

Rohingya Atrocities and Pakistani Painter's Response

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study examines how Pakistani artists respond to this issue, given that Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country and artists are often recognized for their empathy and compassion. Artists in Pakistan have addressed topics like feminism, freedom of expression, and sexual abuse. However, it is important to ask whether they are engaged in this cause and, if not, what the reasons might be.

Methodology: To evaluate the response of artists in Pakistan, the study first examines the political and historical causes of the crisis of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar. This qualitative study has been conducted at Lahore's major art galleries, which include gallery visits, interviews with curators and artists, and searches of the galleries' official websites and social media platforms.

Findings: Although Pakistan has a strong tradition of art-based activism on social and big issues, such as feminism, freedom of expression, abuse, and even on issues regarding Muslim atrocities like Kashmir and Syria, the response to the Rohingya crisis was found limited. During the survey of art galleries, it was found that only the Alhamra Art Council and the Coopera Art Gallery displayed relevant work, while many individual painters created notable pieces depicting atrocities.

Conclusion: The pressure in the art market, insufficient support, and domestic priorities is largely responsible for the limited engagement of Pakistani artists in response to the Muslim atrocities in the Rohingya. This study recommends strong and resilient digital and institutional platforms to enhance and ensure the long-term sustainability of artistic advocacy related to these issues.

Keywords: Muslim Minorities, Atrocities, Myanmar, Pakistani Artist, Genocide.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of Islam at global level is largely through trade, preaching, migration, and peaceful cultural exchange rather than conquest, and the same is in case of the Rakhine state. According to historical records, the Muslim Sufis and merchants arrived on the coast of Arkan in the 8th century with Arab and Persian trading communities established in the 9th century. Following to this the migrations in the Mongol period, the arrival of Chittagonian settlers and in 15 to 7 century and the marriages of Muslim soldiers in Rakhine people, later resulted in the formation of a community that become a fundamental part of the regions social and political structure (Yegar, 1972).

Although there is a long history of Rohingya integration in Myanmar, they have been systematically deprived of their rights since the independence of the country in 1948. There are many factors, like the colonial era migration, post-independence nationalization policies, and a series of discriminatory laws, most particularly the 2015 “race and religion protection” laws that have redefined the Rohingya as illegal immigrants rather than the recognized ethnic group. Since 2016 the escalation of violence, extensive military operation targeting Muslim majority areas, and the burning of villages left the Rohingya the most persecuted stateless population globally (Ibrahim, 2018). International organizations like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court are ineffective in preventing this abuse (Ware & Laoutides, 2018).

The ongoing persecution of the Muslim community is not limited to Myanmar. The situation is no different in in Kasimir, Syria, Palestine, and in many other places along with anti-Muslim sentiments in India, Europe, and Australia (Dabashi, 2018). While most of the world remains silent, art often pushes back against this silence. Art always crosses the political and language boundaries and helps people see the human side of suffering. Notable examples include Picasso's *Guernica* and contemporary visual works that addressing the Syrian refugee crisis.

In 1658, Mughal prince Shah Shyja sought refuge in Rakhine after being defeated by his brother Aurangzeb, but his death weakened the Rakhine kingdom and provoked Mughal retaliation. After that, when the Burmese (today's Myanmar) empire rose in 1758, the Muslims of Rakhine were an important part of the military establishment. The Muslim population had completely integrated into Burmese society by the 18th and 19th centuries; they held prominent military and administrative positions while keeping their distinctive religious identity. Rohingya community has lived in Myanmar for a long time they have faced discrimination and violence, especially in recent times. Many Indian Muslim settlers came to Myanmar during British rule in 1824 to 1948 as civil servants, laborers, and merchants. By 1891, many of the Yangon Population were Indian immigrants and most of them were Muslims. After independence (in which Muslims took an active part), the military coup of 1962 and the nationalization policies harmed the business of Muslims. Muslims of Rakhine state suffer the most in the form of denied citizenship, restrictions on movement, and being recognized as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Yegar, 1972; Steinberg, 2001).

