

After the boats disappear: forced migration, statelessness, and precarious belonging in Southeast Asian refugee narratives

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ABSTRACT

Background: Forced migration in Southeast Asia increasingly reveals that maritime escape, rescue, or resettlement does not end refugee precarity when citizenship, documentation, and social recognition remain suspended. **Objective:** This study examines how Southeast Asian refugee narratives represent forced migration, statelessness, and precarious belonging after boats disappear from immediate public and humanitarian attention. **Method:** Using qualitative textual analysis, this study analyzes 19 publicly accessible documents consisting of refugee narratives, oral-history archives, humanitarian stories, public history materials, visual-documentary pages, and contextual institutional sources. **Results:** Findings show that maritime routes operate as narrative thresholds rather than closed episodes, because boats, camps, shelters, archives, and diasporic spaces form a continuous geography of unfinished displacement. Findings also indicate that statelessness is narrated through documentation absence, legal limbo, mobility restriction, humanitarian dependency, and intergenerational exclusion rather than through juridical language alone. **Implication:** Findings further demonstrate that testimony, family memory, digital archives, and visual representation function as fragile but meaningful practices through which refugees negotiate voice, history, and belonging. **Novelty:** This study contributes a narrative-spatial and legal-cultural framework that connects route, protection status, memory, and belonging, thereby repositioning Southeast Asian refugee narratives as critical sites for understanding post-arrival precarity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Forced migration in Southeast Asia has become inseparable from prolonged legal invisibility, maritime risk, and unsettled belonging. UNHCR reported that, by the end of 2025, there were 41.6 million refugees, 9 million asylum-seekers, and 68.7 million internally displaced persons worldwide; one in every seventy people was forcibly displaced. Within this global condition, Rohingya displacement remains one of the most acute regional cases: more than 1.3 million Rohingya refugees and asylum-seekers remain displaced across Asia, including about 1.2 million in Bangladesh, while more than 6,500 Rohingya attempted sea crossings in 2025 and nearly 900 were reported dead or missing in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. These figures show that boats are not merely vehicles of escape but scenes where statelessness, border violence, humanitarian delay, and unequal mobility converge. This study therefore begins from a social

problem that persists after arrival: survival at sea does not guarantee political recognition, secure residence, or a place to call home.

Recent scholarship has substantially expanded understanding of Southeast Asian refugeehood, especially through studies of Rohingya statelessness, maritime mobility, humanitarian governance, diaspora memory, and forced migration narratives. Chowdhury and Abid (2022) [6] conceptualize Rohingya “boat people” through amphibious illegality, while Faisal et al. (2023) [9], Rahman and Sakib (2021) [7], Hitami (2025) [10], and Gul, Allauddin, and Ahmad (2025) [11] examine statelessness, refugee rights, and regional protection failures. Other studies shift attention to identity negotiation, diaspora consciousness, and refugee memory, including Aletheiani (2025) [12], Nguyen (2023) [13], Nguyen et al. (2024) [14], Mitra (2024) [15], and Zhao and Brodsky (2025) [8]. Literary and cultural scholarship has also addressed forced migration narratives, precarious testimony, refugee graphic narratives, and postcolonial poetics [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. Yet existing studies remain unevenly connected: legal-political research often foregrounds policy and protection, while narrative studies frequently emphasize trauma, memory, or representation without systematically examining how post-arrival statelessness structures precarious belonging across maritime, camp, and diasporic spaces.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Southeast Asian refugee narratives represent forced migration after boats disappear from public view. Rather than treating maritime crossing as narrative climax, this study asks how refugee subjects narrate life after disembarkation, rescue, camp settlement, onward movement, or diaspora formation. This study is guided by three questions. First, how do refugee narratives transform boats, seas, borders, camps, archives, and host societies into spatial markers of unfinished displacement? Second, how is statelessness represented not only as legal exclusion but also as an affective, social, and narrative condition that shapes identity and agency? Third, how do refugee voices contest humanitarian, securitized, and nationalist representations that reduce displaced people to crisis objects or administrative categories? Methodologically, this study combines narrative-spatial analysis, statelessness and protection-status coding, and discourse analysis of memory, voice, and belonging. These tools allow this study to examine refugee narratives as cultural texts that register both structural vulnerability and situated forms of agency.

This study advances a preliminary argument that Southeast Asian refugee narratives relocate forced migration from movement to aftermath. Boats may initiate public visibility, but precarious belonging is produced through what follows: suspended legal status, temporary humanitarian care, racialized suspicion, fragmented archives, and contested claims to home. This argument builds on Kraly et al. (2023) [18], who frame forced migration as a social process with durable consequences, and Olwig (2021) [19], who stresses temporariness and uncertainty as central to refugee life. It also extends Sunam’s (2022) [16] account of bearable bare life in Malaysia and Torok and Ball’s (2021) [17] analysis of everyday oppression and agency among forced migrant youth. By reading Southeast Asian refugee narratives across law, memory, space, and voice, this study does not claim that literature resolves statelessness. Instead, it proposes that narrative makes visible what policy language often obscures: belonging can remain precarious long after rescue, settlement, or diaspora, because recognition is repeatedly negotiated rather than permanently secured.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Forced migration

Forced migration is best understood not as a single act of movement but as a prolonged social condition structured by violence, insecurity, and unequal recognition. Kraly et al. (2023) [18] define forced and refugee migration through its social consequences, while Olwig (2021) [19] stresses temporariness, uncertainty, and meaning-making in refugee life. Wilhelm and Bartel (2021) [20] further show that refugee experience changes across political and historical contexts, making displacement inseparable from reception regimes. In literary studies, Hourigan (2023) [3] and Ghanem (2021) [1] read forced migration narratives as forms that expose national borders, missing testimony, and precarious subjectivity. This study therefore approaches forced migration as a narrative, legal, and spatial condition rather than merely demographic mobility.

