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The Dominant Discourses of Refugees, Recognition, and Othering in Malaysia: Regimes of Truth versus the Lived Reality of Everyday Life

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Abstract

Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention and protocol, and, therefore, the Malaysian state does not recognise refugees as such. Refugees in Malaysia rely on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for recognition and on the Malaysian authorities for tolerating them. Malaysia is a multicultural country, which prides itself on the multiplicity of ethnic and religious identities, yet also struggles with such internal diversity. As a result, newcomers, such as refugees, are usually cast into subjectivities that either align or juxtapose with a particular Malaysian identity. In addition, the socio-legal indistinctiveness of refugeeness in Malaysia has resulted in several regimes of truth that capture refugees of varying religious and ethnic backgrounds differently. This paper will unravel the current discourses that engage refugees based on their ethnic and religious background differently. The paper also demonstrates ways and practices refugees themselves employ that circumvent, challenge, and acquiesce to these discourses.

Keywords: refugees, Malaysia, refugeeness, othering, multiculturalism, UNHCR, Rohingya, ethnicity, religion, government

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.
W.H. Auden

Refugees and Refugeeness: The Power of Words

We all tell stories about our lives; where we come from, who we are, what we want to achieve. Our narrated lives are a rich tapestry of stories, some unravelling over time, well worn by many tellings, whilst others are shining new threads, built upon vivid memories. We weave these stories through our imaginations, our beliefs, our cultures, and experiences to create our life story. Many of these stories are full of the mundane stories of everyday life. One set of stories we are hearing much more of in recent years are the stories of refugees, asylum seekers, and other so-called illegal migrants with a repertoire of stories that are often difficult to understand and engage with. In Malaysia these stories remain hidden and are only slowly coming to the surface. Here, refugees seem part of an age-old cohort of people coming to stay, whilst their political claims to "refugeeness" remain firmly outside the national Malaysian political purview—not least because Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 UN convention on refugees.

The word "refugee" itself is rooted in Old French. The French Huguenot were the first *refugié*; not the first people to flee persecution in their homeland, but the first group we know to whom the word "refugee" was applied. As members of the Reformed Protestant Church of France they were forced to flee France in the aftermath of a lost power struggle with the Catholic majority. They faced persecution and proselytization in the conflict's wake. Many sought refuge (from the Latin *fugere* "to flee") in places close to and far from home. They fled to the United Kingdom, to South Africa, and to the Americas.

In the subsequent period, the word generally meant "one seeking asylum" until 1914 when in the First World War many civilians were forced to flee their homes from aerial bombardment, and refugee came to mean "one fleeing home." With the mass migrations in the aftermath of the First World War, the newly formed League of Nations gave the term "refugee," a formal meaning. In this context, the meaning changed to someone who had been deprived of the protection of their government, but could be identified by membership to specific ethnic or national groups.

Following the Second World War, the meaning of "refugee" changed yet again. This time, however, it was a fundamental shift. Large-scale displacement across Europe saw entire populations shift from one place to another, either fleeing from an invading force or rushing towards it. As a result, over a five-year period the meaning of "refugee" went from being open and flexible in its application to a universal and exclusive legalistic definition.

The Second World War experience led to the creation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950 and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The convention defines a refugee as:

> Any person who, owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.

However, this also means that the term "refugee" did not refer to people fleeing their homeland for other reasons, such as environmental disasters, endemic violence in their society, or displacement due to major infrastructure projects—even though their stories may speak of the same sorts of displacement, flight, and persecution.

Over the last 60 years, "refugeeness" has also been subject to the changing geopolitical landscape of the world and its major powers. B.S. Chimni, an outspoken and well-known Indian legal scholar, has drawn

