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Rohingya Muslims in Malaysia: Finding (Imperfect) Heaven in Polymedia

Eva F. Nisa

Abstract

The condition of Rohingya Muslims, who for decades have faced a humanitarian crisis, especially in their homeland of Rakhine State, Myanmar, has attracted international attention and sympathy. This article focuses on Rohingya Muslims living in a transit country, Malaysia. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Malaysia between 2015 and 2017, this article examines the efforts of Rohingya Muslims to reestablish familial bonds with relatives with whom they had lost touch as a result of a series of crises. The article analyses the role of polymedia in the life of Rohingya Muslims, particularly the impact of polymedia among youth and activists who centre their efforts on Rohingya Muslims. The article expands on the available work regarding the use of communication technologies in times of crisis by focusing on the ways in which young Rohingya Muslims use communication technologies to amplify their voices and establish a connected presence in their distributed and disrupted family lives. By claiming their place in a polymedia-rich environment, young Rohingya Muslims have found a "virtual heaven"—albeit an imperfect one—by embracing the freedom to use their voices through a wide variety of communication technologies. Living in their country of asylum, Malaysia, they can play a significant role as bridging agents who both raise awareness of the plight of Rohingya in Myanmar and work together with those living in resettlement countries to solve the complex problems arising from persecution, displacement, and statelessness.

Introduction

On December 4, 2016, Islamic nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), led by the Islamic Da'wah Foundation Malaysia, organised a rally in Malaysia against the Myanmar government's treatment of Rohingya Muslims. At this rally, the then prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, addressed a statement to Myanmar's state counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, in which he condemned her government's treatment of the Muslim Rohingya minority. The rally focused the attention of Malaysians on the fate of Rohingya Muslims. Before an audience of 5,000 people that included both Malaysians and Rohingyas, Razak said: "The world cannot sit by and watch genocide taking place" (Rozanna Latiff, December 3, 2016, "Malaysian P.M. Urges Intervention to Stop 'Genocide' of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims," Reuters). The crowd, including the Rohingya refugees and activists in attendance, received Razak's statement with enthusiasm.

Prior to the release of an official statement by Razak and his foreign ministry, which stated "The fact that only one particular ethnicity is being driven out is by definition ethnic cleansing" (Al Jazeera, "Malaysia: Myanmar Pursues Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya," December 3, 2016), much of the Malaysian public had been indifferent to the fate of Rohingya Muslims in both Malaysia and Myanmar. While the Andaman Sea crisis in 2015 prompted Malaysians, particularly the elite, to express their solidarity regarding the condition of Rohingyas, which resulted in Malaysians offering humanitarian assistance and temporary shelters (see McLeod et al., 2016; Petcharamesree et al., 2016), the Malaysian public in general remained ignorant to the plight of "the largest stateless population globally and one of the region's largest populations of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)" (UNHCR 2017, 34).

During the author's fieldwork in Malaysia, many Rohingya activists asserted that a large number of Malaysians are ignorant of the condition of Rohingyas. They argued that the humanitarian sympathies of Malaysian Muslims are often directed towards refugees from Syria. Records of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), however, demonstrate that there are far fewer refugees from Syria than from Myanmar in Malaysia. By the end of December 2018, Malaysia hosted 163,860 refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR Malaysia 2018). This number included 141,780 refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar, among them 88,880 Rohingyas and 9,800 Myanmar Muslims, along with other ethnicities. There were 22,070 refugees from other countries, including 6,080 Pakistanis, 3,040 Yemenis, and 2,990 Syrians (UNHCR Malaysia 2018).

There have been many studies about the condition of Rohingya people—who are considered "illegal Bengalis" (illegal Bengali migrants from Bangladesh) and excluded from the 135 ethnic groups recognised in Rakhine State and other parts of Myanmar (Charney 2009; Lay 2009; Steinberg 2010; Brinham 2012; Rogers 2012; Kipgen 2013; Zarni and Cowley 2014; Brooten 2015; Kingston 2015). Maung Zarni and Alice Cowley (2014), for example, assert that the Myanmar state has played a significant role in a "slow-burning" genocide that has been happening over the past thirty-five years. They also emphasise that the civilians active in persecuting the Rohingya people have been backed by the state, and Lindsey Kingston (2015) questions the commitment of the international community to helping the Rohingya. Lisa Brooten (2015) describes how reports of violence against the Rohingya people, broadcast through mainstream global media outlets such as Reuters, reflect colonial and neocolonial narratives that frame the Rohingya as victims who need an external saviour. However, online posts have challenged this perception of the Rohingya people as victims by presenting an alternative perspective that emphasises how Rohingya people themselves resist violence (see, e.g., Sai Latt, June 10, 2012, "Intolerance, Islam, and the Internet in Burma," *New Mandala*). Ronan Lee (2014) discusses the position of Myanmar's leaders in regards to the problems faced by the Rohingya and analyses Aung San Suu Kyi's silence.

