refugee camps in Bangladesh and areas along the Thai-Myanmar border) for many decades in order to survive. They are stateless and have no identity in any country in the world

Based on the majority of the western mainstream media, the images of Rohingyas were depicted as stateless, hopeless and desperate, as well as aggressive. This research aimed to investigate the constructed representations of Rohingyas through media processes and how did the media shape the images of Rohingyas. This paper argues that the mainstream representations of Rohingyas from different media, especially the mainstream cannot provide a comprehensive construction or reflect the real situation of the community. Other images such as NGO/activist media and self-representations of the community were investigated and analyzed to demonstrate this argument.

In this paper, we first lay out the theoretical framework in which we mainly focus on the use of representation. The main literature used in the research was "Representation – Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" by Stuart Hall in 1997 which has discussed the core idea "theory of representations" in his book. Then we have the methodology which outlines the methods used which are conducting interviews and analyzing second-hand information from different media. After the methodology, we have the analysis which discussed the representations from the mainstream media, activists, and Rohingyas themselves. The analysis aims to figure out other representations of Rohingyas.

## Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical resource we use to analyze the representations of the Rohingyas is Stuart Hall's work on representation. In his text 'Representation – Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices', Hall outlines his theory of 'Representation' which this thesis emphasizes. The thesis also uses other relevant concepts of the constructionist approach, such as language, visual representation, identity, meaning from other authors to structure the theoretical framework.

### Representation

The first theory used in this thesis is Stuart Hall's representation. What does the word representation really mean? According to Hall, "representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people [5]." What does the process of representation involve? "Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture." The process of representation involves the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. "Representation is the production of meaning through language." In short, representation connects meaning and language.

How is meaning produced literally? "Meaning is also produced in a variety of different media; especially, these days, in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history." It is worth mentioning that, one of the privileged 'media' in which meaning is

produced and circulated is language. How is the language used to represent the world? A simple answer to that question was given by Hall as "languages work through representation." The concept of language would be further expounded in later in this section. So far, it can be seen that representation, language, meaning are closely related concepts linked through their operational logic. "The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. Language does not work like a mirror. Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call 'languages'." Meaning is constructed and produced by the practice of representation. It is through the practice of representation that meaning is produced and constructed through language. This forms the basic theoretical construct which would be used when studying the Rohingyas through different media.

### Constructionist approach

Further, how does representation work? Just as Hall claimed, "representation is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people, and events," There are three approaches to representation - the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist, which explain how the representation of meaning through language works. The reflective approach refers to simply reflecting a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events, the intentional approach focusses as expressing meanings of only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, while the constructionist approach conveys meanings through language system that people used to represent their concepts. Among these three approaches, the constructionist approach is the core theory that this thesis focusses on. What does the constructionist approach mean? In short, the constructionist approach does not deny the material world where things exist as well as the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning, and language operate. "It is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts." "The constructionist approach recognizes this public, social character of language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of the language can fix to mean in language. Things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems - concepts and signs." Different with the reflective approach which "simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events" or the intentional approach which "express meanings only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say", the constructionist approach conveys meanings through language system that people used to represent their concepts. Constructionists argue people use signs, organized into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others.

Hall gives readers a vivid example of the traffic light which serves as an important principle about representation and meaning. According to Hall, it is not the red and green itself but the code that fixes the meaning – stop and go. The

constructionists argue, “this is because what signifies is not the colors themselves but,

- The fact that they are different and can be distinguished from one another; and
- The fact that they are organized into a particular sequence - Red followed by Green, with sometimes a warning.”
- The thesis applies this constructionists’ argument while analyzing the Rohingyas case-study. The main thrust of the constructionist approach is that meaning does not inhere in things but constructed and produced by various practices, in the world.

## Language and power

Under the core concept of representation, the theory of language was largely applied to the thesis. Having the domain of “all ways to express meanings”, the broad meaning of language in Hall is similar to the sphere of discourse in Foucault. As an addition to the theoretical framework, the power-discourse theory of Michel Foucault is also discussed. Visuals are an indispensable part of the different ways to express meanings and to understand the workings of visual language; Gregory Stanczak’s visual representation theory is also referred to in this thesis [6].

Hall considered language as “one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas, and feelings are represented in a culture.” While Foucault in his “Archaeology of Knowledge” describes discourse as “the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation”. In this definition, a statement “is always an event that neither the language nor the meaning can quite exhaust”. Comparing these sentences, the concepts of language by Stuart and discourse by Foucault are virtually the same and shares the domain of ‘ways to convey meanings’.