According to the center for Peace and conflict report 2010, there was a widespread ethnic protest against the Myanmar government. The law passed by the president Thein Sein in 2015 named “Protection of Race and Religion,” mainly affected the Muslim community. The violence increased in 2016 after a senior officer was executed, leading to Islamic resistance in the Northern part of Rakhine state. In 2017, another wave of violences rose and forced about 400,000 Muslims to leave Myanmar in just a few months. Many faced dangerous journey before reaching Bangladesh. While Bangladesh offers temporary shelter to many of them, it also imposes strict limitations on Refugee movement, due to the social and economic impacts of long-term stay. To date no country even Muslim Majority countries, has given them full citizenship, and only a few of them have made real efforts to address their statelessness. Today, 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims are considered as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world (Gentleman, 2017; Liu, 2017). The limited response from both the states and the international organizations highlights the necessity of other channels to pay attention to the crisis, especially through arts, especially when formal diplomatic efforts have largely been delayed (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018).

The study examines the artistic community in Pakistan, as a Muslim majority country with the strong tradition of socially engaged art that addresses issues like feminism and abuse. The analysis examines the reasons for the community's silence on the Rohingya crisis. Pakistani artists have often used their work to influence public opinion and question the authority of matters related to the public. The research explores why the same activism has not been shown for a humanitarian crisis affecting Muslims in other countries. The study also explores what this silence reveals about the hindrances, boundaries, pressure and priorities that shape the activism of artists in Pakistan.

1.1 Problem Statement

Pakistani artists have a history of using their work to address social and political concerns and promote human rights and encourage public discussion. However, despite the seriousness of the Rohingya crisis, which involves ethnic cleansing, mass displacement, and statelessness, the Pakistani cultural community paid little attention to it. The study looks at why there is a gap between the scale of Rohingya crisis and the artistic response within Pakistan. It also explores the primary political, economic and social reasons that might explain the silence. This leads to the question of whether this silence means their absence of concern or there are structural barriers or a lack of funding and support and institutional platforms or the artists are simply overwhelmed by the crowd of domestic issues. Without a clear understanding it is difficult to know whether the art community's lack of attention is a choice, an oversight or the result of outside limits. The study will look closely at artists' views; decisions and the challenges they face to help clarify this issue.

1.2 Significance

The study is important for several reasons. It helps us understand how art, activism and humanitarian crises are connected, particularly in Muslim-majority countries where cultural and religious ties can shape creative efforts. The research points out the challenges like lack of support, political censorship, lack of public awareness, and other social priorities. The study adds a small amount of research on how some Pakistani artists respond to the Rohingya crisis, giving useful information to policymakers, the art community, other human rights groups and trying to make awareness in public. The study also invites us to think about why some humanitarian crises don't get as much artistic attention as others.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. Examine the historical and current reasons behind the persecution of Muslim community of Rohingya in Myanmar.
2. Reviewing how Pakistani artists respond towards the Rohingya and how they help raise public awareness.
3. Look at how the international artists respond and compare them to Pakistani artists' response.
4. Find out how the artists' expression is effective in shaping public discussion and policy making.
5. Explores how artistic activism affects the public views on humanitarian crisis and its potential as advocacy tool.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large amount of research on artist activism. Artists often discuss Picasso's *Guernica*, protest murals of the Arab spring, and photos of the Syrian refugee crisis. These examples show that art can express the urgency and severity of crisis more effectively than news reports shaping public opinion and putting pressure on institutions. Researchers have looked at how their painters, performers, filmmakers, and performing artists respond to issues like gender-based violence, religious extremism, even though they face censorship, harassment and a lack of funding. Separately there is a lot of research on the Rohingya crisis. This includes Muslims' history in Myanmar; how colonial era immigration laws affected their rights and how Buddhist nationalism fueled violence against them (Holt, 2019). Many studies criticize the United Nations and the international court of justice for failing to turn documentation into justice. However, there is less work on exploring the interaction of both areas and very little focus on artists' response to the Rohingya crisis. Studies on Pakistani art usually focus on Palestine and Kashmir, the Rohingya crisis is rarely discussed. This study seeks to address this gap.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study leans on three overlapping ideas to make sense of why some crises pull artists in while others get left behind.

