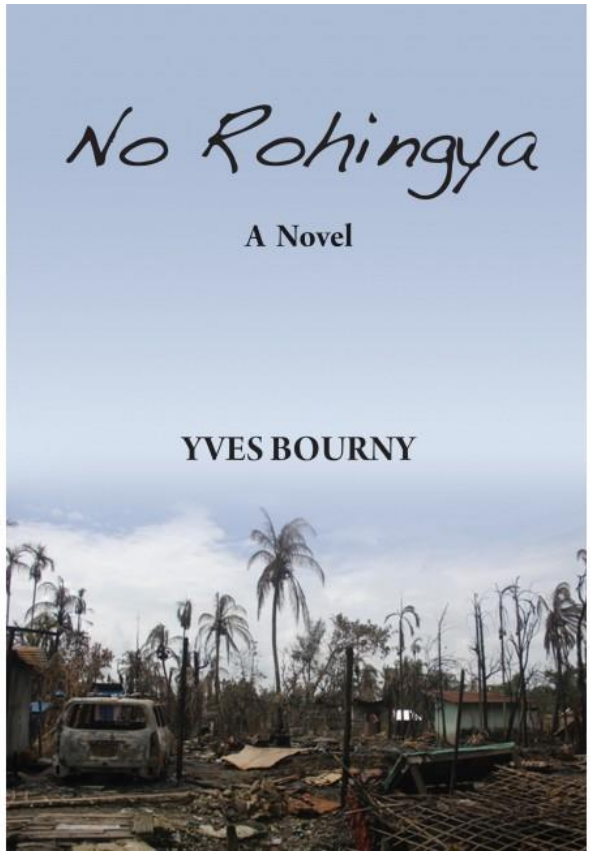
Yves Bourny, *No Rohingya.* Malaysia: Gerakbudaya Enterprise, 2019. 203 pp. ISBN 978-967-0311-17-3



One would struggle to find the exact word to describe the novel *No Rohingya*. It is a captivating read that was written based on the writer Yves Bourny's ten-year experience living in Myanmar. Bourny worked with a French medical non-governmental organisation (NGO) that facilitates access to health care services for 400,000 deprived Rohingyas in Arakan (now renamed Rakhine). Through its unique plots and interweaving narratives, Bourny recounts the ongoing brutality and oppression that befalls the unwanted "Kalars." Unlike most novels that focus on a single protagonist, the author portrays two main characters and delicately strikes a balance between them.

No Rohingya comprises 23 chapters and begins with a chapter titled "Arakan" that sets the scene. It describes a tense, face-to-face encounter between a group of Tatmadaw soldiers and Arun's family that almost turns into bloodshed because of Arun's audacity and impulsive anger. Luckily, the soldiers decide to

retreat, but Arun's father knows they would come back hunting for his son. Therefore, he decides to send Arun away to Yangon – an undertaking that incurs exorbitant costs – in order to save his life and so that he can make a living. Subsequent chapters narrate Arun's difficult life in Yangon. Being a "dark-skinned Bengali," he experiences discrimination on a daily basis, and is confined to Dala, a slum township designated for the poor.

After eight months of "suffocating" in Yangon, Arun is offered a job at a foreign organisation that runs health programmes for the Rohingyas in Arakan. He happily accepts it but unfortunately, this new chapter does not last long. A conflict with Ma Pu, a Burmese colleague, that spirals out of control leads to the closure of the office building and cessation of the health programme. From a respectable health worker, Arun turns into a fugitive overnight, as he is accused of rape and murder of a young Burmese lady whose body is found in the bush of a nearby area. His former colleague who works at the same organisation, Johny, is the actual perpetrator. Johny's hatred for the Rohingyas, especially Arun, drives him to scapegoat Arun and incite the local Buddhists to attack a bus carrying a group of Rohingya passengers as a "punishment for Arun's crime."

As Arun goes into hiding and tension escalates between the two groups, more Rohingyas flee Arakan. A subversive, radical Rohingya group notices Arun's desperation to help his family flee, so they offer to pay for his family's boat journey to Malaysia with one condition: Arun will assassinate Monk Susitha during the big celebration at Kabar Aye Pagoda. Left with no choice, Arun reluctantly accepts the deal. However, his attempt fails and Arun is caught. It is not made explicit in the novel what happens to him in the end, but it is easy to assume that he is arrested or even killed.

The elderly heroine of this novel, Tameema, is Arun's grandmother who has spent her whole life in the Butthidaung town of Arakan. To the children of Butthidaung, Tameema is a symbol of motherly love, patience, perseverance, and wisdom because of her role as the storyteller of the village. Her tale-telling every Friday is the most important source of comfort and solace for the innocent children who have to grapple with daily fear and hunger. Tameema's stories are meant to give powerful lessons while distracting the kids from their sadness and misery. Her imagined world of Tody, a young boy raised by a pack of wild dogs in a jungle full of atrocities, represent the characteristics she believes her people need to possess to triumph against all odds.

An aspect in the novel that deserves to be highlighted is how Tameema is portrayed not only as a source of wisdom for the villagers and solace for the children, but also as a rebellious and progressive force within the Rohingya community. Tameema defies some of the pseudo-religious teachings which she believes are not based on reason and the correct interpretation of the Qur'an. For instance, her story of Tody the child-of-the-dogs, is a deliberate glorification of

dogs that she knows are often unnecessarily despised by some religious people in her community.