Apart from commonly used textual language, visual language is an essential but often neglected part of talking about language. In this aspect, what Stanczak argued is in line with the perspective of Hall that “people use signs, organized into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others. Stanczak also emphasized that different visual representation could give rise to different understandings of meaning [6]. Visual data includes various ranges of media which are photographs, videos, drawings, portraits, cartoons and ‘found’ images that are created or grouped together by participants and researchers in sole and mixed methods of studying [6]. The visual representation process takes place through denotation and connotation: simple denoted messages will be produced with the signs united from the signifiers (different elements in the images) and the signified (the concepts) and then completed messages or signs will be linked to the second set of signified who a broader and more ideological theme is. A conventional conceptual classification used in this level which leads to a wider and broader theme and meaning. Connotations stage involves a lot of interpretations of the meaning of the visual data that people may produce different meanings based on the actual practices and forms of significations [5]. However, the use of imagery leads to the question of whether visual

languages can reflect the real world or bring meanings about the world through representing it [5]. When different images are grouped in a page, it is clear that the author had involved in making connected visual choices that desired effects were achieved. Sometimes images are selected, framed and grouped so as to raise particular interpretations and discourage alternatives. When alternatives are discouraged, the situations and images of the people may not be comprehensive enough.

Back to language or discourse itself, it is quite necessary to understand the sub-concept of ‘statement’. A better way to understand statement is to analyze it through levels of objects, subjects, and its domain. In Foucault, the objects of statement exist under the positive conditions of complex group relations such as relations established between institutions, economic and social process, behavioral patterns etc. The subject of the statement is a particular, vacant place that may, in fact, be filled by different individuals and the position of the subjects can be assigned. The domain of statements thus articulated is in accordance with historical a priori i.e. that they are things that have already been said or in other words refers to the reality of statements.

After understanding the statement as the basic unit of discourse, power-discourse, as the main theory can be introduced. Although some scholars distribute the system of discourse of Foucault to three parts, as knowledge-discourse, power-discourse and life-discourse, which respectively focuses on the formation of truth itself, principle of the whole social relationships and the idea of construction of experience body [7], a dimension between knowledge discourse and power discourse is the most famous one –It is the knowledge that owns the power and it is the power that produces the discourse. In the journal of Amy Allen “discourse, power, and subjectivities: the Foucault/Habermas debate reconsidered”, “Foucault argues that “it is [...] necessary to distinguish power relations from relationships of communication which transmit information by means of a language, a system of signs, or any other symbolic medium.” In this context, power is actions over action which should be exercised instead of possessed. It is not a disposition or a capacity, nor is it a resource or a commodity. At the same time, it is universal, diverse and its intention and the effect may bear little relation to one another and may even be directly contradictory. However, no matter what the exact definition of power is, the strong connection between power, knowledge, and discourse cannot be neglected or underestimated.

## Identity

To understand the concepts of representation, several other questions remain to be answered. In the representation part, it was being clarified how meaning is produced, while what is affected by meaning requires discussion. According to Hall, “Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we ‘belong’.” Here, identity is a breakout through which meaning could be found. In ‘Difference, identity and complexity’, Paul Cilliers also mentioned that “We cannot use the notion of difference (the

source of meaning) without reference to the notion of identity [8]. Yet, identity does not determine the difference, it is produced by it [8].” It is stated that identity is both an emergent property and a relational construct, meaning that identities develop over time within a network of relationships with other identities [8]. In his view, identity, which generated by meaning, is constructed and changing through different practices.

Based on the sense of identity brought by meaning, the thesis further discusses and analyzes the identification of Rohingyas through different media processes.

To summarize, the central theoretical concept of this study was the constructed representations. Meanings are produced through language, which includes textual and visual ways of communication. The link between meanings and language would enable the group to refer to the real objects, people or events, or imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people, and events. The process that connected the three elements, which are objects, concepts, and signs, are called representation (Hall, 1997:34).

Further, visual representation and identity from Stanczak and Cilliers help form a basis of understanding ‘what; the multiple forms and effects of representation are, while power-discourse makes it possible to interpret ‘why’ the representations appear as what we see.

**Table 1:** Ways of expressing the meanings of Rohingyas such as textual description and visual presentation.

	Mainstream media	Rohingya Activists	Rohingya Family
Data collection	Archival Research	Interview	Interview
	Web 2.0 data collection (including news and documents)	Documents	
		Literature (written by Rohingyas)	
		Web 2.0(the websites run by Rohingyas)	
Data selection	We selected the materials which are mostly related to our research questions.		
Data analysis	Using the methods of qualitative content analysis and coding.		