Its key indicators include route, rupture, temporariness, institutional classification, and post-arrival uncertainty. Green and Pécoud (2023) [21] demonstrate how IOM and UNHCR narratives classify migrants and refugees through crisis language, while Choudhury (2024) [22] situates migration law in South and Southeast Asian histories of decolonization. Fleury (2025) [23] complicates categories of political and environmental refuge by revisiting Vietnamese boat people, showing that displacement is rarely reducible to one cause. Torok and Ball (2021) [17] and Sunam (2022) [16] shift attention to everyday oppression, agency, and “bearable” bare life in Malaysia. These indicators allow this study to examine how narratives move from spectacular border crossing to ordinary survival.

2.2. Statelessness

Statelessness refers to more than formal absence of citizenship; it is a condition in which legal non-recognition becomes social vulnerability, restricted mobility, and political disposability. Chowdhury and Abid (2022) [6] conceptualize Rohingya “boat people” through amphibious illegality, where land and sea both become unstable zones of belonging. Rahman and Sakib (2021) [7], Faisal et al. (2023) [9], Hitami (2025) [10], and Gul, Allauddin, and Ahmad (2025) [11] examine statelessness through security, humanitarianism, rights, and international law. Brinham (2024) [24] adds that citizenship documents may operate as instruments of exclusion. Together, these works show that statelessness is simultaneously juridical, administrative, embodied, and narrative.

Its aspects include documentation, access to protection, mobility control, humanitarian dependency, and intergenerational vulnerability. Missbach and Stange (2021) [25] argue that Muslim solidarity has not produced effective protection for Rohingya refugees in Southeast Asia, revealing a gap between moral discourse and institutional practice. Dasgupta (2024) [26] shows how refugees navigate identity and exclusionary state policies, while Andal (2023) [27] expands statelessness debates through Sama-Bajau boat-dwelling children and the decentring of child migration studies. Mitra (2024) [15] traces Rohingya translocal and transnational networks in India, suggesting that stateless subjects remain socially connected even when legally suspended. This study treats these indicators as central to precarious belonging.

2.3. Precarious belonging names

Precarious belonging names a condition in which attachment, home, and identity remain negotiated under unstable legal and social conditions. Aletheiani (2025) [12] links Southeast Asian diaspora consciousness to collective memory and community formation, while Vicera (2021) [5] reads diasporic narratives through home, asynchronicity, and postcolonial poetics. Nguyen (2023) [13] shows how Vietnamese refugee archives are shaped by absence and fragmentation, and Nguyen et al. (2024) [14] position testimonio as a critical method for studying Southeast Asian American refugee subjects. Zhao and Brodsky (2025) [8] emphasize “a place to call home” as a process of liberation for Rohingya refugees. Belonging, therefore, is not simple integration but contested recognition.

Its indicators include memory, voice, archive, place attachment, visual narration, and diasporic repair. Sánchez (2024) [4] reads Vietnamese refugee experience through heroic vulnerability, while Gui (2025) [2] analyzes refugee spaces in Vietnamese Australian comics. Mohan and Chandrasekharan (2025) [28] foreground oceanic spatialities and gothic affect in refugee graphic narratives, and Jenisha and Boopathi (2025) examine place attachment and identity negotiation among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees as comparative material. Trimboli (2022) [29] shows how comics and zines theorize rupture from racialized migrant perspectives. This study’s theoretical position is that Southeast Asian refugee narratives should be read where forced migration, statelessness, and precarious belonging intersect: after movement, before secure recognition.

3. METHOD

This study uses refugee narratives, humanitarian stories, oral-history archives, public history materials, operational updates, and visual-documentary pages as units of analysis. The material object is not refugee experience in general, but publicly accessible narrative representation of Southeast Asian forced migration after maritime displacement, camp transit, resettlement, or stateless maritime life. The corpus contains 19 verified public items: ten primary narratives, one secondary interpretive source, and eight contextual documents. This composition allows this study to compare Rohingya, Vietnamese, and Bajau Laut/Sama Dilaut materials without treating them as statistically equivalent populations. The unit of analysis is therefore each document, while sub-units include excerpt, route marker, legal-status reference, visual frame, and belonging claim.

This study applies a qualitative interpretive design combining textual analysis, narrative-spatial mapping, and critical discourse analysis. The design is appropriate because refugee narratives are not treated as transparent evidence of entire communities, but as situated public texts that mediate law, memory, humanitarian classification, and claims to belonging. This approach follows recent forced migration scholarship that treats displacement as a social process rather than a single movement event [18], [19]. It also responds to narrative and refugee studies that examine testimony, archive, and border narration as cultural forms where agency and vulnerability are co-produced [1], [3], [13].