Some studies have focused on the current condition of Rohingya Muslims in Malaysia, one of the most popular transit countries for Rohingya Muslims (Cheung 2011; Azis 2014; Tazreiter, Pickering, and Powell 2017; Bemma 2018). Avyanthi Azis's (2014) study on the Rohingya in the Klang Valley of the Greater Kuala Lumpur area sheds some light on the condition of the Rohingyas living in Malaysia. Azis argued that the Rohingya

people's long-term residency in Malaysia is unsustainable due to their inability to qualify for citizenship (Azis 2014, 839–40). Tazreiter, Pickering, and Powell (2017) focus on the experiences of Rohingya women in Malaysia and their involvement in decision making related to their migration journey. Little has been written, however, on the role of social media in the migratory path of the Rohingya Muslims seeking asylum in Malaysia. This article focuses on Rohingya Muslim refugees' migratory path through Malaysia as they wait to be resettled to a third state or country that has agreed to grant them permanent residence status, during an era when information and communication technologies are advancing at a rapid pace.

Some scholars have studied the use of advanced technology in sustaining transnational family relations. Some studies focus on long-distance parenting (Vertovec 2004, Madianou and Miller 2012, 2013; McKay 2012, 2018), while others examine how mobile technology can shape and facilitate irregular migration (Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017). In addition, studies on transnational migration have focused on the way the communication technospace facilitates connectedness among individuals who are physically separated (Gomes 2017, 2; Gomes and Yeoh 2018, xii). Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) highlight the notion of "connected presence," referring to a new pattern of connecting people who are physically distant made possible by the growing use of diverse communication technologies (see also Licoppe 2004). Having mainly analysed the use of telephone, email, and instant messaging in their study, Licoppe and Smoreda highlight that technospace has introduced "a new sociability pattern, in which presence is not simply the opposite of absence" (321). "In the regime of 'connected' presence," Licoppe and Smoreda write, "participants multiply encounters and contacts using every kind of mediation and artifacts available to them: relationships thus become seamless webs of quasi-continuous exchanges" (321). Today, connected presence has become easier due to the availability of more diverse social media platforms. The present study illustrates how diverse social media platforms facilitate connected presence.

In the context of forced migration, such as the migration of Rohingya people, scholars have argued that advanced technologies, especially the internet and social media, are "vital tools for well-being" (Wilding and Gifford 2018, 109). Studies often focus on communication technologies, especially diverse social media platforms that are used by youth in the third, or resettlement, country (Wilding 2018; Wilding and Gifford 2018). This article expands on the currently available work to explore the role of advanced technologies used by Rohingya Muslims in the country of asylum. Rohingya Muslims living in Malaysia have used the internet, not only for connected presence, but also to raise awareness of the plight of Rohingya Muslims both internally (among Rohingyas themselves) and externally (in the wider world). Therefore, they have used advanced technology, not only as part of "family practices" (Morgan 2011), but for broader purposes. As mentioned earlier, in the context of transnational family and forced migration, most scholars focus on the use of advanced technology to connect people who are physically distant or to establish connected presence. Studies on how they use advanced technology to raise awareness of their people's plight have been limited.

Drawing on intermittent ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Malaysia, particularly in Greater Kuala Lumpur, between 2015 and 2018, this article focuses on the ways in which

a "polymedia" environment (Madianou and Miller, 2013) benefits users of communication media, assisting them to survive turbulence relating to persecution, displacement, and their general position as stateless people who often have to live separately from their families. Ethnographic data was gathered through participatory observations, interviews, focus groups, and life stories. Twenty-seven Rohingya people, seventeen Malaysians, and nine activists from local and international organisations were interviewed for the study. I also analysed secondary sources, such as books, articles, reports, and films from diverse parties. This article adopts Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller's (2013) definition of the polymedia environment as an environment where communication channels proliferate and affect interpersonal communication. In their discussion of polymedia, Madianou and Miller argue that "polymedia is not simply the environment; it is how users exploit these affordances in order to manage their emotions and their relationships" (172). Mediated communication is not only about access and cost but, as Madianou argues, "the theory of polymedia represents an effort to understand media as environments and their consequences for personal communication" (2014, 667). This article analyses the role of polymedia in the lives of Rohingya Muslims living in Malaysia, as well as activists whose projects focus on Rohingya Muslims. Young Rohingya Muslims have found an imperfect virtual metaphorical "heaven" (*jannah*) by embracing the freedom to raise their voices through a wide variety of communication technologies. Living in the transit country of Malaysia, young Rohingyas can play a significant role as bridging agents who raise awareness of the plight of Rohingya in Rakhine State and work together with those living in resettlement countries to help their Rohingya community solve some of their complex and deep-rooted problems.