As conflicts in Arakan turn worse, Tameema grows less optimistic. She struggles to keep the children entertained, feeling torn between the desire to invent an imaginary happy ending for Tody and to be honest about the situation. Eventually, Tameema succumbs to reality and decides to "end Tody's life" in her story, a painful decision that disappoints the children. Nevertheless, her greatest hope is for her stories to remain alive and be passed to the next Rohingya generation after her demise. The story of Tody, full of wisdom and lessons for a people yearning for a future, would be the uniting force for the oppressed, as she envisions it. Tameema passes away, as the boat carrying her sails away from Arakan.

Oppression of and discrimination against the Rohingya because of their skin colour and different religion (Islam) is a major theme of this novel. The two protagonists' life journey in two areas – Yangon and Arakan – is similar in terms of their social status and (mis)treatment, even though these manifest differently. For Tameema, the type of oppression she experiences as a Rohingya living in Butthidaung is direct and brutal. Conflicts occur in the forms of mass killing, arson, shooting, and rape, which amount to a total annihilation of her people. Whereas for Arun, oppression in Yangon is subtler. It occurs in the forms of prejudice and social exclusion. Some of his experiences read as follows:

> The taxi driver didn't even look at Arun. He simply tapped his finger scornfully on the sticker decorating his dashboard. The sticker was blue and red, stripped in a 969 in Burmese numerals. This meant "no Muslims." (p. 88)

> Castes were alive and well in Burma, judging by what Arun had seen, like in India, but informally…. But for them, the Rohingyas, it was of course different. They represented, one and all, a caste apart, worse than the Untouchables of India. (p. 98)

Prior studies on the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar have demonstrated the multiple levels of oppression of this group (Ahsan Ullah 290). Bourny eloquently illustrates these through Arun's repeated traumatic experiences. At the individual level, oppression is depicted as the stereotypes or prejudices held by the Burmese against the Rohingyas. For instance, Ma Pu gets outraged when she learns that her Rohingya colleagues, not she, are promoted. This is followed by a racist gesture of spitting when Arun challenges her dissatisfaction.

Interestingly, such prejudice does not exist in Ma Pu's mind alone. As the story progresses, Arun has similar thoughts about the Buddhists around him when he finds out that the inhabitants of Golden Valley turn a blind eye to the

killing of stray dogs in their neighbourhood, despite their supposed strong belief against killing a living creature. While Ma Pu perceives the Rohingyas as "thieves," "sneaky," "opportunistic" and "infiltrating Burma," Arun regards the Golden Valley residents as "hypocrites."

At the institutional level, oppression manifests through discrimination in policies and regulations enacted by social institutions that put the Rohingyas at a disadvantage. These include biased policies and practices in housing, employment, and educational or health care settings. Suja, a friend of Arun's, is sentenced to five years in prison for getting married without police authorisation – a rule imposed only on the Rohingya community. On the other hand, at the sociocultural level, oppression is portrayed in the forms of practices that reinforce the stereotypes about the Rohingyas. When Johny leads a mob to attack a bus carrying Rohingya passengers and sets it on fire, the crowd stands, watches and even applauds, while the monks give their blessings.

Among all the chapters in *No Rohingya*, readers might find the chapter titled "Cohabitation" odd or ironic. The chapter seems to appear out of nowhere, somehow disrupting the flow of the story. Here a new character, Maung Aye, is introduced and is portrayed as an Arakanese who feels uncomfortable with the ever-increasing number of Rohingyas in the surrounding villages, and with their practices of killing cows for food, which is deemed contrary to the Buddhist belief. He decides to consult a monk, who then proposes a solution: the monastery will donate a piece of land where the Rohingyas will be relocated. As compensation, they will be offered money. However, the plan does not materialise as they do not manage to reach an agreement with the local Imam, and the Rohingyas ignore the "Non-Buddhist" sign set up by the monk. While the motive of this chapter is unclear, it can be seen as the author's attempt to appear neutral or show a contrary view by drawing sympathy to the "suffering" of Maung Aye who has to tolerate the Rohingyas' presence and inconsiderate actions, such as, not greeting their Arakanese neighbours and slaughtering cows behind the pagoda.

Without doubt, the most intriguing and moving part of *No Rohingya* is its denouement. Arun's attempt to assassinate Monk Susitha fails, while Tameema closes her eyes forever during her boat journey to Malaysia. But before readers can conclude that the heroine has lost her battle, the author makes a brilliant plot twist. Arun's former boss, Miro, leaves Myanmar and works in a refugee camp in Nauru six months after the health programme in Arakan was shut down. There, he comes across a group of Rohingya children who sit together every Friday to listen to a girl among them, telling a story. His curiosity about the children's gathering is recounted thus:

> The young girl began speaking in a slow, strong voice. The children all seemed to drink up her words, and Miro looked at each of them. What

> in the world could she be telling them that was so exciting? Suddenly, the young girl raised her tone to ask a question. A dozen hands rose in agitation and all the children shouted in one voice: "Tody, Tody, Tody, Tody, Tody…."

Tameema's dream is thus realised. Her hope of keeping her stories alive is fulfilled by a girl who used to listen to her tales devotedly every Friday. As the old woman has so direly wanted, the legacy of Tody continues. This is a legacy that Tameema believes the Burmese can never erase.

No Rohingya powerfully captures and describes the injustices committed against the Rohingya community in Myanmar. It brings to the surface the various complexities, emotions, dynamics and power relations between different forces that underlie the tragedy of sporadic ethnic cleansings and genocides in Arakan. Needless to say, the novel's implicit but most important message is the urgent call for the delivery of justice to this world's most persecuted minority.

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