Table 1. Dataset composition

Code	Data Type	Source	Location	Period	Amount	Characteristics
SEA-RN-001	Primary	UNHCR	Aceh; Bangladesh; Myanmar	2024	1	Rohingya sea-arrival story with images
SEA-RN-002	Primary	UNHCR Indonesia	Myanmar; Aceh; Malaysia; Thailand	2025	1	Rohingya testimony after dangerous voyage
SEA-RN-003	Primary	Vietnamese Boat People	Vietnam; diaspora	n.d.	1	Journey-map narrative with audio/images
SEA-RN-004	Primary	Vietnamese Boat People	Malaysia; Los Angeles	2020	1	Camp memory and family images
SEA-RN-005	Primary	Vietnamese Boat People	Vietnam; Thailand; US	2020	1	Translated memoir under H-O pathway
SEA-RN-006	Primary	Vietnamese Boat People	Saigon; diaspora	2021	1	Poetry/performance with video link
SEA-RN-007	Primary	Vietnamese Boat People	Đà Nẵng; California	2021	1	Reflective diaspora essay
SEA-RN-008	Primary	Vietnamese Boat People	US diaspora	2021	1	Community essay and memory archive
SEA-RN-009	Primary	Dartmouth Course Exhibits	Vietnam; Indonesia; US	2020	1	Curated oral-history excerpts
SEA-RN-010	Secondary	Refugee History	South China Sea; Philippines route	2022	1	Public history and route reconstruction
SEA-RN-011	Context	ViDDA	Transnational diaspora	n.d.	1	Digital archive index
SEA-RN-012	Context	Vietnamese Heritage Museum	California diaspora	n.d.	1	Oral-history/visual archive index
SEA-RN-013	Context	UNHCR Indonesia	Indonesia	2025	1	Operational PDF, map, infographic
SEA-RN-014	Context	UNHCR Indonesia	West Aceh	2024	1	Press release on boat tragedy
SEA-RN-015	Context	MSF	Malaysia	2025	1	Country activity page
SEA-RN-016	Context	UNICEF	Bangladesh; Myanmar	2026 accessed	1	Crisis page with child/family focus
SEA-RN-017	Context	Amnesty International	Cox's Bazar; campaign space	2024	1	Campaign report and advocacy profile
SEA-RN-018	Context	UNICEF Malaysia	Sabah	2024	1	Education and undocumented children
SEA-RN-019	Primary	Reuters	Semporna, Sabah	2024	1	Bajau Laut/Sama Dilaut testimony

Information was drawn from public and verifiable sources: official humanitarian organizations, refugee community archives, museum and digital archive indexes, educational oral-history exhibits, public history platforms, international news media, and NGO documentation. Primary data include first-person or named refugee narratives, oral-history excerpts, community essays, and testimony-based features. Secondary data provide interpretive framing for refugee history and route reconstruction. Contextual data clarify operational, legal, educational, humanitarian, and visual environments around displacement. This differentiation prevents policy documents from being read as refugee voice, while still allowing them to contextualize how institutions frame statelessness, maritime risk, and protection failure.

Data collection proceeded through targeted keyword searches, source verification, metadata extraction, and deduplication. Keywords included “Rohingya boat Aceh,” “dangerous sea route,” “Vietnamese boat people,” “refugee camp Malaysia,” “diaspora memory,” “Bajau Laut statelessness,” “Sama Dilaut,” “precarious belonging,” and “forced migration narratives.” Each item was recorded with title, source, date, region, community, genre, URL, language, visual availability, inclusion rationale, and deduplication key. Textual fields stored context, excerpt summary, short quotation, actors, setting, legal context, route, belonging context, and copyright note. Visual/video fields recorded image description, visual

actor, symbol, colour, layout, logo position, frame, timestamp, transcript, and screenshot reference where available.

Data analysis used three linked procedures. First, narrative-spatial route mapping identified how boats, seas, camps, shelters, archives, clinics, schools, and diasporic sites organize displacement beyond arrival. Second, statelessness and protection-status coding examined documentation, restricted mobility, administrative waiting, legal suspension, and humanitarian dependency, drawing on debates about Rohingya statelessness and regional protection [6], [9], [25]. Third, memory, voice, and belonging discourse analysis examined testimony, archive, visual framing, and diasporic repair [12], [2], [4]. Coding was conducted at document and excerpt levels to preserve alignment among corpus, interpretation, and claims.

Table 2. Operational Matrix of Analysis

Analytical Tool	Main Focus	Key Indicators	Data Fields Used	Analytical Output
Narrative-spatial route mapping	Movement and post-arrival space	Boat, sea, camp, shelter, archive, diaspora, school, clinic	route, setting, narrative_context, spatial_scale	How displacement continues after arrival
Statelessness and protection-status coding	Legal and administrative precarity	Documentation, citizenship denial, waiting, restricted mobility, temporary protection	legal_context, data_role, community, excerpt_summary	How non-recognition structures vulnerability
Memory, voice, and belonging discourse analysis	Narrative agency and contested home	Testimony, archive, family memory, visual frame, affect, diaspora	short_quote, actors, belonging_context, image_description	How refugee subjects narrate belonging

