

## ***Born to Struggle: A Prototypical Portrayal of Deprivation and Denial***

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### **Abstract**

The Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority primarily residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State, have long been subjected to systemic persecution and displacement. Statelessness has compounded their suffering, depriving them of basic rights and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Their statelessness stems from the denial of citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which excluded them from the list of recognized ethnic groups. Statelessness has subjected the Rohingyas to institutionalized discrimination, restricting their freedom of movement, access to education, healthcare, and employment. On this backdrop, the present paper attempts a comprehensive analysis of Muhammad Noor's *Born to Struggle*, which emerges today as a prototypical portrayal of deprivation and denial, examining the systemic inequalities and social barriers that trap marginalized individuals in a cycle of suffering.

**Keywords:** Born to Struggle, deprivation, denial

The Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority primarily residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State, have long been subjected to systemic persecution and displacement. Statelessness has compounded their suffering, depriving them of basic rights and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Their statelessness stems from the denial of citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which excluded them from the list of recognized ethnic groups. Despite evidence of their historical presence in the region for centuries, the government labels them as "Bengali," suggesting they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The United Nations describes the Rohingyas as "one of the most persecuted minorities in the world" (2020 Report). This denial of citizenship has left the Rohingyas without legal status, rendering them stateless and without access to fundamental rights.

Statelessness has subjected the Rohingyas to institutionalized discrimination, restricting their freedom of movement, access to education, healthcare, and employment. They have been compelled to work in state-run projects without pay. Their physical movement is heavily restricted, as they need special permits to travel between villages. These restrictions exacerbate poverty and limit access to essential services. The Rohingyas have been victims of targeted violence, including military crackdowns that the United Nations has described as acts of ethnic cleansing and possible genocide. Clashes between Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhists in 2012 resulted in mass killings, destruction of homes, and displacement of thousands into squalid camps. Following alleged attacks by Rohingya militants, the Myanmar military launched a brutal campaign in 2017, killing thousands, raping women, and burning entire villages. Over 1 million Rohingyas have fled to

neighbouring Bangladesh. The conditions in the camps where they stay are dire. Refugees live in densely packed shelters with inadequate access to sanitation and clean water. Malnutrition, infectious diseases, and mental health issues are rampant. Most children in the camps lack access to formal education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency. They are easy targets for traffickers who exploit their desperation. Many Rohingyas have been sold into forced labour or sex slavery. Despite international condemnation, accountability for the atrocities against Rohingyas remains limited. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has initiated proceedings, but progress is slow. The trauma of violence, displacement, and prolonged uncertainty has taken a severe toll on the mental health of the Rohingyas.

Thus, the Rohingyas' statelessness is the root cause of their suffering, exposing them to systemic discrimination, violence, and forced displacement. Without citizenship, they remain one of the most vulnerable communities in the world, denied the rights and dignity they deserve. A lasting solution requires addressing the structural roots of their statelessness, ensuring justice for past atrocities, and granting them a safe and dignified future.

On this backdrop, Muhammad Noor's *Born to Struggle*, earlier published as *The Exodus* in 2012, emerges as a profound literary exploration of deprivation and denial, examining the systemic inequalities and social barriers that trap marginalized individuals in a cycle of suffering. The narrative, rich in emotional depth and social critique, portrays the human cost of poverty, injustice, and exclusion. As the author himself informs:

This is my story, a child of Rohingya refugees, born stateless. But this isn't

just my story. It is a glimpse inside the world of the Rohingya, often called 'the world's most persecuted people.' It tells the tales of struggle and persecution, but also of hope and happiness... My hope is that my opening this door into my life, you can understand the unique personal challenges I faced and how I became the man I am today, but also recognize that there are millions of my brethren who face similar or worse every day. (xi)

*Born to Struggle* is a compelling memoir that chronicles the author's life as a Rohingya refugee. It is a heartfelt narrative about perseverance, identity, and the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity. The book opens with Noor's early life in Myanmar, where the Rohingya face systemic discrimination, including restrictions on movement, education, and employment. Noor recounts his family's struggles under oppressive conditions, emphasizing how they were treated as "stateless people in their own land."

Noor vividly describes the turning point in his life when his family is forced to flee Myanmar due to escalating violence and persecution. The journey to escape is harrowing, marked by dangerous boat rides, treacherous terrain, and the constant threat of exploitation. The memoir delves into life in refugee camps, where Noor experiences hunger, despair, and the loss of dignity. He reflects on the challenges of finding education and work, often feeling trapped in a cycle of poverty and prejudice. However, even in the bleakest moments, Noor's resilience shines through. As the story progresses, his determination to build a better future leads him to Malaysia, where he confronts new challenges as a refugee without legal status. He takes on menial jobs to survive but never abandons his

dream of becoming an advocate for his people.