"Doing" Family through Social Media in the Transit Country

Rohingya Muslims, especially young people in their twenties, use a wide range of social media platforms to establish connected presence. They have used social media to facilitate the "doing" of family (Morgan 2011), as well as to speak out about humanitarian issues in both the virtual and nonvirtual public spheres. David Morgan (2011) argues that family is something individuals "do" rather than "have." His concept of "family practices" holds that family is not a static category defined by residence, blood ties, or legal systems. In his account of doing family, Morgan reasons that "the focus on doing, on activities, moves us away from ideas of the family as relatively static structures or sets of positions or statuses. Family actors are not simply persons defined as mothers, fathers and so on but they can also be seen as 'doing' mothering or fathering" (2011, 6). What stateless refugees like the Rohingya people actually do in families is important. The connected presence they strive to build through the use of the internet is part of their "family practices." Family in this regard does not refer only to a group of people related by blood; people who are not genetically linked may nevertheless "do family" in a virtual context.

The concept of family practices does not mean that nuclear and extended families are not important anymore (see, for example, Parsons 1949). A fluid understanding of family also develops among irregular migrants like Rohingya people in this study who live in countries where it is unlikely that they will be granted citizenship. Rohingya living in Malaysia

often refer to each other using the term "my people." Sometimes they use the term "my Rohingya family" to refer to those related by blood or marriage, or, more generally, to those from the same village in Rakhine State. Additionally, activists often use the term "our Rohingya family" to refer to all Rohingya communities living in Malaysia. Among the Rohingya refugees, the term family has become extensive and flexible, encompassing all people who are connected through a similar fate.

Living close to extended family provides strength to Rohingya refugees during their migration, enabling them to support each other in often strange and challenging environments. However, their status as stateless people—labelled in transit country Malaysia as *pendatang "haram"* or illegal refugees (Amnesty International June 2010, 3)—has occasionally made living closely with extended family impossible. A 2017 study reported that the majority of Rohingya refugees who responded to a survey had chosen to migrate to Malaysia to reunite with their families (Tazreiter et al. 2017, 16–19). However, due to the difficulty of affording rental accommodation, some of them ended up living with anyone who would accept them. It is not unusual for one rented house to be occupied by three to seven families who are unrelated by blood. Unrelated people thus share the same fate: They face enduring restrictions as unwanted refugees who experience physical separation and dispersal from members of their nuclear and extended families. This has resulted in Rohingya communities in Malaysia feeling as if they belong to one large family.

This does not mean that the Rohingya people's emotional relationships with their nuclear and extended families are fading. Here the importance of social media becomes apparent: social media not only produces and reproduces a transnational "family imaginary," but also reinforces the feeling that transnational family bonds remain strong. Scholars of migration and the transnational family have argued that technological advances, including the internet and social media platforms, are important in facilitating the maintenance of family relationships and enabling communication among transnational migrants (Wilding 2018, 129; see also Wilding 2006). Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford argue that new media help most transnational families to maintain connected presence and "mediated co-presence," but that "refugee transnational families are a clear exception, with both physical and mediated contact between kin living in refugee camps or in transit remaining limited, if not impossible" (2016, 219). Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford focus on young refugees in Melbourne who use digital media in response to the absence of their family members. They argue that digital media in this context assist young refugees in Melbourne "to construct a family imaginary that serves to sustain a sense of familyhood in context of ongoing separation" (2016, 219). Tech-savvy young Rohingya Muslims in this study experience the same phenomenon. However, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, unlike refugees in Melbourne, do not live in a country of resettlement; Malaysia is not one of the thirty-seven countries of resettlement as recorded by the UNHCR (2019). Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford's study shows that, despite many limitations, young refugees who have been resettled in Melbourne "do not simply accept the disruption of their families. Rather, some of them use digital media in new and innovative ways" (2016, 224). Wilding argues that "cyberspace and virtual communications provide a useful addition to family practices" (2006, 138). Similarly, this study reveals how young Rohingya living in Malaysia use digital media in innovative ways to conduct family practices. Rohingya youths' family

practices, however, extend beyond striving to maintain and sustain their connections to immediate and extended family, to also helping the broader family of Rohingya across Malaysia and the world. This article's case studies of Sharifah Shakirah, a popular young female Rohingya activist in Malaysia, and the journalists of RVision provide examples of how Rohingya youths have used social media campaigns to generate awareness of the plight of Rohingya Muslims, highlighting it as an international issue. This, in turn, has positioned Rohingya youths in Malaysia as key bridging agents connecting Rohingya people in Rakhine State with Rohingya people in countries of asylum and resettlement.

Rohingya Muslims have found a "virtual heaven" through polymedia. "Virtual heaven" in this context refers to connected presence and to the happiness and pleasure that Rohingya Muslims experience through using various communication technologies to ease problems their families experience on their journey to permanent countries of settlement. Having been inspired by Madianou and Miller's (2013) study of polymedia, this article offers an expanded view of the role of polymedia, illustrating how polymedia can support a variety of communication media users as they assume different roles. For example, polymedia enables the young activists of RVision to act as both consumers and producers of communication technologies. Young Rohingya Muslim activists are usually well versed in negotiating the different uses of polymedia, because digital literacy and the use of diverse information and communication technologies are important in their everyday lives. This study strengthens Madianou and Miller's argument that diverse relationships can create certain configurations of media that meet the needs of their particular relationships (2013, 179). In this study, we see how young Rohingyas, most of whom have had to live apart from their families, creatively take advantage of the polymedia environment with its diverse configurations of media by creating their own platforms to suit their communicative needs, the resources available to them, and their living conditions.