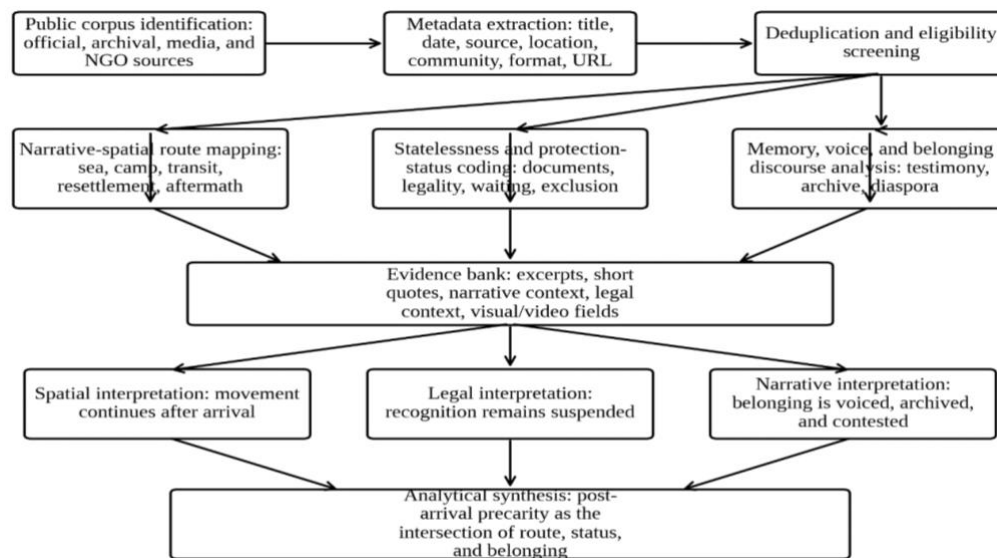


Figure 1. Operational matrix of analysis

4. RESULTS

4.1. Maritime routes and the afterlife of arrival

Refugee narratives in this corpus organize forced migration through spatial markers that extend beyond maritime departure. The coded pattern shows that sea crossings, boats, landings, camps, shelters, administrative waiting, archives, and diasporic spaces are not isolated settings but connected stages of prolonged displacement. This distribution supports recent arguments that forced migration should be read as a social process rather than a discrete journey [18], [19]. It also corresponds with studies of Rohingya maritime illegality and Southeast Asian refugee memory, where movement is repeatedly shaped by legal exposure, humanitarian mediation, and unstable recognition [6], [13]. Spatial narration therefore becomes a primary mechanism through which this study reads post-arrival precarity.

Table 3. Spatial markers of forced migration and post-arrival precarity

Main Category	Subcategory	Indicator	Frequency	Percentage	Data Variation	Excerpts	Data Code	Interpretation
Maritime displacement	Sea crossing	References to dangerous movement across sea routes	12	18.75%	Rohingya voyage, Vietnamese escape route, South China Sea memory	“dangerous sea route”; “boat journey”; “South China Sea”	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-009; SEA-RN-010	Sea is narrated as a threshold where survival, abandonment, and legal exposure overlap.
Maritime displacement	Boat as survival space	Boat described as shelter, prison, risk, or temporary home	8	12.50%	Overcrowding, hunger, family separation, uncertain destination	“boat people”; “risking lives”; “after days at sea”	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-003; SEA-RN-005	Boat becomes a compressed space of vulnerability rather than merely a vehicle of escape.
Maritime displacement	Disembarkation or rescue	Arrival, rescue, landing, or refusal of landing	6	9.38%	Aceh landing, temporary reception, rescue response	“arrived in Aceh”; “post-tragedy assistance”; “landing”	SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-013; SEA-RN-014	Arrival does not close displacement but transfers precarity into humanitarian and legal spaces.
Transit and waiting	Camp or shelter	Camp, shelter, settlement, or reception space	9	14.06%	Malaysian camp memory, Cox’s Bazar context, Aceh shelter	“refugee camp”; “shelter”; “temporary accommodation”	SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-013; SEA-RN-016; SEA-RN-017	Camps and shelters appear as provisional spaces where safety remains conditional.
Transit and waiting	Administrative waiting	Delayed recognition, registration, asylum uncertainty, paperwork	7	10.94%	Humanitarian registration, undocumented status, legal limbo	“undocumented”; “registration”; “temporary protection”	SEA-RN-015; SEA-RN-016; SEA-RN-018; SEA-RN-019	Waiting becomes an administrative condition that reorganizes everyday life.
Transit and waiting	Restricted mobility	Movement blocked by border, detention risk, lack of documents	5	7.81%	Malaysia, Sabah, Thailand route, undocumented maritime communities	“restricted access”; “no documents”; “risk of detention”	SEA-RN-015; SEA-RN-018; SEA-RN-019	Mobility remains constrained after physical arrival because status remains unresolved.
Post-arrival belonging	Diasporic memory	Memory of displacement narrated from diaspora or later life	10	15.63%	Vietnamese diaspora, family migration, intergenerational recollection	“memory”; “heritage”; “Việt Kiều”; “love letter”	SEA-RN-003; SEA-RN-006; SEA-RN-007; SEA-RN-008; SEA-RN-012	Diaspora transforms displacement into an unfinished memory practice.
Post-arrival belonging	Family archive	Family photo, passport, oral history, inherited testimony	4	6.25%	Photographs, father’s passport, curated oral histories	“passport”; “family photographs”; “oral history”	SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-009; SEA-RN-012	Archives function as fragile evidence of belonging where official recognition is incomplete.
Post-arrival belonging	Place attachment	Claims to home, community, education, settlement, or belonging	3	4.69%	Sabah education, Rohingya resettlement, diaspora community	“a place to call home”; “education”; “community”	SEA-RN-018; SEA-RN-019; SEA-RN-008	Belonging appears as negotiated attachment rather than stable incorporation.