The first is the “politics of distant suffering,” an idea most associated with sociologist Luc Boltanski, which holds that people react very differently to suffering depending on how close or far it feels, geographically and culturally. Someone can watch footage of atrocities happening far away and feel real sympathy without ever being moved to act, because the suffering stays abstract and safely distant (Boltanski, 1999). This raises the possibility that Pakistani artists may know about and even care about the Rohingya crisis, but distance keeps it from becoming something they feel compelled to respond to creatively.

The second is framing theory, developed by scholars like Robert Entman, which holds that how an issue is presented—what gets emphasized or left out—shapes whether people see it as urgent (Entman, 1993). If the Rohingya crisis hasn't been framed in Pakistani discourse as connected to causes people already care about, it may simply never register as “an issue for us” the way Kashmir or Palestine does.

The third framework, transnational advocacy network theory by Keck and Sikkink, looks at how activists organize around the crisis that crosses borders. It highlights the need for things like funding, platforms and networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Without this support for any issue, even artists who care may not act in a good way. Together these theories help us to understand different reasons for what happened instead of assuming there is only one cause.

2.1 Related Studies on Persecution and Media Representation

“*Tracking Genocide: Persecution of the Karen in Burma*” by Jay Milbrandt, and the UNHCR report, “*Avoiding genocide: safeguarding the Karen people in Burma.*” Discusses if the crime committed against the Karen people of Burma is a crime of Genocide under international law. The research covers the human rights misuse of forced displacement, killings, cultural repression, etc. Milbrandt has discovered the Burmese military has been deliberately trying to wipe out the Karen people and has ample evidence of state sponsored atrocities (Milbrandt, 2012). J. Roe's study, “A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis of the Portrayal of the Rohingya Minority in Myanmar,” looks at how Rohingya people are represented in online media. The language of the media influences the perception of Rohingya, Roe argues. The study reveals the Rohingya community is frequently depicted as the victim and as an isolated community. This type of illustration reinforces stereotyping and reduces the world's knowledge of the crisis. Journalism should be balanced and factually correct to deal with religious discrimination, Roe says. Azlan Tajuddin's research, *Statelessness and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya in Myanmar: Time for serious international intervention*, examines the incidents of Rohingya massacre and the serious humanitarian consequences of the mass killings in 2017. Tajuddin notes that the international community, as well as the United Nations has failed to take adequate steps to prevent such incidents. The study's findings suggest that an end to the ethnic cleansing would lead to better cooperation between humanitarian and government and local communities. He further appeals for specific measures, diplomatic pressure and enhanced cooperation with the refugees to deal with this situation (Tajuddin, 2018). In aggregate these studies are directed towards the pressing need for international action, to ensure greater international accountability, and towards fair media reporting of the persecution of the Muslim community in Myanmar. Digital media is an important factor in the dissemination of awareness on global conflicts and human rights abuse, through photography. Photographs provide first-hand, visual evidence of the event and are more impactful than writing and speeches. International Organizations, NGO's and human rights groups utilize digital media to document and share information on abuse, including the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar who are being targeted by genocide. Information is disseminated and international support is gained through online platforms. With the help of social media, and online campaigns, anyone anywhere can participate and exert pressure on governments and international institutions (Van de Donk, 2004). Photographs have often been employed to record wartime violence and continue to hold significant importance in photojournalism. The images of

the Rohingya's plight bring attention to the plight and inspire people all over the world to respond. Photography in human rights does not just document what has happened, it helps people to empathize and call to account those responsible for the event (Media Diversity Institute, n.d.). The Rohingya crisis is reported by Pakistani newspapers and television channels, just like international media, have followed the Burmese crisis (Ali, 2017). Some Pakistani journalists even put themselves in risk and travel to Myanmar during the worst situation getting in and reporting in dangerous situations. Their interviews with the Burmese people, live reports and videos shared were valuable information on the crisis. This enables people around the world and in Pakistan to comprehend what was going on. As a result of these reports many people came out and protested the violence faced by the Rohingya.