Rohingya: From Myanmar to Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the main destinations for the Rohingyas. Rohingyas have been present in Malaysia since their sporadic migration started in the early 1970s (Azis 2014, 840). Rohingyas began to arrive in Malaysia in large numbers in 1991 and 1992 (Human Rights Watch 2000). For many Rohingyas who arrive in Malaysia, the country is the imperfect *jannah* (heaven) that they dreamt about when they were trying to save their own lives. Malaysia is a metaphorical heaven for many of them, especially when one considers the situation in Rakhine State, where they cannot freely perform Muslim acts of devotion. In Malaysia, Rohingya refugees are free to express their religiosity. Rohingyas' belief that Malaysia is a sanctuary is also based on cultural proximity, a concept that encompasses many dimensions, including shared histories, common languages, and similar legal environments. However, in the context of Rohingya Muslims in Malaysia, cultural proximity refers primarily to shared religion.

The Rohingya people often have great expectations of what Malaysia can offer them: legal residency, access to affordable health services, protection from persecution, work permits, and study permits. However, these expectations do not take into account the legislative

position of Malaysia. Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Therefore, Malaysia "does not possess a legislative and administrative framework to address refugee matters" (Xiong 2015, 1) and, moreover, it does not have an international legal obligation to deal with refugees; it need not recognise, accept, nor protect refugees.

Quite apart from the fact that Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Malaysian government's attitude toward the Rohingyas is complicated. Domestic challenges have contributed to the Malaysian government's reluctance to provide full rights to the Rohingyas. In addition, ethnic violence has made the government particularly wary in its handling of the Rohingyas. Malaysians attribute ethnic violence between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Malaysia to ethnic clashes between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. In June 2013, ethnic clashes occurred between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in both Selayang and the Klang Valley, Malaysia (Xiong 2015, 3). The Malaysian government believes that this ethnic violence is a potential threat to religious harmony in Malaysia. However, a number of members of parliament from the ruling coalition and the opposition have criticised the government for its half-hearted efforts to help the Rohingyas (Xiong 2015, 3).

Despite their status in Malaysia as *pendatang haram* (irregular migrants) with limited rights, together with the resulting discriminatory treatment from locals (see Azis 2014, 842), most Rohingyas remain thankful to Malaysians for allowing them to stay in their country, at least temporarily as they await resettlement in a third country. Some Rohingya refugees lived in other transit countries, such as Bangladesh, Thailand, or Indonesia, prior to their arrival in Malaysia. Malaysia, for many of them, is their ideal home or imagined *jannah.* The presence in Malaysia of established Rohingya communities—home to people they already know—and opportunities to work in an informal economy helps cultivate refugees' vision of Malaysia as *jannah* (Tazreiter et al. 2017, 8). Many Rohingyas in Indonesia, for example, aim to eventually move to Malaysia. Puan Siti, an activist within the Aram organisation's Rohingya community, said:

> *All of them [Rohingya in Indonesia] want to come here [Malaysia], because they have family and relatives, and also people from their village have been staying here for ages. In Aceh [a province of Indonesia], they are not that happy because they are just by themselves, they have no relatives or people from their villages. (interview with author, November 7, 2015)*

Puan Siti's statement demonstrates the importance of family and community ties to stateless Rohingyas and shows how the Rohingya people negotiate the condition of being physically distant from family, relatives, and friends. Social media plays an essential role in helping them, individually and collectively, to connect the dots in their lives. The Rohingyas have found imperfect virtual *jannah* through polymedia. The next sections focus primarily on the ways in which the Rohingyas, especially youth, make extensive use of polymedia environments to help themselves and their people build connected presence.

Polymedia as Imperfect Virtual Jannah ("Virtual Heaven")

The two cases below, which profile an activist named Sharifah Shakirah and the Rohingya television news channel RVision, chart the trajectories of young Rohingyas as they individually and collectively build connected presence through imperfect virtual *jannah*. Virtual *jannah* signifies the feeling of being "in heaven." Stateless Rohingyas experience *jannah* when they use communication technologies, especially social media. Diverse media platforms have also enabled many young Rohingyas to exercise their agency by generating news and spreading it freely, with relative freedom from government control. Living in the transit country, these young people play a key role as bridges between Rohingya people living in the country of origin—who face continuous discrimination, exclusion, and, most crucially, long-term violence—and those living in countries of resettlement.