attention to the changes in refugee policy in the global North towards refugee flows from the global South.[1] The major refugee conventions we have today were drawn up following the Second World War and initially aimed at Europeans fleeing across Europe following that war. The West welcomed refugees in the aftermath of this catastrophe as pawns in an ideological battle with a new foe, the Soviet empire. During the Cold War émigrés were welcomed as a sign of Western supremacy to communism. Chimni argues that during this time the "refugee" image was normalised as a Western, white male fleeing persecution that usually denied him (seldom her) a basic freedom—the West's greatest imagery. Even though the definition was extended in the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which opened up the previous geographical and temporal limitations to include people fleeing persecution the world over, the image of the Western refugee retained validity. As the Soviet bloc imploded, the end of history in sight (cf. Fukuyama),[2] refugee flows changed again. Increasingly, refugees from the global South made their way to Europe, the US, and Australia. By the late 1980s and the 1990s, with conflict erupting at the heart of Europe during the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and conflicts simmering across other parts of the world, the refugee debate was refocused by those arguing that there was now a new kind of refugee who was not only fleeing persecution but also seeking a "better life" in the global North. With this shift came the Northern consensus of containment of refugees and internally displaced persons in the regions and areas they were fleeing from and, at first, fleeing to. In other words, the refugee as pawn of geopolitics changed its meaning. Now the focus has shifted to complex border security regimes that keep refugees further away from the West, rather than helping people flee their "evil" (at least ideologically) homelands.

Today, we use the term "refugee" to define a person who has left their country of origin and who is unwilling to return to it due to a reasonable fear of persecution. Furthermore, someone only receives official status as a refugee after they go through successfully the formal identification processes of the UNHCR and/or receiving countries. In fact, those undergoing this process are now predominantly termed asylum seekers, i.e. those seeking refuge in another country. The act

of seeking refuge is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in Article 14 that "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." This right, like those enshrined in the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, are often in contradiction with increased border security measures operating globally to stop, hinder, and interdict the flow of people across borders.

Malaysia's Refugees

Malaysia's borders remain porous and not well policed. Most of Malaysia's borders are borderlands made up of dense jungle and sparsely populated hinterland. The Thai-Malaysia border has been the subject of recent debate as it is the main conduit for refugees from Myanmar entering Malaysia. In early 2015, authorities on both sides of the border discovered trafficking camps along the border. Several bodies were exhumed, and harrowing tales emerged about the ill treatment of refugees by traffickers. It is not uncommon for refugees fleeing Myanmar or their dire situation in Bangladeshi refugee camps to receive offers of cheap or even free passage to Malaysia. The offer is, sadly, too good to be true. After an unusually arduous boat journey to a southern Thai port and a trek inland to a camp, refugees are then imprisoned and forced to call relatives and friends to pay a ransom for their release. There are numerous reports of rape, abuse, and mistreatment of refugees and migrants in these camps.[3] The Malaysian government's reaction was one reminiscent of recent Western approaches to refugee crises: increase border security to stop people from crossing the border. The then-deputy home minister even reiterated an earlier plan to build a wall along the Thai-Malaysia border to erect a physical barrier against people seeking asylum.[4]

Malaysia is not a signatory to the United Nations refugee convention and protocol. Thus, the Malaysian state does not recognise refugees. Nonetheless, hundreds of thousands refugees live in Malaysia, and many have tried to make Malaysia their home. The UNHCR itself has registered around 150,000 refugees so far, while many others remain unregistered. The vast majority of refugees are made up of refugees from

Myanmar (members of the Rohingya and the Chin are most numerous) with smaller communities from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Yemen, and Syria.[5] This paper interrogates key discourses around what a refugee *is* in Malaysia and how the dominant discourses or regimes of truth capture refugees or, as we shall see, sideline them.

Refugees in Malaysia rely on the UNHCR for recognition and on the Malaysian authorities for tolerating them. The UNHCR in Malaysia is usually invoked as the protector and carer of refugees. This, in the eyes of the government, absolves the Malaysian government from any responsibility and care towards refugees. Yet, the UNHCR is underfunded and provides no financial support or shelter to refugees, relying on local implementing partners to support vulnerable refugees, whilst the vast majority have to support themselves by working illegally in the vast Malaysian shadow economy. They have to find work to pay rent, buy food, and pay for their health care.[6]

Malaysia is a multicultural country, which prides itself on the multiplicity of ethnic and religious identities, yet also struggles with such internal diversity. As a result, newcomers, such as refugees, are usually cast into subjectivities that either align or juxtapose with a particular Malaysian identity. In addition, the socio-legal indistinctiveness of refugeeness in Malaysia has resulted in several regimes of truth that capture refugees of varying religious and ethnic backgrounds differently. This paper will unravel the current discourses that engage refugees based on their ethnic and religious background differently. The paper also demonstrates ways and practices refugees themselves employ that circumvent and challenge these discourses and regimes of truth, while appearing to acquiesce to them.