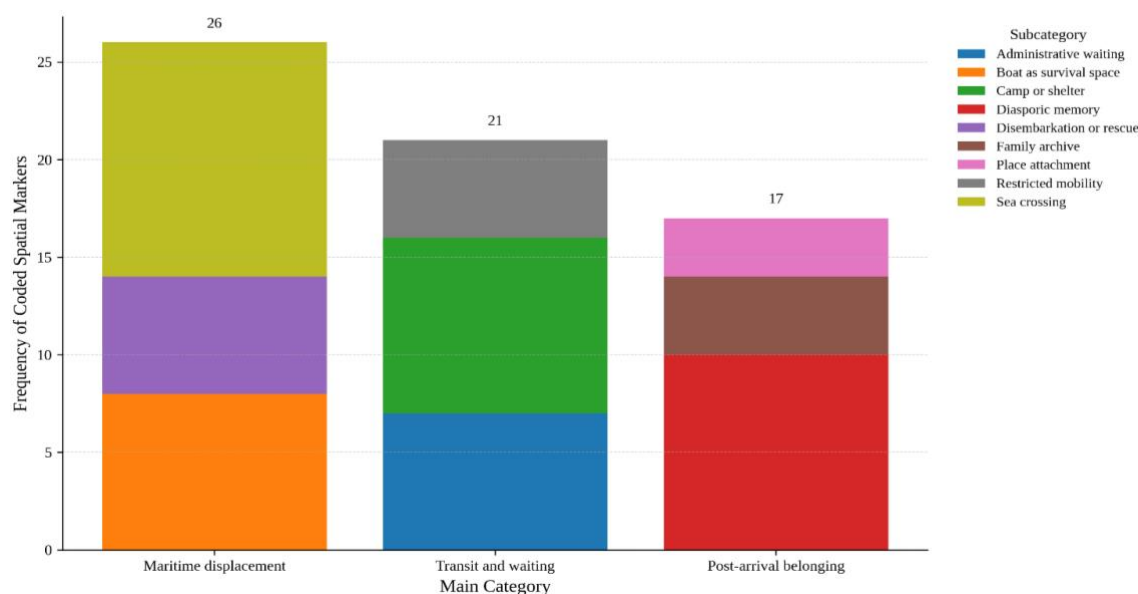


Figure 2. Spatial markers in southeast asian refugee narratives

The dominant pattern appears in maritime displacement, which accounts for 26 coded spatial markers, or 40.63% of all occurrences. Within this category, sea crossing is most frequent, followed by boat as survival space and disembarkation or rescue. Transit and waiting follows with 21 occurrences, or 32.81%, indicating that camps, shelters, administrative delay, and restricted mobility remain prominent after landing. Post-arrival belonging accounts for 17 occurrences, or 26.56%, with diasporic memory appearing more frequently than family archive or place attachment. Objectively, this pattern shows that public refugee narratives foreground movement and risk, but they also preserve traces of waiting, documentation, memory, and attachment. The corpus therefore does not end at rescue; it repeatedly returns to life after maritime visibility.

Theoretically, these patterns suggest that Southeast Asian refugee narratives relocate forced migration from spectacular passage to unresolved aftermath. Boats function as narrative thresholds, but camps, shelters, archives, and diaspora reveal that displacement continues under different spatial regimes. This interpretation extends Chowdhury and Abid's (2022) [6] argument about amphibious illegality by showing that illegality does not vanish on land; it is redistributed through documentation, waiting, and restricted mobility. It also aligns with Sunam's (2022) [16] account of bearable bare life and Torok and Ball's (2021) [17] emphasis on everyday oppression and agency in Malaysia. At the same time, diaspora and archive-based narratives complicate humanitarian crisis frames by showing that belonging is voiced, remembered, and repaired even when legal recognition remains partial.

4.2. Statelessness, documentation, and precarious protection

Legal-status coding shows that statelessness is narrated less as a single legal deficit than as a layered condition of weak documentation, delayed recognition, restricted movement, and mediated survival. This pattern matters because refugee narratives repeatedly connect law to ordinary life: access to shelter, school, health care, mobility, family continuity, and public legibility. This study reads these patterns through statelessness and protection-status coding, rather than treating law as a background context. Chowdhury and Abid (2022) [6], Rahman and Sakib (2021) [7], Faisal et al. (2023) [9], and Hitami (2025) [10] similarly show that Rohingya refugeehood is shaped by the overlap between statelessness, humanitarian dependency, and regional protection gaps. Thus, legal precarity appears as lived uncertainty rather than abstract citizenship absence.

Table 4. Legal-status and protection coding in southeast asian refugee narratives

