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FROM REFUGEE TO SLUR: ‘ROHINGYA’ AS SIGNIFIER OF OTHERNESS IN EVERYDAY BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, ‘Rohingya’ is increasingly used as a slang insult or slur – stripped of its original meaning and repurposed to signify displacement, marginality and threat. Drawing on Saussure’s semiotics and lived encounters, Galib Mahmud Pasha explores how language reshapes the identity of the Rohingya in everyday discourse in Bangladesh.

On a warm afternoon in mid-November 2024, I was standing near a tea stall in Khulna, waiting for a rickshaw to take me home from work. Two men stood nearby, sipping tea and chatting in bursts of casual laughter. One turned to the other and joked, ‘Tui ekdom Rohingya hoye geli re’ (‘You have turned into a proper Rohingya’), drawing laughter from both. The remark was sharp but ordinary, projected into the conversation as if it were nothing unusual. However, the

word struck me – not as a curious eavesdropper but as a researcher. I was not surprised by the use of ‘Rohingya’ as a slang term; I was concerned about how casually it had been redefined. As luck would have it, the man who had just been mocked became my rickshaw-puller. As we rode, I asked him why his friend had called him ‘Rohingya’. His answer was simple: ‘Ami Khulnar na ... Barishal theke aschi. Khulna amar bari na. (I am not from Khulna; I came from Barishal. Khulna is not my home.) That is why he called me that.’ There was no anger in his voice, only a quiet resignation to a label that no longer carried its original meaning.

The interaction stayed with me; a term meant to describe one of the most persecuted communities in the world had now come to signify someone who was merely from elsewhere. If internal migration – from Barishal to

Khulna – could invite such a label, what of those who had crossed international borders in search of safety? The word ‘Rohingya’, in this local context, was no longer a descriptor of a real, suffering people. It had become a shorthand for displacement, poverty and otherness.

This is where the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure offers a powerful lens. Saussure argued that language comprises signs, each consisting of a signifier (the word or sound) and a signified (the idea or concept it refers to). However, crucially, the relationship between these two elements is arbitrary and socially constructed. Words do not have fixed meanings; they shift as societies reassign what they stand for. The term ‘Rohingya’ once signified a community fleeing ethnic violence in Myanmar. In parts of Bangladesh, its signified has changed – through repetition, humour

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and casual insults. It no longer denotes only a stateless refugee. It connotes someone unwanted, someone not quite belonging to the place.

This transformation reveals more than just a change in vocabulary. It signals a shift in how identity is perceived and constructed through everyday language. A legal category born of international protection has been re-signified in tea stalls, markets and communities to mean something undesirable. At the same time, this re-signification, subtle as it may seem, carries with it a form of symbolic violence — one that makes it easier to marginalise, ignore or even dehumanise those who carry that identity.

This was not the first time I had encountered identity being reshaped by language. I recalled a part of my own childhood village known as ‘refugee para’. The name itself marked it as different — an area inhabited by Muslim families who had crossed the border from India during the partition of India in 1947. Though they shared language, religion and culture with the rest of us, they were still called ghoti — a term used to denote origin (from West Bengal) but often delivered with a sneer; similarly, those who migrated from East Bengal were called bangal in West Bengal.

These were not just identifiers; they became slurs uttered to remind people of their displacement. It struck me then that refugee identity had long been entangled with stigma. The term ‘refugee’ might appear neutral in legal documents and humanitarian declarations but it often mutates in lived experience. It becomes slang — a shorthand. A wound reopened through laughter, gossip or insult. Saussure’s insight — that meaning is produced not by any inherent quality of the word but by its position within a structure of signs — felt painfully apt.

When a community loses control of how its name is used, it also loses control of its place in the social imagination. The Rohingya community faces this loss in multiple layers. Stripped of citizenship in Myanmar and forced into exile, they have been rendered stateless not just by law but by language as well. In Myanmar, they are deliberately called ‘Bengali’ to imply foreignness, erasing their centuries-old presence in Rakhine. In Bangladesh, while initially welcomed on humanitarian grounds, public sentiment has gradually shifted. Media narratives, political rhetoric and economic anxieties have reshaped the identity of the Rohingya from a symbol of suffering to one of strain — on

resources, order and national belonging. The everyday use of ‘Rohingya’ as slang reflects this more profound shift. It marks a transformation in meaning that cannot be separated from power. When words change, they do not just reflect how people think — they shape how people behave. Moreover, when a refugee identity becomes a casual insult, it erodes empathy. It makes neglect seem reasonable, and exclusion seem natural.

In many ways, the re-signification of ‘Rohingya’ mirrors what happened to earlier waves of displaced people across South Asia. However, there is a difference. The Rohingya crisis unfolds in an age of 24-hour media, algorithmic amplification and rising nationalist rhetoric. The spread of the term as a slur and its impact are accelerated. It does not take a political speech or a newspaper headline to distort meaning anymore. A joke at a tea stall is enough. A whisper in a crowded market can carry the same weight as a broadcast. This is why semiotics matter not only in classrooms but also in alleyways, rickshaws and refugee camps. They enable us to ask not just what words mean but how they mean — and who gets to decide.

■ Source: blogs.lse.ac.uk