## Data collection

The representation of Rohingyas was divided into three dimensions from the mainstream media, activists and common Rohingya family. The group used different data collection methods to gather a broader spectrum of evidence and perspectives to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis of the research [9,10].

In mainstream media part, archival research, Web 2.0 data collection, visual images and textual information from the mainstream media were used. Secondary data from the physical existence as well as from the Internet were collected for understanding the background and interpretations of Rohingyas from the mainstream media. While in the digital era, both physical and digital contexts were considered in our research study. The secondary data such as literature and articles could effectively support and enhance our analysis. The collection of secondary data worked as a function for

## Methodology

### Using sensitizing concepts

The starting point of our qualitative research is using the notion of sensitizing concepts. Sensitizing concepts were introduced in Herbert George Blumer “What is wrong with social theory”.

In contrast to other research methods, sensitizing concepts had a decentralization of objects which did not have a clearly defined object in the research but gives users a general sense of reference and guidance. As a result, the inference from the concrete expression of the instance should be made to test, improve and refine the concepts [8].

The primary sensitizing concept for the thesis is representation with an emphasis on constructive representation on Rohingyas. Based on Hall, it is seen as the production of meaning through language which takes the definition of “all ways to express meaning”.

The scope of text in this thesis is accordingly enlarged to ways of expressing the meanings of Rohingyas such as textual description and visual presentation (**Table 1**).

“reflecting and metaphorically representing their creators’ ideologies and value systems.” The use of secondary data was regarded as an opportunity to collect a pool of historical data which not only affected the preparatory study design but also became an active part of data corpus for analysis. Based on the as-needed and as-appropriate basis to refer and integrate the literature into field notes and analytic memo and a final report could initiate a connection with the work of the other people and place the nested contexts into one’s own research. On the whole, more than 300 reports were collected in the process.

As for the part of activists, semi-structured interviews were one of the qualitative research methods that the group used. Compared with the structured interview in which a quantitative research method is that same questions and orders would be applied to all participants, semi-structured interviews are predominantly and informal that questions were different for different participants. Two participants were

invited including Abul Kalam, Chairman of Swedish Rohingya Association and Founder of European Rohingya Council, and Ambia Perveen, Vice President of European Rohingya Council. The questions asked in the interview were prepared beforehand which were structured but follow-up questions were also asked in the interview based on the participants' insights and information as semi-structured interviews worked as a function for exploring new insights. Their knowledge and information about Rohingyas act as an essential proportion of the study. The whole interview with Ambia Perveen and a part of the interview with Abul Kalam are recorded by video and both of them are audio recorded with the interviewees' permission so as to maintain the transparency and reach the consensus of the information gathered and coded by the group. The two interviewees offered the group the literature written by Rohingyas and some meaningful documents for the study. The group also gathered information from websites, Facebook and YouTube channel which the access to the global is such as

"The Stateless Rohingyas" (<http://www.thestateless.com/>),

"Arakan Times" (<https://arakanpost.com/arakantimes/>),

"Rohingyas Blogger" (<http://www.rohingyablogger.com/>),

"The European Rohingya Council" (<http://www.theerc.net/>),

"Rohingya Vision" (<https://www.facebook.com/RohingyaVisionTV/>),

and "Haikal Mansor" (<https://www.youtube.com/user/HaikalMansor>).

In the part of self-representation, the group used a semi-structured interview method as well and interviewed one Rohingya family who used to live in Raking state before migrating to Sweden. The interview was audio recorded with the permission of the family. Furthermore, the group conducted the way of ethnography by doing the interview in the living place of Rohingyas observing their living conditions.

## Data selection

During the data collection process, the group collected a great quantity of information about Rohingyas; however, some of them may be irrelevant to the study. Therefore, a careful data selection was required. In the end, about 300 news reports were collected and 50 of them were selected and studied carefully. Three recordings of the interview were used in our analysis along with two books written by Rohingyas as well as several articles. The group selected the information based on the primary research question – "what are the constructed representations of Rohingyas through media processes?" Content which can answer this question and is relevant to secondary questions were also taken into consideration:

- What are the representations of Rohingyas in mainstream media?
- What are the alternative representations of Rohingyas by experts and Rohingyas themselves?

## Data analysis

The methods of qualitative content analysis and coding are used to do the data analysis.

To figure out the different representations of Rohingyas from mainstream media, activists and Rohingyas themselves, the group conducted the methods of qualitative content analysis, which requires information or data collection and analysis as well as non-quantitation in character, consisting of textual materials such as interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, or visual materials such as artifacts, photographs, video recordings and internet sites.