For Foucault a regime of truth is inextricably linked to the way he sees power operating in society. Foucault saw that power was not unilateral, mono-directional, or even identifiable in particular actions. Thus, Foucault talks of power/knowledge and regimes of truth that operate in sophisticated ways to pervade society:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function

> as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth, the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. [7]

The general politics and regimes of truth are reiterated and shaped by the state and its institutions, civil society, the media, other consumable information systems with which we interact, such as the internet, and a myriad of other discourses and institutions that engage our attention. The refugee discourse in Malaysia is skewed towards two main sources: the UNHCR and the government controlled media. There are few books, novels, poetry, or other forms of cultural products to disseminate information about the lives of refugees in Malaysia. The UNHCR has tried on occasion to fill this void with their very able and active press secretary publishing stories, story projects for their website, and other non-traditional outputs. Some local activists also share stories on Facebook, and a local university project published a few storybooks for the local book market. More influential is the traditional media in Malaysia that has usually republished much of this information, usually verbatim or with minimal reportage about the larger issue at hand, or worse, focussed on the deviant status of being a refugee by labelling them as illegal immigrants and as threats to law and order. The media in Malaysia is largely government-owned or affiliated, and therefore reporting on contentious issues is muted or left to the web-based alternative media. These have been more adept and interested in the well-being of refugees, but their readership remains limited. According to Lee, the alternative media have shown more empathy towards refugees, because they portrayed refugees as victims of both circumstance and the Malaysian government's policies towards them.[8]

The local NGOs, activists, refugees, and locals working with refugees have been most outspoken. Human rights reports from independent human rights organisation Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM) focus on rights and mistreatment of refugees in detention, and reports from health NGOs like Health Equity Initiative focus on the mental health ef-

fects of living as a refugee in Malaysia, while reports from labour rights NGO Tenaganita focus on the effects of refugees' lack of rights in the workplace as well as other types of discrimination and maltreatment against refugees. Lawyers for Liberty, the Malaysian Bar Council, and organisations like Amnesty International focus on the legal aspects of life as a refugee, intervening in the detention of refugees and promoting rights-based education initiatives. Yet, there are few spaces for refugees themselves to voice their opinions and have their issues heard beyond the relatively small and highly controlled civil social space in which the UNHCR, local NGOs, and refugee community organisations operate.

The Dominant Discourses of the Refugee in Malaysia

How do we *know* that someone is a refugee? In Malaysia, the usual answer is to point to the UNHCR as the ultimate arbiter of whether an individual is a refugee or not. The UNHCR in Malaysia decides who is and who is not a refugee. The process to determine whether one is a refugee or not can mean the difference between resettlement in an affluent Western country or remaining in legal limbo in Malaysia. Life-changing trajectories are tied to the outcome of Refugee Status Determination (RSD), yet most refugees never give it much thought in their reflections on life in Malaysia. RSD is a crucial instrument to determine whether one receives the status of refugee and the services that it entails. First and foremost is inclusion in the resettlement quota, which provides several thousand refugees in Malaysia a path to citizenship in a safe third country, such as in the US, Canada, Australia, or the European Union. Those staying behind in Malaysia have to contend with how they are perceived by Malaysians and the Malaysian authorities, who often view them as illegal immigrants, as threats to law and order, or as victims.[9] Lee has done an extensive investigation into the media representation of refugees in Malaysia, which found that refugees in Malaysia are either framed as problems or as victims. Where refugees are represented as problems, the discourse focuses on the need to fix the said problem. Where refugees were represented as victims, it is their vulnerability and helplessness that are highlighted.[10]

The Refugee as Illegal Immigrant

> It's like this. The refugees are categorized as PATI (illegal immigrants), so there is no double standard. The enforcement agencies just do their job. Whatever in the law needs to be enforced… because they are enforcement agencies. Enforcement is harsh duty. So, I think they only do their job (interview with Rohingya refugee community leader 2015).