Sharifah Shakirah

Sharifah Shakirah is a twenty-four-year-old newlywed Rohingya. She has five brothers and sisters, the youngest of whom is five years old. Her father left Rakhine for Malaysia when Sharifah was two years old, and she moved to Malaysia when she was five years old. She shares that her three-year separation from her father caused her psychological problems and her experience has led her to try to help other Rohingya family members who have experienced separation. The most painful episode in her life was when Sharifah and her siblings and their mother attempted to go to Malaysia to reunite with her father. The boat that transported Sharifah, her family, and another three hundred Rohingya Muslims from her hometown was due to stop in Yangon before continuing on to Thailand and Malaysia. Unfortunately, in Yangon, Sharifah and her family and many others were caught by officers because they did not possess the required documents and were ordered to pay a fine. Sharifah's mother used money she had received from Sharifah's father to release the children. Sharifah said:

> Unfortunately, my mother's money was not enough to release her, too. Therefore, she had to stay in prison for one year [Sharifah tears up]. We were taken by our relatives. We [Sharifa and her siblings] had to stay separately from each other. I was taken by one relative. (interview with author, November 10, 2015)

Sharifah has experienced much turbulence throughout her life, including abuse at the hands of agents on the boat that brought her and her family from Yangon to Malaysia. The agents often beat them, especially when the young children asked for more food. Sharifah recounted:

> Our life was tough at that time [during the journey and until they were reunited with her father]. My mother had to work to feed us. It was tough. But I do not blame my father, because I know that at the time his condition here in Malaysia was also very bad. (interview with author, November 10, 2015)

When I first met her in 2015, Sharifah's father was working at a traditional market and her mother in a grocery store. Their situation had gradually improved since their arrival in Malaysia.

Sharifah is one of a kind. When I first met her, I did not know that she was famous in her community for her humanitarian activism on behalf of the Rohingyas in Malaysia. Her humanitarian activities stemmed, not only from her experience as a refugee, but also from her keen interest in becoming a helpful bridge between Rohingya communities in Myanmar, the transit country of Malaysia, and countries of settlement. She began helping other Rohingyas when she was a teenaged volunteer for relief aid initiatives. In the mornings, she regularly volunteered for an NGO that supported the Rohingyas, and in the afternoons she taught English to Rohingya children. Rohingya children do not have access to public schools in Malaysia and their parents cannot afford to send them to private schools.

In 2015 Sharifah worked for the UNHCR interpreting during interviews with Rohingya people. In this role, she learned about the myriad problems faced by Rohingya communities. Many Rohingya people contact Sharifah when they have problems to solve because they consider her helpful and welcoming to her community. For Sharifah, social media is an important aspect of "doing family" (Morgan 2011). Social media has enabled her to build a connected presence (see Licoppe 2004; Licoppe and Smoreda 2005), not only for her nuclear and extended family, but for her broader Rohingya family. Sharifah mentions that in Malaysia there are hundreds of Rohingya WhatsApp groups. Most of these groups have asked her to join them. She said:

> I understand they want me to be in their groups, but there are just too many. I could not do that. This does not mean I do not want to help them. I am still always available for my people. (interview with author, December 21, 2016)

Lately, Sharifah has tried to limit her focus to issues of Rohingya women and children. She spends her whole day helping her people—meeting them, discussing their problems, and providing them with peace of mind.

The development of a variety of new social media platforms has enabled Sharifah to be strategic in her use of social media, choosing platforms to suit her emotions and needs. Madianou and Miller note that polymedia becomes "part of the control and expression of emotions and in turn of personal relationships themselves" (2013, 178). Sharifah uses Facebook as a tool to raise awareness of the plight of the persecuted Rohingyas. She often shares news stories broadcast by diverse media outlets. In particular, she posts news items produced by Rohingya activists about the plight of the Rohingyas, her activism, and Rohingyas in Malaysia who need emergency help. Sharifah capitalises on her technical expertise, which is cultivated by Malaysia's vibrant social media landscape, and mobilises her international and national networks. She is the agent of her own news on Facebook; she decides what to post and curates the content. In contrast, she uses WhatsApp to gather

"raw" first-hand news and to "consume" the news of members of the groups of which she is a part. In WhatsApp group chat she is able to identify those who need emergency assistance and can then directly contact the individuals concerned using social media features such as WhatsApp voice calls or Imo's chat and instant messaging services.

Sharifah says that social media platforms have enhanced her own personal "family practices." In 2016 the UNHCR resettled Sharifah's parents and siblings in a third country, the United States. Sharifah, who has remained in Malaysia, has had to endure another separation from her family, the longest since her father went to work in Malaysia, leaving Sharifah, then a young girl, in Rakhine State. She was traumatised by this childhood separation from her father, with whom she had been close. The second separation was also difficult; however, social media has helped her overcome difficulties presented by her family's resettlement. Sharifah's experiences may reflect a broader trend; scholars of forced migration have noted that social media plays an important role in easing the trials of forced migration (Wilding and Gifford 2018, 109).