All of the interview transcripts, journals, documents, literature, photographs, video, websites were coded for the first cycle coding processes. It could range in magnitude from a word to even a stream of moving images. For the second cycle coding processes, coding could be the same units or a longer text passages or even code reconfigurations. The second cycle coding processes aimed to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the codes of the first cycle. The collection of the coding methods in this manual could be considered as a repertoire of possible filters for considering and applying to our approaches to qualitative inquiry. Before acting as an interviewer, who should be peripheral and active throughout the fieldwork, the interviewers should consider the filters that they have perceived and the document. After this stage, the data could be coded. When the codes were applied and reapplied to the research of qualitative research, it was a process that permitted data collected by the group to be separated, grouped, regrouped, and reconnected so as to strengthen the meaning and explanation of our research [11].

## Limitations of the research methods

The interview transcript included valuable comments and insights of the activists. However, even though the interview questions were constructed, and voice and some videos were recorded so as to maximize the transparency and trustworthiness, the documentation of the observation of the participants were written by the researchers which might have included some personal and subjective responses. Considering the use of a camera, the interviewees may be too cautious to conceal some sensitive issue. Moreover, for collecting data, the lack of Rohingyas who were living in Myanmar, Bangladesh in our interview might not give the most complete picture of the real situation while data from media is inevitably subjective.

The outcomes of the research could range from achieved seriously, insightful research results that would be meaningful to open-ended questions; from third person objective to first person objective. There were different ways of conducting qualitative research. There are multiple pathways along the research journey. If the directions, as well as the research methods, did not provide meaningful or useful data for the research, the research might lose the value of the study [10].

## Analysis

### Mainstream media representation

During this study, the reports of Rohingyas from mainstream media were collected in order to analyze and summarize the main constructed representation of Rohingyas.

We selected those are most relative and what the group has found out is that the Rohingyas in these media are described as a vulnerable group faced with impoverishment, statelessness, and inhumane treatment (**Table 2**).

**Table 2:** Mainstream media representation.

Mainstream media	Rohingya Activists	Rohingya Family
Impoverishment	Manmade Statelessness	Inhumane Treatment
Statelessness	Intelligence and Determination	Deserving Equal Rights
Inhumane treatment	Non-extremists	Conflicted Identity

### Impoverishment

According to the mainstream media, Rohingyas are under severe living conditions.

In BBC News Report, specific reports have been published to show the living situation of Rohingyas refugees. As in "Myanmar's Rohingya stuck in Bangladesh's 'no man's land' [12]. The report was written in a narrative way and what Rohingyas said was inserted, which made it quite sentimental.

CNN reports are paying more attention to the timely news. From 'Pre-monsoon' rains begin in Bangladesh; highlighting the plight of Rohingya refugees [13], the weather in Bangladesh was a tiny breakthrough to show the impoverishment of Rohingyas. As another way for media to cover the impoverishment, they reported what happened after the pre-monsoon rains in the camps of refugees to show the impoverishment.

Rohingyas refugees seeking shelters in the difficult terrain and with little access to aid, safe drinking water, food or healthcare are always mentioned in most reports related to Rohingyas in mainstream media.

Moreover, the mainstream media also published some short videos combined with simple words to convey the impoverishment of Rohingyas in social media platforms. For example, BBC once uploaded a video of a giant elephant wrecking the refugee camp [14].

The elephant is even taller than the camps of refugees and the scream of Rohingyas attained the sympathy of the users in the social media about the life in the camps of refugees (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1:** Living situation of Rohingyas refugees.

To take a step further, it could also be found out that the pictures convey the information about their terrible living condition and melancholy faces. In the reports of Rohingyas, there are a great number of pictures photographed by BBC trying to give audiences an image of impoverishment, as can be seen from the former example. In this photo, people can be seen as skinny and in rags. Also, the crowded, messy and insanitary camp is displayed in the picture. This picture refers to the living situation of Rohingyas in Bangladesh, where people can easily feel starvation, poverty etc. According to the theory of visual representation, these visual elements can influence the way the audience forming their representation [6]. Photos as this may raise the feeling of compassion, and people who have seen this kind of photos may form an impression that these people are really weak and they are badly in need.