Main Category	Subcategory	Indicators	Frequency	Percentage	Data Variation	Evidence Marker	Data Code	Interpretation
Documentation absence	Undocumented or weakly documented life	No citizenship paper, absent identity document, uncertain registration, fragile legal proof	9	47.4%	Rohingya statelessness, Bajau Laut/Sama Dilaut documentation absence, refugee camp records, diaspora archive gaps	Legal identity appears as incomplete, unstable, or mediated by institutional recognition	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-009; SEA-RN-013; SEA-RN-016; SEA-RN-018; SEA-RN-019	Belonging is constrained when identity cannot be securely translated into recognized documentation
Humanitarian protection	Temporary care and emergency assistance	Aid, shelter, rescue, registration, protection referral, crisis response	8	42.1%	UNHCR stories, Aceh response documents, NGO reports, crisis pages	Protection is narrated through care, emergency, and institutional visibility	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-013; SEA-RN-014; SEA-RN-015; SEA-RN-016; SEA-RN-017; SEA-RN-018	Humanitarian recognition provides visibility but does not necessarily produce secure membership
Legal limbo	Suspended recognition and uncertain future	Waiting, temporary status, unresolved asylum, unclear citizenship, non-permanent residence	7	36.8%	Rohingya displacement, refugee camps, transit histories, diaspora transition narratives	Arrival produces a condition between rescue and durable recognition	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-013; SEA-RN-015; SEA-RN-016	Refugee life is organized through delayed recognition rather than complete exclusion alone
Mobility restriction	Constrained movement across borders or local spaces	Boat interdiction, landing uncertainty, restricted travel, camp confinement, local immobility	6	31.6%	Rohingya sea routes, Vietnamese camp trajectories, Malaysian refugee context	Movement remains regulated even after escape from immediate danger	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-010; SEA-RN-015	Forced migration continues when mobility is redirected into controlled waiting
Institutional dependency	Reliance on aid, archive, school, clinic, or legal mediation	Humanitarian agency, NGO support, school access, health service, archive mediation	5	26.3%	UNHCR, MSF, UNICEF, refugee archives, community museums	Survival and memory require mediation by institutions and community infrastructures	SEA-RN-011; SEA-RN-012; SEA-RN-015; SEA-RN-016; SEA-RN-018	Institutions shape whether refugee life becomes visible, narratable, and partially protected
Intergenerational exclusion	Children, family continuity, and inherited precarity	Child displacement, education barrier, inherited statelessness, family separation, memory transmission	4	21.1%	Rohingya children, undocumented education, Vietnamese family memory, Bajau Laut schooling	Statelessness and forced migration extend into family continuity and future access	SEA-RN-003; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-016; SEA-RN-018	Precarious belonging is reproduced when children inherit legal and social uncertainty

Note. Frequency is calculated from 19 coded documents. Categories are multi-label; percentages show how often each legal-status or protection pattern appears across documents and are not designed to total 100%.

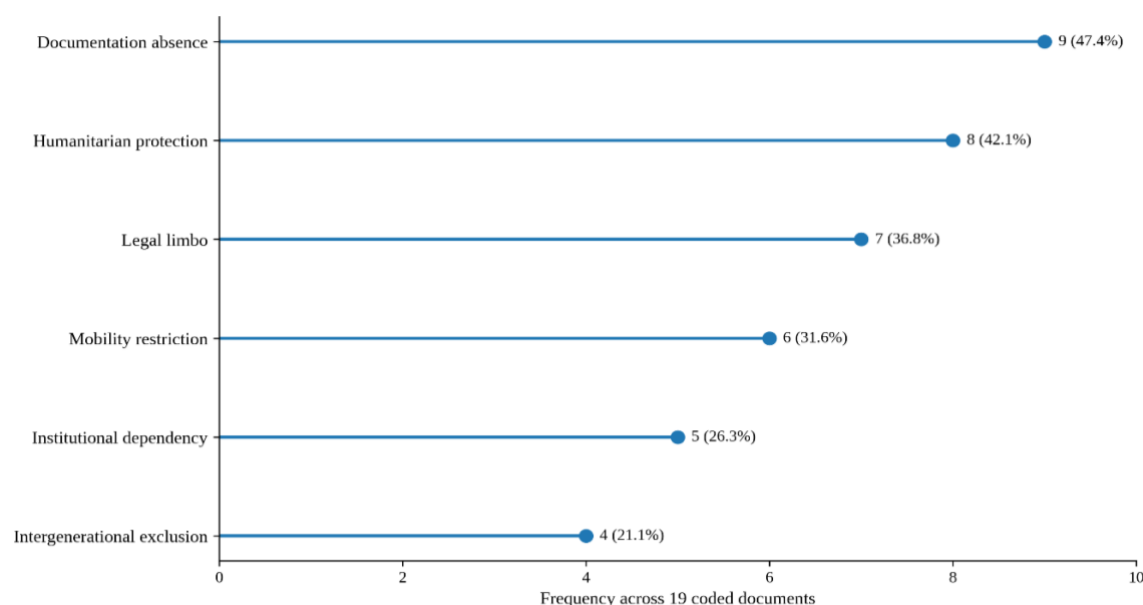


Figure 3. Protection-status precarity across the corpus

Documentation absence is the most frequent pattern, appearing in nine documents, or 47.4% of the corpus. Humanitarian protection follows in eight documents, or 42.1%, while legal limbo appears in seven documents, or 36.8%. Mobility restriction appears in six documents, institutional dependency in five, and intergenerational exclusion in four. Objectively, this distribution indicates that post-arrival precarity is not concentrated only in border-crossing moments. Rohingya documents emphasize temporary protection, registration, and unstable reception; Vietnamese narratives reveal how camps, family papers, and archives mediate past legal uncertainty; Bajau Laut/Sama Dilaut material foregrounds shoreline belonging without secure documentation. Across these materials, legal status becomes visible through practical obstacles rather than formal legal language alone.

Theoretically, these findings support a reading of statelessness as an administrative and affective condition that organizes belonging before, during, and after movement. Brinham (2024) [24] argues that citizenship documents may become technologies of exclusion, while Missbach and Stange (2021) [25] show that humanitarian concern and religious solidarity do not automatically secure effective protection. Dasgupta (2024) [26] and Andal (2023) [27] broaden this issue by showing how identity, child migration, and exclusionary policies complicate conventional citizenship models. This study therefore interprets documentation, protection, and mobility not as separate variables but as interlocking mechanisms of precarious belonging. Refugee narratives make this intersection legible by showing how recognition is repeatedly negotiated through papers, shelters, institutions, memories, and borders.

