

136: I AM ROHINGYA

By Saiful Huq Omi

Schilt Publishing, 2018

144 pages | \$50

*they're tryin' to take away my pride
by stripping me of everything I own
they're tryin' to hurt me inside.*

Saiful Huq Omi's book of black and white photographs, *136: I am Rohingya*, evokes the above lyrics from Tracy Chapman's hit song, *Born to Fight*. This reflection follows the May 2012 experience in Myanmar when three Rohingya men allegedly raped and bludgeoned to death a 27-year-old Buddhist woman from the Rakhine State. Subsequently, revenge killings and persecution led to 136 Rohingya attempting to cross the border in transit boats to neighboring Bangladesh. Unfortunately, these desperate refugees were denied entry and forced to return to Myanmar with many permanently disappearing in the process.



As a people, the Rohingya became a controversially hated ethnic tribe following colonization's interruption of Myanmar's social order, according to Tomás Ojea Quintana in the book's foreword. Later, the people were rendered stateless and became "illegal immigrants" devoid of civil liberties in Myanmar and many parts of the world. Omi's book of photographs features the mundane daily life of the Rohingya in refugee camps around Bangladesh. The photographer's roving eye for the dynamism of composition interprets the cruel persecution of the people whose origin and existence remain desperate and denied while the world watches.



Anwara Khatun (pseudonym) with a photograph of her stepfather, who tried to rape her on several occasions. On each occasion, Anwara's mother saved her and eventually her stepfather killed her mother. A case has been filed against him for the murder of her mother but he has not yet been arrested.

This book with accompanying text, and a poem by Bina Sarkar Elias, *136: I am Rohingya*, condemns the blatant abuse of the Rohingya. It depicts the inhumane, shameful, and brutal acts revisited on their physical body and psyche.

Imitating charcoal and wash drawings with strong tonal effects, Omi's images show this poor society's contact with water, humble commercial and recreational activities, and the attempt to ease the pangs of oppression. For example, a series of photographs captioned *Fenced in, broke out. Broke in, fenced out* portrays a family climbing over the barbed-wire border fence in the dead of night. One chilling print shows a little girl looking straight at the viewer while enveloping a strand of fence wire in the palm of her tiny right hand. According to Omi, the border police arrested the girl's entire family as soon as they entered Bangladesh and quickly pushed them back to the cauldron of Myanmar.

An eclectic array of posed and spontaneous photographs foregrounds the shocking representation of the cruelty imposed on the purported "other." The subject matter of these images includes soldiers and the police with guns, almost nude, tortured bodies, and scenes exploring the Rohingya's spiritual dimensionality. For example, in an image captioned *Look in me. Be my silent*, Omi depicts Hasina Begum with her mutilated, scared bare back facing the viewer. According to the caption, Begum sells sex for survival after being shot in her back by the police as a little girl, raped several times as a teenager, and then as an adult, sold to a Bangladeshi man for \$10.

These emotionally-laden but aesthetically pleasing compositions portray sexual violence, exploitation, extreme emotions displaying personal troubles, decaying, sick, and abused human flesh. As a result, the forceful compositions veer towards the fault lines of the controversy over images that employ aesthetics to represent the horrendous and abject body. This is most apparent in the image captioned *Ali Mia suffered from an 'unknown' disease*. Omi's troubling composition depicts the half-dressed Mia sitting on a mat, bending forward, with his back facing the viewer. The composition positions his ailing body to reveal emaciated rib bones and vertebral column consumed by the 'unknown' illness. Omi writes that Mia waited to die in Bangladesh after he was refused medical attention because of his Rohingya identity.

Some images also seem to straddle the line between documentary and fine art photography while depicting the people's emotions in worship as they cry and smile. Generally, these compositions contrast symmetrical and asymmetrical lines enclosing substantial tonal variations to frame normalized scenes of human suffering.

In this book, Omi expresses his commitment to human rights through visual narratives encapsulating photography, film, and television. Covering a ten-year journey from 2008, documenting the life and struggles of the Rohingya in Bangladesh, *136: I am Rohingya* is an essential addition to activism against human rights abuses, but also forms part of the aesthetics that beautify wretchedness.

—Kolodi Senong