### Statelessness

Rohingyas are stateless people as covered in the news in mainstream media. The government of Myanmar denied their citizenship and regards them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The problem of statelessness can be boiled down to several reasons. It involves a historical background and the attitudes of different governments. In the news, "Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis", BBC has inserted a map with legends to make readers understand it better. Apart from digging out the deep reason or explaining the complicated history, the mainstream media also strengthen this point by repeating the simple sentences in the news which mentions the background of the Rohingyas crisis. And sometimes the mainstream media attributes the statelessness to the violence of Myanmar government and the religious issue, which can be seen from "Rohingyas Muslim refugees have fled Buddhist-majority Myanmar". The religious issue is sensitive, so they just mentioned this as a small point or even avoided it. Because of the limitation of texts, the statelessness may not be expressed totally in textual reports. But it can be shown in a visual way to make up this shortage.

BBC has made a series of documentaries to let the Rohingyas themselves tell their own stories and feelings. This video is one of them and shows the current political situation

of Rohingyas. Expelled from Myanmar, they have to move to Bangladesh where they are still unwelcome. The video tries to impress the audience by recording their voice, their gestures, and particularly their expression in the eyes. Facing the camera, there are despair, confusion, disappointment in their eyes. This video delivers the information that the Rohingyas were proud of being a Rohingya, but now they are confused about their identity. They are questioning where they should go and where they belong. Also, there are some children showing up during the record, contrary to the smiling ones we always see, these children are staring at the camera at loss.

### Inhumane treatment

According to Dictionary.com, the word 'Inhumane' means lacking qualities of sympathy, pity, warmth, compassion. In mainstream media, Rohingyas are also seen to be inhumanely treated. Rohingyas have fled into neighboring Bangladesh since violence erupted in Rakhine state, with terrible stories of mass murder, rape, and torture in almost every piece of news.

Because Myanmar military has denied targeting civilians, BBC covered many details such as specific death number, accurate date, and reliable source to make the news more genuine and reliable. In the news, Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis, BBC quoted the data of Medecins Sans Frontieres, at least 6,700 Rohingyas, including at least 730 children under the age of five, were killed in the month after the violence broke out [15]. Apart from that, the mainstream media conclude this inhumane treatment of Rohingyas as "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" by quoting the United Nations.

Meanwhile, there is also a great number of news in mainstream media especially for showing the inhumane treatment. The news, The Rohingya children trafficked for sex is a typical of them [16]. The reporter wrote the news in a narrative way. In this news, the reporter spied with an undercover client to contact the pimp and they saved two girls. The whole process seems a ferocious adventure. The two girls appeared torn between poverty and prostitution and without the sex work they would not be able to support themselves or their families. And they inserted what people said directly to inspire sympathy of the readers. Take the interview from one of the girls who is saved as an example, "*I used to play in the forest with my brother and sister. Now I don't remember how to play.*" And also, from the pimp, "*We have young girls, many, but why do you want Rohingya? They are the dirtiest.*"

The photographs and videos also display how Rohingyas are (inhumanely) treated. The documentary which was made by BBC, Rohingya crisis: The Tula Toli massacre, reflects what the Rohingyas have suffered by recording one of the Rohingyas' village. The document shows people are in scare and great sorrow telling their story about being killed, raped, expelled from their home, Moreover, these villagers described how they were massacred, how the military set fire to burn their houses, how many women have been raped and children have been slaughtered. This is quite shocking and touching. Hearing their experience of raped women and seeing their scars, a

sense of sympathy may be triggered. Besides, the journalist in this video called what has been done towards Rohingyas as a text-example of ethnic cleansing, which clearly shows the attitude towards the Rohingya crisis.

After analyzing the news reports from mainstream media, a clear constructed media representation of Rohingyas has come in sight. Both from the visual part and the text part, mainstream media are presenting a group of vulnerable people who are poor, living in the terrible environment, stateless, and being abused. This kind of media representation largely triggers audience's compassion towards Rohingya people and censure towards Myanmar government. However, what was presented in the mainstream media is not the comprehensive image of Rohingyas, as the mainstream media can be influenced by its ownership, governing the structure and so on. With these limitations, the group interviewed two Rohingya experts and one Rohingya family to find out different representations of Rohingyas.

### Activists media

As explained in the theoretical part, the world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. Meaning is constructed and produced in and through various languages. By the same token, the representation of Rohingyas is not unitary and fixed- it is multidimensional and various. For example, three Rohingyas that were interviewed all mentioned that, since the mainstream media does not reflect the truth objectively or completely, especially in some respects like the number of deaths, they get information of Rohingyas' current living situation through websites and YouTube channels ran by Rohingyas themselves at the most time. For the outside world, it is of vital importance to use different approaches in order to get the relatively whole picture of Rohingyas' representations. According to three interviews with Rohingyas, Rohingyas' own book, websites and YouTube channel that ran by Rohingyas themselves, the group found out different self-representations of Rohingyas. What's more, there are obvious differences between what activists and family of Rohingyas thought about them. Below, the representations of manmade statelessness, own identities, and non-extremists which were summarized from two activists and confusion which were concluded from one Rohingya family would be analyzed.