4.3. Testimony, archive, and diasporic belonging

Memory and voice emerge as central mechanisms through which refugee narratives resist disappearance after maritime movement, camp transit, or resettlement. The strongest pattern is archival memory, which indicates that refugee belonging is often reconstructed through testimony, digital preservation, oral history, family records, and community-curated materials. This focus is consistent with Nguyen (2023) [13], who argues that Vietnamese refugee archives are shaped through absence and fragmentation, and with Nguyen et al. (2024) [14], who position testimonio as a critical approach for studying Southeast Asian American refugee subjects. This study therefore treats archive and testimony not as supplementary evidence but as narrative infrastructures through which displaced subjects become audible, visible, and historically situated.

Table 5. Memory, voice, and belonging coding in southeast asian refugee narratives

Main Category	Subcategory	Indicators	Frequency	Percentage	Data Variation	Evidence Marker	Data Code	Interpretation
Archival memory	Digital archive, oral-history archive, museum record, curated testimony	Archive, oral history, memory fragment, community preservation, documentary record	9	47.4%	Vietnamese Boat People pages, Dartmouth oral-history exhibit, digital diaspora archive, museum index	Refugee memory is preserved through curated fragments, public archives, and community-based documentation	SEA-RN-003; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-006; SEA-RN-007; SEA-RN-008; SEA-RN-009; SEA-RN-011; SEA-RN-012	Archive becomes a substitute space of belonging when territorial home remains unstable or historically ruptured
First-person testimony	Named voice, narrated experience, self-positioning	"I/we" narration, remembered journey, narrated loss, direct experience, personal witness	8	42.1%	Rohingya personal stories, Vietnamese memoir fragments, oral-history excerpts, Bajau Laut testimony	Refugee subjects appear not only as humanitarian objects but as narrators of movement, loss, and survival	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-002; SEA-RN-003; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-007; SEA-RN-009; SEA-RN-019	Voice contests institutional reduction by restoring situated agency to displaced subjects
Diasporic belonging	Home-making, community memory, resettlement reflection, identity negotiation	Diaspora, community, return, memory of homeland, cultural continuity, place attachment	7	36.8%	Vietnamese diaspora essays, community archives, resettlement reflections, Rohingya home narratives	Belonging is reconstructed across distance, memory, and community rather than secured by location alone	SEA-RN-003; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-006; SEA-RN-007; SEA-RN-008; SEA-RN-012; SEA-RN-017	Diaspora transforms displacement into a contested practice of cultural and political continuity
Family-mediated memory	Family photograph, inherited story, parent-child memory, intergenerational narration	Family archive, parental memory, childhood displacement, inherited trauma, kinship continuity	6	31.6%	Vietnamese family narratives, childhood boat memory, refugee camp recollection, visual family records	Forced migration is remembered through kinship structures that link personal history to collective loss	SEA-RN-003; SEA-RN-004; SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-007; SEA-RN-009; SEA-RN-012	Family memory keeps displacement narratable across generations even when official archives are incomplete
Visualized vulnerability	Photograph, campaign image, map, humanitarian visual, video frame	Image, body, boat, camp, map, logo, colour, layout, frame	5	26.3%	UNHCR visual stories, operational PDF, archive images, campaign materials, Reuters visual reportage	Visual materials organize how refugee precarity becomes publicly readable	SEA-RN-001; SEA-RN-013; SEA-RN-017; SEA-RN-018; SEA-RN-019	Visuality can humanize refugee life while also framing subjects through crisis, need, and exposure
Silence and absence	Missing record, fragmented archive, unsaid trauma, inaccessible memory	Absence, gap, loss, unrecorded event, incomplete testimony, mediated translation	4	21.1%	Vietnamese refugee archives, oral-history fragments, translated memoirs, humanitarian summaries	Narrative gaps reveal the limits of testimony and the uneven preservation of refugee histories	SEA-RN-005; SEA-RN-009; SEA-RN-011; SEA-RN-012	Absence is not empty; it marks historical rupture, archival inequality, and the difficulty of narrating displacement

Note. Frequency is calculated from 19 coded documents. Categories are multi-label; therefore, percentages indicate document presence for each pattern and are not designed to total 100%.

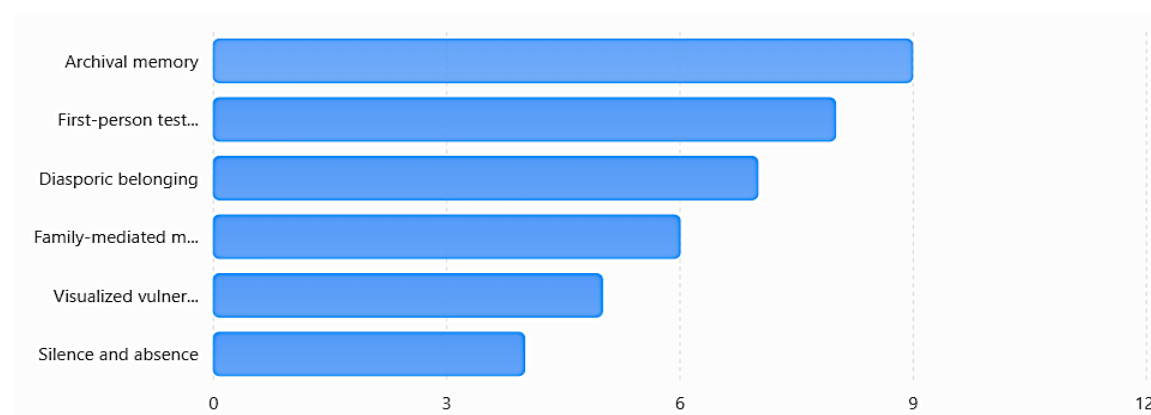


Figure 4. Frequency of memory, voice, and belonging patterns across the corpus

Archival memory appears in nine documents, or 47.4% of the corpus, followed by first-person testimony in eight documents, or 42.1%. Diasporic belonging appears in seven documents, while family-mediated memory appears in six. Visualized vulnerability appears in five documents, and silence or absence appears in four. Objectively, this distribution shows that refugee narratives are not organized only around suffering or mobility. Vietnamese materials are especially prominent in archive, family memory, and diaspora-oriented narration, while Rohingya materials foreground testimony under humanitarian mediation. Bajau Laut/Sama Dilaut material contributes a distinct form of voiced shoreline belonging. Across these materials, memory functions as both evidence of rupture and a method of reassembling displaced identity.