Since Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN convention on refugees, it does not have any legal protection mechanisms in place for refugees. They are subject to the same penalties and punishment as undocumented migrants and illegal immigrants in the eyes of the legal authorities in accordance with the Immigration Act 1959/63.[11] This makes refugees vulnerable wherever they live as immigrant, and the police conduct regular raids of known refugee neighbourhoods and other places they congregate, especially potential workplaces like malls and construction sites. Asylum seekers and refugees are often detained in immigration detention and can be liable to corporal punishment, such as caning. The Malaysian government pursues a discourse of illegality, which represents refugees as active agents who transgress borders that in turn makes them illegal. The lack of any legal distinction between refugees and other non-citizens has a profound impact on how refugees see themselves. The discourse of illegality has been internalised by many refugees, especially those who have interactions with police, immigration officials, and ordinary Malaysians who tell them that they are Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin or PATI—"foreign visitors without permission," but usually translated as, and used synonymously with, illegal immigrant. The term *pendatang* has special connotations in Malaysia, where nationalist Malay political leaders have invoked the term to designate non-Malay Malaysians as sojourners or newcomers more broadly. This term, then, draws refugees (and other non-citizens) into a political definitional conflict over whose country Malaysia is and should be. Rohingya refugees, because of their looks and language, are usually placed within the Bangladeshi migrant worker category and may find a temporary place within society as a marginalised undocumented worker alongside

those often called by the derogatory "Bangla." Chin refugees, meanwhile, because of their appearance, can find refuge in Chinese neighbourhoods where they are able to blend in. Here, they often rent rooms from Chinese landlords and find work with mostly Chinese employers. This places them inside the contested nation and makes them subjects to questions of who belongs in Malaysia and who is welcomed there, often marred by the politicisation of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia more broadly.[12] Thus the refugee also functions as internal other, much like other undocumented migrants, as potential scapegoat and one that does not disturb the fragile domestic Malaysian power balances between government and opposition, among Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups and between rich and poor Malaysians. Refugees are the Other to all Malaysians equally, without legal status, an ethnic brotherhood, and sufficient financial means to secure a place in the Malaysian nation. This also highlights that for refugees, their status in Malaysia and the hope for social acceptance are always linked to domestic discourses and politics.

The Refugee as Charity Case

> I can understand Malaysia being concerned, because they're inundated with hundreds of thousands of refugees, that they have no capacity to manage or care for. So I'm not one of those people that says 'Malaysia should do this' and all of that sort of stuff. At least they're not kicking them out. At least they're trying to manage it as best as they can with the limited resources that they have. But the thing that impressed me the most is the Malaysian people that have put up their hand and answered the call… thousands of young Malaysians that are actually fighting for refugee issues. You can't ignore human suffering when it's in front of you (interview with expatriate refugee supporter 2015).

Whilst Malaysia is a challenging country for refugees to live in for all these reasons, it nonetheless is seen as an initial safe haven by most refugees.[13] Upon arrival in Malaysia, however, refugees are often disappointed at the lack of support, both from the government and from

the UNHCR. They must rely on local NGOs, ordinary Malaysians, and expatriates for help in raising funds and in running refugee community schools and health clinics. In order to attract attention and funds, refugees are often obliged to fulfill the stereotype of a deserving victim who is willing to accept charity and to acquiesce to being viewed in essentialising ways. Some refugee communities have been more successful than others in presenting their victimhood in ways that arouse sympathy among Malaysians and expatriates.

Alternative Malaysian Refugee Histories

Refugees have, in fact, a long history in Malaysia, even as the experiences of what makes a refugee and language used today to describe them have changed over time. Indeed, Malacca, once a thriving port city and sultanate crucial to trade in the entire region, was founded by a prince who was a fugitive and refugee. Parameswara, or Iskandar Shah is named in the *Malays Annals*, which documents the birth of Malacca, as the prince who founded an empire.[14] He had been on the run before settling Melaka with his followers. There remains much discussion on where and why the prince fled: Tome Pires' account has him fleeing from Palembang in Sumatra, whilst the Malay Annals have him fleeing from Singapore.[15] Yet today, his fame rests on the contribution he made to the founding of Malacca and its successive Malay polities. This means, whilst his origins continue to be debated, the refugee prince's legacy as a state builder remains steadfast. However, in Malaysia the prince's story is seldom discussed in these terms.[16] Parameswara created in Malacca a cosmopolitan polity by negotiation with (and tribute to) local tribes, such as the *orang laut* (sea nomads), and major powers like the Chinese. This example of displacement made good, of the creation of a new, prosperous and open polity in spite of and, perhaps, because of, having fled from another land, could serve as a rallying cry for the inclusion of refugees in Malaysian society. It presents a history of accommodation of traditions, culture and religions in the multicultural polity that Malaysia has continued to be.