Since her relatives' resettlement in the United States, Sharifah has relied heavily on social media to maintain connected presence with her family there and her extended family in Rakhine State. She is strategic in deciding which media platform works best for her. Sharifah uses WhatsApp to communicate with her families. She recounts:

> Life there [the United States] is not as good as [my family] expected. It is a life-changing experience. My father has to find a new job again ... He does not really speak English ... The society, culture, language are different. I need to make sure I am there virtually to support them. With social media, especially WhatsApp, everything becomes easier and cheaper. (interview with author, December 27, 2016)

Madianou and Miller argue that "polymedia means not just that particular kinds of media become seen as more or less appropriate to certain types of relationships. Most relationships create a particular configuration of media that works best for their particular communicative needs" (2013, 179). Sharifah's experiences illustrate how media can be configured to meet particular needs. As an activist working to improve the lives of her people, she has to deal with a wide range of problems. Therefore, she says:

> I need to be careful when I communicate with my parents in the United States. I need to choose proper media too when I communicate with them. If I am dealing with difficult problems here, then I would prefer not to video call them, because if they see that I am sad, then they will be sadder. Phone conversations are also sometimes tricky because parents can feel what we feel from the tone of our voice. Therefore, texting is sometimes a way out—to make sure that I can still communicate with them even when I have to deal with difficult problems here. (interview with author, December 27, 2016)

Sharifah is emotional when she recounts the difficulties that her family members—and

particularly her father—have had to deal with in their new country. After living in Malaysia for twenty-three years, her father has struggled to adjust. Sharifah says:

> It is very painful to hear his story. His heart is in this country, Malaysia. He has been living in this country for years and years. He has his life in this country. In the States, he needs to build everything from scratch. Malaysia is closer to his heart. I need to be always active in strengthening him. (interview with author, December 27, 2016)

Through WhatsApp, Sharifah has accompanied her father on his journey to integrate into the United States. She could not imagine what it would have been like had her family been in this situation before the era of social media.

Sharifah's story is shared by other Rohingyas living in Malaysia who have experienced separation from their families and have benefitted from polymedia. For example, Zaynab, an eighteen-year-old mother of two whom I first met in early 2015, said:

> When I met you, Eva, you remember I was with my uncle and aunt? They were resettled five months ago. It is tough now. I have family in Rakhine, Australia, and Saudi Arabia. Thanks to Imo [a social media platform that allows texting, voice and video calling] I can communicate with them. We do video calls, because I want to see them. It is cheap. However, I also love to have phone conversations to share more private matters, especially when it is a very sad problem. (interview with author, July 10, 2016)

Video calling is popular among the Rohingyas. Many of them feel relieved when they are able to see their loved ones on screen. Zaynab said, "It is already heaven, even if I can only see them via my mobile screen." Hasan, Zaynab's husband, added:

> Before this [the presence of social media platforms like Imo] it was very difficult to communicate with families. We did not even know where they were. Now, with this cheap means of communication, it does not only help us to communicate with them but also to find our families. We can spread the news from social media groups if we are looking for our relatives. Alhamdulillah [praise be to God]. This is amazing (wiping his tears). (interview with author, July 10, 2016)

Social media has helped Zaynab and Hasan, not only to feel a connected presence, but also to become a bridge between those who live in a third country and those who are still in Rakhine. Yasin, a twenty-eight-year-old male refugee who is part of Aram, shared his thoughts on Rohingya WhatsApp groups:

> We feel more connected now with the presence of these [WhatsApp] groups. If we have problems, we feel like we are not alone in facing this. We can share our problems with our friends here in Malaysia. (interview with author, July 9, 2016)

Yasin's experience reveals the important role that social media plays in the lives of those who reside in a transit country without knowing when they will be resettled in a third country. Their precarity makes them vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse by police and immigration officials, who often arrest them because of their uncertain legal status (see also Tazreiter et al. 2017, 9). Moreover, as *pendatang haram* (irregular refugees), they experience the prejudice of the larger community in Malaysia. Social media platforms that enable refugees to connect with their larger Rohingya families serve as imperfect virtual *jannah* that strengthens Rohingya solidarity.

It is important to note, however, that not everyone in Rohingya communities can experience the full benefit of emerging technologies. Wilding and Gifford, in their work on young people from refugee backgrounds who live in Australia, argue that "it is essential to recognise the digital divide that continues to have an impact on who is able to participate in this social space and how" (2018, 124). The extent of the digital divide became apparent to Wilding and Gifford when participants in their studies "did not use social media to effectively communicate with their peers in refugee camps, or with older members of their families" (2018, 124). Among the Rohingya, there are many people who are illiterate, particularly in the older generations. It is difficult for the elderly to understand how technology works. Therefore, the older generations usually gain most from voice and video calling, as well as news clips posted on diverse platforms, and they derive less benefit from text-based social media. Digital literacy in this context not only encompasses access to technology, but also the cognitive skills to use advanced technology. Digital literacy is the key to enjoying the full benefits of online media. Rohingya youth play an important role in educating their communities, including the older generations. The following section discusses how Rohingya youth use social media to raise awareness of the conflicts in their homeland.