### Manmade statelessness

As mentioned before, the Rohingyas are often depicted as the stateless people who belong to neither Myanmar nor Bangladesh. However, this representation has a deeper meaning as "Manmade Statelessness" according to the Vice President of European Rohingyas Committee (Perveen, 10th May, Interview).

Manmade, contrary to nature, refers to the state produced, formed, or made by humans. In this case, the manmade statelessness of Rohingyas means the lack of nationality made by the Myanmar government, especially the "governmental systematic policy" (Perveen, 10th May, Interview in **Appendix**).

Through the history book written by Rohingyas themselves, "Rohingya Muslims are the descendants of Arabs, Moors, Turks, Persians, Moghuls, Pathans and Bengalees. Their ethnic origin can be traced as far back as first half of the 7th Century A.D. Arakan, formerly known as Rohang, is the ancestral homeland of the Rohingya Muslims." It was not until the Myanmar invasion in 1784 that the peaceful life of Rohingyas was blocked: hundreds of them were killed, Islamic architectural remnants were destroyed, and the rule of repelling Muslims started. After that, the British colonizer ruled Arakan under "Divide and Rule Policy" from 1823 and deepened in the hatred between Muslims and Myanmar which resulted in movements from both sides. Due to the administration vacuum after British Colonization, the massacre of Rohingya took place in 1942 in Arakan. After the independence of Myanmar in 1948, "the right of citizenship of Rohingya nationals as an ethnic minority has totally been denied." (1999: 38) Therefore, Rohingyas consider themselves as the "ancient inhabitants of Arakan" (Perveen, 10th May, Interview) as well as "the ancestors in Myanmar for a lot of years" (Arafah, 11th May, Interview). They share the view that Rohingyas belong to Myanmar since Arakan is the part of it now. From this vision, it is understandable that they have a sense of belonging to Myanmar (**Appendix**).

The fact of history constructs their state belongings while the betrayal of words is thought as the symbol of "manmade". According to both two experts, it is Ang San Atlee that promised the unification with the slogan of "Let us all live together." Before 1982, there were even news channels in Rohingya language and members of Parliament. However, the promise elapsed with publish of Law of 1982. In this law, "Rohingyas have been excluded from the category of "nationals" on the plea that- they are post-1823 settlers, in spite of their centuries-old habitation in Arakan." This representation of manmade statelessness of Rohingyas is not fully displayed in mainstream media.

### Intelligence and determination

Mainstream media mainly focus on the situation of Rohingyas but seldom report how Rohingyas position and shape themselves. Therefore, the second constructed representation of Rohingyas is their own identity which can be described as intelligent Muslims who believe in their nation, religion, and future. As explained in the theoretical part, our own identity is about whom we are and with whom we 'belong'. Thus, here, the identity of Rohingyas is analyzed from perspectives of whom they are and with whom they belong. According to the interviews with Rohingya people and websites run by Rohingyas themselves, the identity of Rohingyas consists of three aspects- being "Rohingya" and Muslim, positive characteristics and the hope for the future. In an interview, Perveen said that "Our belief, look, dialect, food, dressing, the identity of religion and the fight for the equality of Rohingyas all contribute to our cultural identity." (Perveen, 10th May, Interview in **Appendix**).

On one hand, Rohingyas specifically target themselves as being so-called Rohingya and being Muslim. First, it is of great