The founding of Malacca was only a jumping-off point for the role

of newcomers and refugees to Malaysia. Soon after its founding, Cham political refugees who fled the Vietnamese invasion of the Kingdom of Champa made Malacca their home in the fifteenth century. They were welcomed in Malacca and given important posts in the trading entrepôt.[17] The Malay world as a whole was and continues to be marked by the movement of peoples due to social and political displacement and resource competition. Whether we would call some of these people refugees remains a contentious point, but it is equally important to note the scale of displacement of peoples and their ability to find new homes elsewhere in the archipelago as well as the readiness of others to welcome or at least tolerate their presence in the first instance.

Malaysia thus has, on several occasions, become such a place of refuge. Even in our recent history, Malaysia has provided sanctuary to a variety of peoples, such as Moro refugees from the Philippines, Cham Muslims from Cambodia, and Bosnians from the former Yugoslavia to name a few. The Malaysian government has, on occasion, also given work visas to refugees, such as to the members of the large Acehnese diaspora in West Malaysia in the early 2000s. There is considerable debate about which refugee communities have qualified for such inclusion and why. I have argued that cultural affinity, including religion, is a crucial factor in the provision of protection. But the Malaysian government's approach to providing sanctuary is inconsistent and remains based on what the government calls "humanitarian action on a case by case basis." This works on two fronts for the Malaysian government: "the use of the term 'humanitarianism' appropriates a noble role for the Malaysian government while simultaneously distancing itself from the language of human rights or the rights of refugees and any obligation that the language of rights invokes."[19]

The alternative histories have rarely been invoked and remain what Hage calls "minor realities"—where reality is merely the dominant reality while we are also inhabiting minor realities.[20] These minor realities may haunt the major one and ultimately provide ways to destabilise it.[21] They thus offer opportunities and afford potential spaces to engage these alternatives or minor realities more fully in the future.

The Refugee Speaks

For a long time, Malaysia has stood as a beacon of hope for many refugees from Myanmar. As mentioned above, the Rohingya and the Chin form the most numerous refugee communities in Malaysia. Both have fled Myanmar due to religious persecution. Since Rohingya were denied citizenship by the military junta regime in the 1980s Rohingya have looked to neighbouring countries for refuge. Many thousands live in UNHCR refugee camps along the Bangladeshi border or in Bangladesh proper, some having attained Bangladeshi citizenship in the interim. Others have moved to Saudi Arabia, where a large Rohingya community has found a sanctuary as workers in the Saudi economy, mostly labouring in construction. Malaysia, too, is seen by most Rohingya as a Muslim country in which they can freely practice their religion and live peacefully.[22] The Rohingya remain a severely persecuted minority in Myanmar where Islamophobia and communal tensions have diminished their access to health, education, and personal freedoms, such as the ability to marry or move freely.[23] The Chin have fled to neighbouring India and Malaysia since the early 1990s for similar reasons. They are predominantly evangelical Christians and have faced persecution by authorities in their homelands in the Chin state. The Myanmar authorities restrict their ability to practice their faith, destroy churches and crosses, and the military junta regularly conscripts Chin into portering duties.[24] As a result many young Chin have fled the mountainous Chin state for the cities in India and Malaysia in search of a better life and a place where they can practice their faith freely.

One less well known, but innovative and interesting, activity refugees have engaged in to voice their feelings about being a refugee in Malaysia is poetry. Some refugees have for some time shared poems via Facebook and other internet-based services and in person in readings and oratory community events. In these events poems form a crucial oratory skill to transmit knowledge and emotions and express community sentiment. In 2015 a public poetry slam for migrant workers and refugees was incorporated into the Cooler Lumpur Festival, a hip upmarket festival of culture and ideas held in a new mall on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The Migrant Worker Poetry Competition was held again as the renamed

migrant poetry competition in 2016 held at a separate event at another mall in central Kuala Lumpur. Whilst the competitions attracted mainly foreign workers, not refugees, it nonetheless opened a space in which Malaysians and other non-citizens could meet and hear about what life as a refugee in Malaysia is like. Platforms such as these are high profile in the way that they provide a space for refugee stories to be heard from refugees directly.