Figure 1-4 shows that international Media Photography to spread awareness about the Rohingya crisis.



(Fig 1: United Muslim Relief)



(Fig 2: Human Rights watch)



(Fig 3:Getty images)



(Fig 4: - Burma Genocide - Human Rights Watch)

Figure 5-7 shows Pakistani and Washington post media video reports and protests about the Rohingya crisis



(Fig 5: Saar-E-Am)



(Fig 6: Saar-E-Am)



(Fig 7:- Washington Post)

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

3.1 *Research Design*

In addition to the street protests and journalists' efforts the study looks at how the Pakistani artists responded to the Rohingya crisis. Using the Qualitative case study, it examines the artworks, exhibition themes, and the views of artists and curators. Around the world artists often comment on human conditions, using their work to express emotions, question society and record history. In contrast to photography and videography, which shows reality more directly, artists offer personal interpretation through paintings. Artists can highlight, omit, or change details to create stronger emotional reactions and shape how people see events.

3.2 *Sample*

The sample comprised eleven art galleries in Lahore—Alhamra Art Council, Ejaz Art Gallery, Hamail Art Gallery, Unicorn Art Gallery, Oyster Art Gallery, Revivers Galleria, Ocean Art Gallery, O Art Space, Collector's Galleria, Taseer Art Gallery, and Coopera Art Gallery—together with individual painters identified as having produced work related to the Rohingya crisis: Muhammad Javed, Ghulam Mustafa, Anjum Alix Noon, Mahboob Ali, Komal Hayat, Rahat Naveed Masud, Nasreen Aurangzaib, and Aasma Majeed.

3.3 *Data Collection*

The study looks at how artists in Lahore responded to the Rohingya Muslim atrocities in Myanmar. The research included visits to different art galleries interviews with artists and curators and online searches on official websites and social media to see if Pakistani artists have addressed the issue through their work.

3.4 *Data Analysis*

Artwork and exhibition records found during research were analyzed focusing on their subject matter, symbolism and techniques. These findings then compare with artists and curators accounts and to understand how deeply they are engaged with the Rohingya crisis.

3. RESULTS

Among the galleries visited only the Alhamra Art Council displayed the artwork about Rohingya Muslim atrocities. The artist association of Punjab the leading art group in Pakistan features pieces on the theme of "Terror and Violence" in its 32nd annual exhibition drawing attention to the sufferings of Rohingya Muslims. This show provided a rare artistic look at the crisis.

However, many other art galleries like Ejaz art gallery, Unicorn art gallery, Oyster art gallery, Ocean art gallery, O Art Space, Taseer art gallery, collector's galleria, said that they had no exhibition on artwork regarding humanitarian crisis. Due to artists mostly focus on work that is more likely to sell, rather than on political issues. Because of this topic like these rarely seen in exhibitions.

An exception was Coopera Art Gallery, which displayed a single oil painting by Muhammad Javed, a renowned artist recognized for tackling social issues through his work. His piece was the only documented example of an individual artist reflecting on the Burmese crisis.

While the broader artistic community in Lahore has largely remained detached from the issue, notable Pakistani artists who addressed the Burmese atrocities include:

- **Muhammad Javed**, at the Punjab artists association's 32nd annual exhibition in Lahore presented his painting that highlights the sufferings of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar by using bold colors and symbolism. The paintings include the minarets of Myanmar's Hsipaw mosque, making a clear link to Rohingya crisis. The background inspired by the Myanmar flag and figures shown in green moving from peace to violence, shown in red, this represents the forced displacement. Javed explained in the interview that he wanted to make the series of paintings on this topic but due to different challenges he could only complete painting. As a gallery curator he notices that themes like landscape tend to sell more and art about human suffering doesn't attract buyers. Those financial challenges often keep many artists from exploring topics related to human suffering or other issues, even though art can help raise awareness (see figure 8).