The book concludes on a note of hope and empowerment as Noor emerges as a voice for the voiceless, working to bring attention to the plight of the Rohingya. His story is both deeply personal and universally relevant, urging readers to reflect on the global refugee crisis and their role in fostering compassion and change. Noor's journey exemplifies the strength of the human spirit in overcoming unimaginable challenges. His memoir explores the pain of statelessness and the quest for recognition. This poignant memoir is a testament to the resilience of refugees and a call to action for justice and equality.

At the heart of *Born to Struggle* lies the exploration of deprivation and denial, manifesting in the characters' material, emotional, and existential struggles. Noor vividly depicts the stark realities of material deprivation. The protagonist's lament captures the perpetual hunger and despair that define the lives of the impoverished. The recurring motif of scarcity underscores how deprivation transcends mere lack of resources, becoming a chronic condition that robs individuals of dignity and hope.

Noor explores the societal denial of opportunities and rights, particularly for those born into marginalized communities. He highlights how structural inequities predetermine the fates of the underprivileged. The systemic refusal to acknowledge their humanity is a recurring theme, reflecting how societal structures perpetuate exclusion and invisibility. In this context, I think, the most significant contribution made by Noor for his community is digitisation of the Rohingya language, which might have gone neglected

and died in the course of time, with its users.

I have made the word processor freely available on the Internet and today it is possible for Rohingyas anywhere to correspond on the cyber world... Being a Rohingya, if you want to speak other languages, that's fine, but your mother tongue should always be used. (159).

Noor employs a range of narrative techniques to deepen the emotional resonance of the text and underscore its themes. The characters in *Born to Struggle* are not mere victims but complex individuals grappling with their circumstances. Noor uses their voices to articulate broader social critiques. Noor's vivid imagery brings the harsh realities of deprivation to life. Despite this, he voices the indomitable essence of the Rohingyas in the following lines:

I have never sunk into self-pity and never asked for refugee privileges. I have consistently refused to be a refugee in heart and mind. And I believe that I have as much right to walk upon this earth as any other person (203-4).

Throughout the narrative, moments of fleeting hope are juxtaposed with overwhelming despair, heightening the narrative's emotional impact. For instance, a scene in which children briefly rejoice over a simple meal is followed by the stark realization of their precarious future.

*Born to Struggle* is not merely a story of personal hardship but a powerful critique of systemic injustice. Noor addresses the interconnectedness of race, class, and geography in perpetuating cycles of deprivation. He proclaims:

Our introduction was through our suffering at the hands of a brutal state machine that wished to remove our existence entirely from the global consciousness. But our history as a people, though not well known, cannot be erased so easily (xi).

The narrative critiques the apathy of privileged classes and institutions. A government official's dismissive remark, "These people are used to suffering" (26) underscores the normalization of inequality and the dehumanization of the poor.

Noor's literary craft is a key strength of *Born to Struggle*. His evocative language and nuanced storytelling elevate the narrative from a mere tale of hardship to a universal meditation on resilience and injustice. Although rooted in a specific socio-economic context, the themes of deprivation and denial resonate globally. In a way, Noor shares experiences of marginalized communities worldwide. His ability to evoke empathy through his characters is unparalleled. The raw pain in certain lines leaves a lasting impression on the reader, compelling reflection on the cyclical nature of poverty.

All in all, Muhammad Noor's *Born to Struggle* is a prototypical portrayal of

deprivation and denial, offering an unflinching look at the systemic forces that perpetuate inequality. Through its evocative language, complex characters, and incisive social critique, the narrative challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about poverty and exclusion. While its relentless focus on despair may polarize some audiences, the work's emotional depth and universal relevance ensure its place as a significant contribution to contemporary literature on social justice. What matters most for me, as a reader-researcher, is the fighting spirit of the author and the community he represents, coupled with an innate awareness of the *here and now* as well as wisdom to act for the *there and then*. The concluding paragraph of this account bears evidence to this:

We are a people without options and solutions. We cannot afford to wait forever for the generosity of the Burmese government or the international community while we are left to rot in statelessness. We have to take a slow and painful process of rebuilding ourselves, of reviving our fortunes, and of laying the foundation for our next generation. (208)

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