RVision

Rohingya Vision TV (RVision) is the world's first Rohingya television news channel. Its correspondents are citizen journalists, not professional reporters. RVision strengthens the solidarity and sense of belonging in the large family of Rohingya that is scattered throughout Rohingya people's country of origin, countries of transit, and countries of settlement. RVision was founded in April 2012 through the initiative of young Rohingyas residing in Saudi Arabia. Initially, RVision was only an internet news channel. In October 2016, RVision satellite television channel was launched; however, it is only available in Saudi Arabia. People who live outside Saudi Arabia can access news from RVision through social media outlets, such as Facebook, YouTube, and WeChat. RVision focuses on broadcasting news programs that relate to issues facing Rohingya people around the world, including those still in Rakhine. RVision's news broadcasts are available in four languages: Rohingya, Burmese, English, and Arabic.

One year into its operation, RVision began collaborating intensively with the Rohingya community in Malaysia. RVision's links to Malaysia were cultivated by M. S. Anwar, Sharifah's husband. M. S. Anwar and his team began to build a website for RVision in

May 2013. From its establishment to early 2017, RVision depended for its survival on the financial assistance of Rohingya businessmen living in Saudi Arabia. At the time of writing this article, RVision employed fourteen staff members in Malaysia, all of whom were Rohingyas in their twenties whose earnings were below Malaysia's minimum wage standard.

Rohingya youth in Malaysia are as creative in their use of polymedia as are the young Malaysians who use social media to mobilise for Bersih rallies—democratic protests where they demand electoral reform, including free and fair elections (see M. Lim 2016; J. Lim 2017). The young Malaysians of the Bersih movement have found social media particularly useful in "planning and mobilising the rallies as well as expanding and sustaining the movement" (M. Lim 2016, 5). Social media offers a space where young Malaysians can escape the "government's control over public gatherings in physical spaces" (M. Lim 2016, 5). Like the young Bersih activists, RVision activists have also made extensive use of the polymedia environment to help their broader Rohingya family and to work toward ending their persecution.

The RVision case study reveals how Rohingya youth use digital technologies to help their people. RVision brings together young, digitally literate Rohingyas who aim to provide accurate coverage of the conflicts happening in their homeland. Striving to share the stories of Rohingya people who have first-hand experience of persecution in Rakhine State, RVision is an agent of counter-narratives that challenge the news produced by the Burmese government. They believe that their reports and news are more reliable than those produced by the mainstream media. This is crucial for them, because they contend that Rohingya people have been misrepresented by the mainstream media. In conflict zones, activists rely on citizen journalism to advance their goal of improving the condition of their society. In the case of RVision, citizen journalism assists the Rohingya family (in its widest sense). M. S. Anwar argues:

> *We cannot rely on the mainstream media anymore because they are agenda driven, so we take to social media to express what really happens in there [Rakhine State]. (interview with author, December 21, 2016)*

RVision's efforts to deliver another side of the story for the Rohingya family have been praised by international media broadcasters. Al Jazeera and the BBC have distributed news produced by RVision (interview with M. S. Anwar, December 21, 2016).

Communication media—and particularly social media—is the backbone of RVision. Were it not for social media, RVision would not have been able to fully realise its aim to circulate genuine stories from Rohingya people's homeland. With the help of social media, the young Rohingyas behind RVision have become both bridging agents between Rohingya communities and active producers of fair, balanced news. It is also through social media that they serve as the distributors of this news. M. S. Anwar explained how his team works:

> *Our people, they work as citizen journalists. We have correspondents in Rakhine state. Two to three people in each village. Usually, the moment*

we get the report from the mainstream media of the state, we verify with our correspondents there whether these things happened or not. If so, how? We use social media to communicate with our correspondents, in particular, WhatsApp, WeChat, Viber, and Imo. (interview with author, December 21, 2016)

I visited the RVision office in Kuala Lumpur, where the staff showed me RVision's WhatsApp groups. Each group covers a different locality. One RVision journalist, Arifa Sultana, explained:

We have separate groups for each area. Each village has its own group. For example, in this group [showing me a WhatsApp group on her mobile phone], there are Rohingyas living in transit countries and resettlement countries; there are three local Rohingyas from Maungdaw who participate in this group. We really depend on them. If they do not send us their reports, how can we see the real things which happen there? They take the pictures and send them to us. (interview with author, December 21, 2016)

RVision's use of WhatsApp is similar to Sharifah's. In the early stage of the news-gathering process, RVision is a consumer of news that it receives from its correspondents through WhatsApp. Their news follows a trajectory, moving from the country of origin to the transit country and then to diverse countries of settlement and beyond. However, RVision's news does not necessarily follow a linear path of dissemination, because, as M. S. Anwar mentioned, for the sake of their own Rohingya community, RVision feels obliged to fact-check the news produced by mainstream worldwide media outlets.