(Fig 8: Muhammad Javed

Untitled Oil on Canvas

3" x 3")

- **Ghulam Mustafa**, an award-winning artist portrays the mass killings of Rohingya Muslims in two of his Paintings. Mustafa highlights the role of Burmese government and Buddhist monks in these atrocities. In one of his paintings, he highlights the face of Suu Kyi a Nobel prize winner for peace standing with a military officer while a terrifying child carrying his younger sibling and trying to escape. The dead bodies on the ground depicting the genocide. While in the other painting there is blood spreading everywhere and the white portion depicting peace is shrinking and the dove (symbol of peace) is flowing away, also showing dead bodies of children. Mustafa's application of intense red hues conveys war and violence, rendering the painting a compelling narrative of fear, suffering, and oppression (see figure 9 and 10).



(Fig 9: Ghulam Mustafa oil on canvas)



(Fig 10: Ghulam Mustafa Untitled Oil on canvas)

- **Anjum Alix Noon's** painting *Bhuuki Suu Kyi* (Hungry Suu Kyi), criticizes Aung San Suu Kyi the former leader of Myanmar. Suu Kyi was once praised as a champion of democracy but later faced global criticism for not acting during the persecution of Rohingya Muslims. In the painting symbols of peace like white colors and a dove are set against Suu Kyi's twisted, almost monstrous face. This contrast shows the difference between her positive reputation and her failure to stop the violence in Myanmar. In this painting Noon points out how she sees hypocrisy in Suu Kyi leadership and argues that her silence has added to the sufferings of the Rohingya people (see figure 11).



(Fig 11: Anjum Alix Noon Bhooki Suu Kyi
Acrylic on Wasli)

- **Mahboob Ali's** paintings powerfully show the sufferings of Rohingya people. At the center Buddha statue with the red halo his head stands out against black background, highlighting the idea of Buddhist idea of peace and the violence carried out by Burmese military and the extremist monks. In front the painting shows the pain of Rohingya man and children, and a river of blood runs through the scene to represent the ongoing massacre and the atrocities faced by the Rohingya (see figure 12).



(Fig 12: Mahboob Ali

Untitled Oil on canvas)

- **Komal Hayat's** abstract painting highlights the harrowing reality of sexual abuse faced by Rohingya women in Myanmar. The artwork shows the three main figures: the military officer, the Monk and the distressed woman trying to cover herself. These figures represent the widespread and systematic attacks on Rohingya women. Hayat uses distorted shapes, chaotic brushstrokes, and dark colors to express the victims' fear, helplessness and suffering drawing attention to how these crimes often go unfinished (see figure 13).



(Fig 13: Komal Hayat

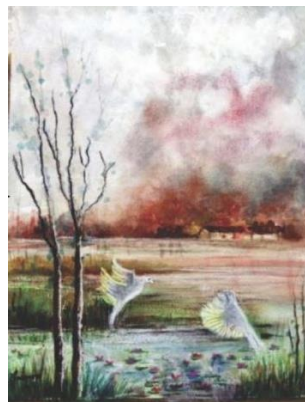
untitled Oil on canvas)

- **Rahat Naveed Masood's** painting shows the struggle of Rohingya Muslim escaping persecution in Myanmar. At the center a tired women sit by the sea; her body language shows both the exhaustion and despair. This shows the physical and emotional toll of being forced to leave home. Nearby an injured man shows their vulnerability. In the distance a boat shows the risks of journey many Rohingya made to make Bangladesh. The wide empty sea shows the symbol of uncertainty (see figure 14).



(Fig 14: Rahat Naveed Masud
untitled)

- **Nareen Aurangzeb** shows in her Painting the harsh reality faced by the Muslim minority in Myanmar by placing scenes of destruction alongside the signs of hope. The background features fire, blood, and burning houses, representing the violence and loss experienced by the Rohingya community. Meanwhile the dove in the foreground represents hope, resilience and a chance of peace even during ongoing hardships (see figure 15).