Most poetry is still shared online and the following two examples of refugee poetry are from a Rohingya and Chin refugee respectively. Both are written by refugees who have since been resettled to Canada and Australia. The former was shared on a blog on-line, the latter was entered in a Malaysian poetry competition.

"I am a Refugee" by Saiful Rohin

I am a refugee, I love Arakan like my heart,
Rohingya name got entirely mixed with my blood
All the difficulties today in Arakan we face
I know for being from Burma and from the Rohingya race
I am told I have no country now
Please tell me where will I go and how,
I am asked "where are you from?"
My reply is " it's Burma" with a political storm
See, nobody wants us in Asia
It is so difficult to be in Malaysia,
We have no place to stay, nowhere to go
Advise me, being Rohingya what should I do,
Our children are deprived of education
Refugees are always in fear of deportation,
In the jungle we hide,
Here we cannot sleep at night
I know, I know, we have to work with our head and be brave
Or our destination is the boat people's watery grave
I am a helpless refugee, before I say you all goodbye
I swear to God, listen to me, my poem is not a lie!

This poem shares the despair of a homeland lost and the on-going discrimination experienced in Malaysia by the stateless Rohingya. The common tropes of helplessness and truthfulness are mixed to elicit the veracity of the refugee claims as well as the despair experienced in Malaysia. Like in Auden's opening lines of "Refugee Blues" that opened this paper, Saiful speaks to the incongruity of having "no place to stay, nowhere to go," especially in a country that is relatively wealthy.

> "A Refugee's Silent Distress" by Salai Robert Ngun Sang
>
> I cry alone in silence under the endless sky
> I feel so down about my life, so dry and forlorn
> I sit and talk to myself but my lips are not moving.
> Too many times, I think about my life as a refugee
> It makes me wonder where my life is and will be
>
> Taking a deep breath, I often shoot a long sigh
> In despair I shake my head and wipe my tears
> I want to force my eyes shut and go asleep at ease
> But I fear the dreadful dream that haunts my soul
> It makes too many of my nights so unbearable.
>
> I walk around all over the place in search of care
> With my heart so burdened and my soul so weary
> And stepping towards a place that I think is home,
> I look up to heaven and murmur for help in whisper
> But there again appears no hope at all too many times
>
> I kneel down and stretch out my arms in prayer
> I go around seeking someone to share my pain with
> But nobody seems to give heed to my cry in need
> Nobody beside me seems to care about my hunger
> So, still I cry in distress without making a sound.

This poem highlights refugee life as one of sorrow and loneliness and

shows the need for refugee stories to be expressed, shared, and discussed more widely in the refugee communities as well as in the broader society. Refugee voices often reverberate only within the walls of their rooms, not able to pierce the walls to the outside world. Both poems are cries for help, support, and understanding. They are performances geared towards an audience "out there," as yet undefined and unknown.

Conclusion

Refugees in Malaysia remain trapped in representations of their identities that are largely determined outside of their purview or realms of influence. This means that they remain excluded from the processes that determine who a refugee is and what that means in society at large. Refugees are either portrayed as persecuted victims or transgressive agents. In cases of the latter, they are viewed as individuals who choose to leave their home countries in pursuit of a better life, which serves to delegitimise their claims of refugee status. They are viewed as making dubious and largely self-centred choices for themselves or their family to the perceived detriment of native Malaysians, making labels like "illegal" socially powerful. Thus, we see little real basis for their plight as victims and their claims for asylum. Victims, on the other hand, are portrayed as powerless to resist the violent actions of their governments, and their stories are deemed genuine, as they are innocents persecuted by the state and forced to flee. They seemingly have no choice or control, and so Malaysians must help them because they cannot help themselves. Thus they fall into the category of being recipients of charity, according to which they cannot speak for themselves or act on their own. However, refugees exist beyond these two categories. Both Malaysia's own history and refugees' own reflections on their lives through literary forms, such as poetry, open up ways for refugees to connect to ordinary Malaysians.

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