significance to using "Rohingya" as their pronoun. When it comes to the main common thing between Rohingyas, Perveen thinks, the word of "Rohingya" which stands for the long history and shared roots gives them a strong sense of belonging (Perveen, 10th May, Interview). Since "Rohingya" is a history-recorded word which points an ethnic city of Myanmar in past time, the admission of it at now is of vital importance. Only with the common recognition of the existence of "Rohingya" can they trace the history and regain acceptance. Second, Rohingyas have great trust in their religion despite it is a big reason why they are isolated. Abul Kalam believes that it is because they are all Muslims that they are tied together (Kalam, 11th May, Interview). When listing the cultural memories shared by Rohingyas together, Kalam mentioned the Quran without doubt, the holy book on which the religion of Islam is based. The emphasis they put on religion demonstrates the high faith they have in their belief, which can also be interpreted as a deep sense of identity. On other hand, Rohingyas have the general characteristic of intelligence, generosity, and kindness which always be concealed under the depiction of miserable suffering by mainstream media, according to Dr. Ambia Perveen, "Our Rohingyas might be very poor, but we are rich in our heart. We are generous, intelligent and open-minded with big hearts. We love everyone despite being treated unequally. We can contribute to the whole world." (Perveen, 10th May, Interview). The positive adjectives given by Dr. Ambia Perveen shape a new image of Rohingyas out of the conventional one-helpless and hopeless. Besides, the mainstream media have reported a lot about Rohingyas' suffering, however, Rohingyas never stop fighting with deep hope for the future according to interviews and websites. From the local website called "Rohingyablogger", there are quite a lot reports about struggles against the government and other obstructions, such as "Rohingya and the Right to Self-Identify by Dr. Maung Zarni at Permanent People's Tribunal on Myanmar". The interviews with Rohingyas also prove the intense hope they have. Dr. Ambia Perveen strongly believes that Rohingyas, together with the international community, could bring a mandate to Myanmar government to stop inhumane persecution on Rohingya as well as on other ethnic minorities. "By doing so, we are not just helping Rohingya, but also securing a better peaceful world for everybody", she added passionately. Also, Abul Kalam has confidence in the future of Rohingyas as well. He compared Sweden who developed from poorness to one of the richest countries in the world in less than one century with Rohingyas. Kalam firmly believes that the intelligent Rohingyas could enter into a bright future (Kalam, 11th May, Interview).

In spite of being persecuted, the words show Rohingyas' goodwill towards the future under the confidence of their general personalities. The future drawn by Rohingyas themselves is distinct-different from the current situation. The seldom reported aspect of Rohingyas' identity presents people with various angles from which a suffering, but hopeful group of people is vividly depicted (**Appendix**).

## Non-extremists

Compared with some reports which describe Rohingyas as extremists, Rohingyas themselves only want to achieve peace and equality, according to the Rohingya people the group interviewed. The basic appeals of Rohingyas could be summarized as backing into the arms of Myanmar and acquiring equal human rights. First, according to the interviewees, the Rohingya is an ethnic minority that belongs to Myanmar. "We never want to have a free land or an autonomic country, we want to live with our brothers and sisters and another ethnicity of Myanmar in harmony and peace", said by Perveen (Perveen, 10th May, Interview). There are also a lot of poems which express Rohingyas' love for the motherland on the website of "Rohingyablogger". For example, the poem "To the Bosom of My State" wrote, "Other's love for you could be in the heart/ what love I have for you is in my blood/ I love you in any circumstance/ I love you, my motherland/ I love you, my Myanmar!" [17]. What Rohingyas presented here is a demonstration of belonging-belonging of the country Myanmar, as well as an underline-underline they have no extremist thoughts. Second, it is of Rohingyas' great but simple desire to receive peace. "Our common goal is to stop this genocide", said by Perveen (Perveen, 10th May, Interview). Those words show the undue wish of Rohingyas- the peace wanted by a distressed ethnic minority. In short, the constructed representation of Rohingyas here is a group of people who strongly eager to live with their brothers and sisters with the same rights peacefully, in shared motherland- Myanmar (**Appendix**).

## Rohingya family

Being different from Rohingya activists who strongly take a stand and express opinions about identity, peace etc., the common people from Rohingyas are confused and perplexed about the cause of their current situation and the attitude of Myanmar government to some degree. According to the interview with a Rohingya family in which the father and daughter expressed their feeling, they are confused in two ways. Firstly, they are confused about not being admitted by the Myanmar government. When being asked about their history and why they regard themselves as the Burmese, the family said that it is because they have been living there for a long time and they used to have ID cards of the country that they should belong to Myanmar. The family was quite confused about the DE recognition of their identities. "We just want to have our ID which we owned previously, but they (government) just took it away." (Arafah, 11th May, Interview) When it comes to the change of the government's attitude, the family didn't know the exact reason except for the difference of religions and threw the question to the Myanmar government. Secondly, at the same time with being confused about the attitude change, the family emphasized their inhumane sufferings and attributed their poorness to the government completely. "We don't have food because the government burned down our houses. We own these before. We are the poorest right now because of the government." (Arafah, 11th May, Interview) The family spoke faster with

emotions in their voices. From their perspective, although not knowing the exact reason of not being admitted, the government should be the one who takes full responsibility for their current sufferings (**Appendix**).

All these self-represented images of Rohingya have not been mentioned at least not emphasized in media process due to the uncertainties: no one can guarantee that we are reading the real history instead of the history written by victors; no one can be sure the Rohingyas are not making up the "facts" and no one can jump out of the western or eastern constructed discourse system to be absolutely objective and justified.