(Fig 15: Nasreen Aurangzaib
Untitled Oil on canvas)

- **Aasma Majeed**, a faculty member at LCW, University Lahore, used the traditional Gouache on wasli technique to depict the Burmese crisis in her distinctive artistic style. Majeed utilizes this technique to illustrate a smoke-covered sky surrounded by muted grey tones, representing the extensive devastation of Rohingya villages set ablaze, with bright strokes of red representing the bloodshed, slaughter, and violence suffered by men, women, and children regardless of age (see figure 16).



(Fig 16: Aasma Majeed
Untitled Gouache on Wasli)

4 DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

There are numerous difficulties for artists when dealing with issues that are politically charged, such as the Rohingya Muslim atrocities in Myanmar. These range from censorship and political pressure, threats to their safety, and social backlash. The type of artwork these types of are often considered protest and can result in banishment from the exhibition, from the Internet or even legal problems. In Myanmar, the military has long been a central player in the persecution of Rohingya Muslims (David & Holliday, 2019) – even when the persecution is against the government, not in favor of it, the artist could get arrested, if not for violence. Even in the countries like Pakistan where Rohingya have some support, artists can still feel limitations from institutions, lack of funding and hesitation from galleries and media to show their work, consistent with Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) observation that advocacy on distant crises depends on funding, platforms, and networks that are often absent. People may have mixed feelings on issues such as this. Others raise religious and nationalistic issues that make open discussion more difficult, while others are supportive artists. Social media is not only a useful way to spread awareness, but it also opens the door for harassment, cyber bullying, and government controlling of artists. Even with these difficulties, numerous artists continue to speak out through their art and demand respect for human rights and even put their safety on the line.

5 CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the Pakistani art community, art galleries, and institutions have not done much to sensitize people to the persecution and atrocities of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Although visual art has the potential to be a powerful medium for social commentary and activism, there are few artistic attempts dedicated to this humanitarian crisis as revealed by the research. This is one of the problems due to the art market commercialization. Art galleries are very important for showing and promoting art and they do it, but do not necessarily show work that looks at social and humanitarian issues but work that will sell. The attitude of the gallery owners and curators is such that they do not like to display socially concerned art because they feel that it is more important to make money than to support issues. Similarly, educational institutions such as the leading art schools and universities seldom track or promote artwork that addresses issues such as these. The study indicates two possibilities for this: either these schools lack a history of student and faculty participation in social issues, or they don't encourage enough involvement in political or social issues. The economic force and growing emphasis on the commercial aspect of the arts could have led the students and faculty to shift their attention to commercial art, as opposed to arts for activist purposes, experts interviewed for the study said. Many artists in Pakistan have economic problems due to which it is difficult for them to concentrate on this type of art. Artworks on social issues, particularly when it comes to humanitarian crises, do not sell, so artists who have financial issues then tend to put their work in projects that can make them earn more. The study reveals that artists are driven to accept money over their artistic and creative aspirations due to the economic hardships of the world

today. Therefore, the artists and artist community can only contribute towards social causes if we can change the mindset of the society and their positive response towards such artworks. Moreover, the gallery owners also need to realize that in this age of digitalization their positive contribution can help to change the mindset of not only the Pakistani audience but that they can reach the masses across the globe to help their Muslim brethren not only in the case of this calamity but in case of other social concerns too. The study demonstrates the ability of art to raise awareness about any humanitarian crisis and that social media can be used to give voice to the voiceless in the community. Pakistani artists creating works on these themes should increasingly involve human rights organizations, news media and the web art projects, in order to contribute more to raising awareness of issues such as persecution of Rohingya Muslims. The active development of an artistic community that can be seen to inspire change and support human rights, beyond being beautiful, is important.

5.1 Limitation

There are some limitations in this research. Since there are very few artistic productions on Rohingya crisis in Pakistan, the findings might not be generalizable. Artists' responses regarding their motivations for engaging or not engaging can be self-aware, but they may not always be truthful; this is particularly the case in relation to sensitive topics, such as censorship. It was also more convenient to contact already established artists than new entrants, which might lead to greater attention to established artists in the study. Finally, since the crisis is still happening, these results show only the current situation, not a lasting one.

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Conflict of Interest

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