The status of the Rohingyas as stateless people in their homeland, together with the constant persecution they experience, prevents RVision from freely covering the news. RVision journalists understand these limitations. RVision does not insist that its correspondents in Rakhine produce as polished and comprehensive reports as journalists are able to secure in more peaceful areas in the world. Because they are under government surveillance and prohibited from covering the news, RVision's correspondents cannot use professional cameras in the field. As a consequence, the photos and videos captured by RVision correspondents on their mobile devices are not top quality, although they nonetheless tell a story. Military surveillance of mobile communications is commonplace, particularly in conflict areas, and RVision is not alone in facing such security issues. Brooten explains that security and safe access to conflict zones are two of the major concerns of journalists working within conflict zones (2006, 364). The Myanmar government has RVision under surveillance because it knows that the Rohingyas depend on it for news, and that RVision provides a different version of news from that of the mainstream Myanmar media. In addition to government surveillance, RVision correspondents also face travel restrictions. In 2001 the Myanmar government introduced a regulation limiting travel beyond state borders to those who have a travel pass. Obtaining travel passes is extremely difficult, due to their high cost (Minority Rights Group International 2019).

The Rohingya youth behind RVision strategically use the supportive, communicative

environment offered by polymedia. RVision journalists understand the different functions of social media platforms and how these platforms can be used to greatest effect. Madianou and Miller state that during the early days of internet-based communication, users of diverse media "switch[ed] between [digital tools] to achieve their purposes: what cannot be achieved by email can be accomplished by webcam, or instant messaging or a phone call" (2013, 175). RVision approaches digital communication just as strategically, choosing platforms based on their ability to support RVision's ambition to act as an information hub for the Rohingya community and the wider public. RVision also selects media platforms according to their potential to cater to diverse segments of its audience. By sharing reports and footage through WhatsApp, RVision's correspondents initiate the early stage of the news-production process. Polymedia has enabled RVision to be the agent of Rohingyas' stories and to navigate the medium that best suits their situation, while allowing them to influence not only the minds, but also the hearts of their audience. M. S. Anwar says:

> *There are lots of things [conflicts and events] which need to be covered. But, at the same time, our human resources are limited. Therefore, we usually choose the most important news to be posted on our website. The remaining news is distributed section by section, piece by piece, by spreading it through Twitter and Facebook. On Facebook, the audience is mostly limited to our Rohingya society in Rakhine and abroad. Through Twitter you can reach the international community within a second. So we use Facebook and Twitter for two different purposes. (interview with author, December 21, 2016)*

RVision realises the Rohingya people's vision of virtual *jannah* by acting as an important bridge that strengthens awareness and solidarity among Rohingya communities living in the country of origin, transit countries, and third countries. Many Rohingyas in Malaysia are thankful for RVision because, through it, they can obtain uncensored information about the difficult situation in their homeland. Aman, a thirty-seven-year-old Rohingya, said:

> *I feel so blessed that we have RVision. This is what we call the solidarity of the big Rohingya family. If we cannot help our people in Rakhine financially, at least we are concerned about their condition. (interview with author, December 18, 2016)*

Many Rohingyas do not speak Malay or English, and some are also illiterate. News videos posted by RVision are these people's primary window through which they can understand the difficult condition faced by their community in their Myanmar homeland and feel connected to the wider diasporic Rohingya family.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the differing roles played by diverse media technologies in the lives of one of the most persecuted people in the world, the Rohingyas. In particular, it has examined digitally fluent Rohingya youth in Malaysia, one of the most prominent

transit countries for Rohingya refugees. The communication technospace, especially the polymedia environment, has afforded stateless Rohingya people a connected presence that represents a virtual *jannah*. Connecting through social media can be regarded as a "family practice" that Rohingya people follow while physically distant from their immediate and extended families. They choose technologies according to how they suit their emotions and allow them to express their needs for reconnection. For example, Sharifah negotiates polymedia by being strategic in deciding which medium she will use and which works best for a particular context. Her experiences reveal how social media plays an important role in alleviating the trauma and other psychological problems associated with family resettlement.

Malaysia has long been an imperfect *jannah* in the minds of many Rohingya Muslims. Influenced by the cultural proximity of Malaysia and Rakhine State, Rohingyas in Myanmar often picture Malaysia as a place of sanctuary. However, there is often a discrepancy between the expectations held by Rohingya refugees before they enter the country and the reality of the treatment they receive once they arrive. Struggling to cope with the number of asylum seekers crossing its borders, Malaysia has been unable to meet Rohingyas' high expectations.

This study showcases how young, media-literate Rohingya Muslims in Malaysia serve as important bridging agents who support their Rohingya communities. Despite all the limitations they experience living in a transit country and their plans for onward migration, Rohingya people find that they are well placed in Malaysia—with its long-established Rohingya communities—to link Rohingya people who still live in the country of origin with Rohingyas in other transit countries (such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Thailand) and in resettlement countries. Young Rohingya Muslims play diverse yet significant roles in helping and supporting their communities.

The cases of Sharifah Shakirah and RVision reveal how Rohingya youth, as tech-savvy bridging agents, creatively use diverse media technologies to exercise their voice and agency. Polymedia has positioned Rohingya youth as the consumers, producers, and agents of their stories. Media technologies have been integral to individual Rohingya people's journeys to find lost family members and the wider family of Rohingyas, to mend hearts made heavy or broken through separation, to raise awareness of the plight of the Rohingya, and to build solidarity and hope.

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