## Results

In all, the representations of Rohingyas from mainstream media, activists and common people overlaps a proportion that they are poor, stateless and trapped and therefore, they seek for peace. However, it is the differences between them should not be ignored. For mainstream media, the Rohingyas are tagged as "the most persecuted people in the world" and some details are exaggerated in order to prove this argument. For the activists, they hold firm to their belonging to Myanmar, their identity of great people and their pursuit of promising future. For common people from Rohingyas, they do have a strong feeling of being insulted and improperly treated but their expressions are not as fierce as activists and their desire for peace is not tightly related to grand concepts such as identity but connected to their childhood and cherished memory. In most cases, the general public of Rohingyas just feels confused about the cause of their current situation and the attitude of Myanmar government. Limitations of these representations exist and there is no criterion to judge right from wrong. What represents in mainstream media is influenced by Power Discourse that the values and norms constructed and supported by western countries are imposed on the evaluation of Rohingyas and reporting these persecuted people is one indirect way to spread their claim on universal values of equality, freedom etc. The activists accept these values due to their growth experience and are inevitably objective since their patriotic enthusiasm, national pride and individual achievement mixed with the pure image of Rohingyas. The representation from Rohingya family is still not the comprehensive one since they are not fully representative. Having moved to another country and lived there for a long time, a large proportion of their images of Rohingyas are based on imagination, memory and selected information. There is no truth of the real representation of Rohingyas because all of them are created, produced and constructed. Trying to approach the comprehensive representation by finding different arguments and pointing out their limitations are the only things the group can do, and these are what the group did for analysis.

The representation and discourse system are as well analyzed to explain the formation of multi-image of Rohingyas. Considered as "one of the most prosecuted people in the world" by United Nations, Rohingyas are depicted as impoverished, stateless and inhumanely treated minority

group in mainstream media such as BBC and CNN. However, these images are constructed during the media process and this study tries to find the self-representation of Rohingyas themselves through archive research and interviews where the Rohingya activists and normal Rohingya families are involved.

## Conclusion

After analyzing the reports from the western mainstream media, the representations of Rohingyas were that they were shaped and depicted as impoverished, stateless, and inhumanely treated. They were the vulnerable ethnic minority group which demanded international attention and help. The videos and photographs showed the bad living conditions of Rohingyas which implied that they were the underprivileged group in the society with no ability to change or improve their living environment. The current political situation could not provide the Rohingyas identity and sense of belonging to a country which led them stateless and desperate. As Rohingyas were shaped as the vulnerable group in society, when there were under violence, discrimination, and stereotype, they could not fight back, but to accept the truth and reality. The news and media sometimes put the emphasis on the inhumane treatment of the Rohingyas for gaining global attention and sympathy. The videos and photographs showed the soreness of Rohingyas, but the information was one-sided that did not provide alternative and complete representations of Rohingyas. In this research, the group has discovered and investigated the self-representation and representation of activists of Rohingyas as the supplement for the depiction of the Rohingyas from the western mainstream media.

Based on the interviews conducted by the group with the two Rohingya activists and two interviewees in one Rohingya family and second-hand information researched, the other representations of Rohingyas were studied. Three analyses were drawn which were manmade statelessness, identities, and non-extremists. For the political factor, "governmental systematic policy" of Myanmar pushed the statelessness of Rohingyas further and became the main reason why Rohingyas could not gain their identity. Though Rohingyas had a sense of belonging to Myanmar, they were excluded and not classified as the citizens of Myanmar. The mainstream media usually depicted Rohingyas as desperate and sorrowful. However, through the interviews with a Rohingya family, they were optimistic and having strong hope for their future. While some news and reports described Rohingyas as extremists, Rohingyas themselves did not want to have violence and fights but peace and equality. They would like to stay in their motherland and fight for their identity and recognition in the country.

These three representations were not emphasized or shown in the mainstream media, but they were also the representations of Rohingyas. The depictions and representations of Rohingyas should not only be one-sided. The mainstream media had shown part of the lives, beliefs, and attitudes of Rohingyas but still, some were not shown. The images and representations of Rohingyas were heavily sloped

by which the public did not gain the comprehensive image of Rohingyas.

Media was powerful as it could shape the group of people with certain construction and representations but more importantly, influence the perceptions of the public. Other representations should be encouraged so that the representations could be more objective and comprehensive for the public. The research proved that there were other representations of Rohingyas that the mainstream representations were not all-around. Rohingyas should not only be depicted as desperate and helpless, they had their faith for the future and they worked hard to fight for their future so the people around the globe would understand their perseverance and determination for gaining the recognition of the others and identity for themselves.

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