Theoretically, these patterns support a reading of precarious belonging as a narrative practice rather than a completed social status. Aletheiani (2025) [12] links Southeast Asian diaspora consciousness to collective memory and community formation, while Vicera (2021) [5] reads diasporic home through temporal dislocation and postcolonial poetics. Sánchez (2024) [4], Gui (2025) [2], and Mohan and Chandrasekharan (2025) [28] further show that visual and graphic refugee narratives can represent vulnerability, survival, and spatial instability without reducing displaced subjects to passive victims. This study therefore interprets testimony, archive, family memory, and visuality as sites where refugees negotiate recognition beyond law. Belonging remains precarious, but narrative gives that precarity social form, historical depth, and political address.

5. DISCUSSION

Spatial patterns in this corpus indicate that Southeast Asian refugee narratives reframe forced migration as an afterlife of arrival rather than a completed journey. This matters because boats often dominate public imagination as spectacular signs of crisis, but this study shows that narrative attention moves from sea crossing to shelters, camps, archives, humanitarian sites, and diasporic spaces. The function of this spatial dispersion is critical: it prevents forced migration from being reduced to emergency mobility. Its dysfunction, however, lies in how visibility depends on crisis scenes. Refugees become legible when they are rescued, counted, sheltered, or archived, but less legible as political subjects with claims to durable recognition. This finding extends Kraly et al. (2023) [18] and Olwig (2021) [19], who conceptualize displacement as socially prolonged and temporally uncertain. It also supports Hourigan's (2023) [3] view that forced migration narratives disturb nation-state assumptions. Thus, space operates as both survival infrastructure and evidence of unfinished displacement.

The underlying structure behind this spatial pattern is not movement alone but the uneven governance of mobility. Boats, camps, shelters, and diasporic archives appear connected because refugee movement is repeatedly redirected by borders, humanitarian systems, and reception regimes. This study does not claim that these structures cause every narrative form in a deterministic sense; rather, the evidence suggests that spatial narration is associated with institutional conditions that organize who can move, wait, settle, or remember. Chowdhury and Abid's (2022) [6] concept of amphibious illegality clarifies why sea and shore function as unstable zones for Rohingya "boat people," while Fleury (2025) [23] complicates simple distinctions between political and environmental flight in Vietnamese refugee history. Green and Pécoud (2023) [21] further show that institutional language often frames mobility through crisis. The spatial finding therefore points to a structural tension: displacement continues because arrival is governed as temporary management rather than secure political incorporation.

Legal-status patterns suggest that statelessness in refugee narratives functions less as an abstract juridical category than as an everyday grammar of vulnerability. Documentation absence, temporary protection, legal limbo, mobility restriction, and institutional dependency show how belonging is negotiated through papers, registration, aid access, and administrative waiting. The implication is significant: narratives make law visible not by explaining legal doctrine, but by showing how legal uncertainty enters family life, movement, health access, schooling, and memory. This finding aligns with Rahman and Sakib (2021) [7], Faisal et al. (2023) [9], Hitami (2025) [10], and Gul, Allauddin, and Ahmad (2025) [11], who place Rohingya displacement within statelessness, security, and rights debates. Yet this study also complicates legal scholarship by showing that refugee texts do not present stateless people only as rightless victims. They also narrate agency, endurance, and relational belonging under incomplete recognition. Law therefore appears as both protective promise and mechanism of suspension.

The structure beneath this legal precarity lies in the disjunction between humanitarian recognition and citizenship recognition. Refugees may become visible to aid agencies, NGOs, archives, and media, yet this visibility does not necessarily translate into enforceable membership or durable rights. Missbach and Stange (2021) [25] show that Muslim solidarity in Southeast Asia has not generated effective protection for Rohingya refugees, indicating a gap between moral recognition and institutional capacity. Brinham (2024) [24] likewise suggests that citizenship documents can operate as tools of exclusion rather than neutral proof of identity. Dasgupta (2024) [26] and Andal (2023) [27] broaden this issue by showing how exclusionary state policies and maritime childhood complicate conventional migration categories. The corpus reflects this structure through repeated references to weak documentation, temporary shelters, and mediated access. Consequently, statelessness persists not because refugees lack social identity, but because administrative systems fail to convert lived belonging into recognized status.

Memory, voice, and archive patterns show that precarious belonging is not only endured; it is narrated, preserved, and contested. This implication shifts discussion beyond vulnerability. Refugee narratives function as counter-archives that repair fragmented histories, transmit family memory, and challenge institutional accounts that speak about refugees without allowing them to speak as historical agents. The dysfunction is that even voice is mediated: testimony may appear through translation, curation, humanitarian framing, museum description, or digital archive selection. Nguyen (2023) [13] is useful here because Vietnamese refugee archives are shaped by absence, fragmentation, and collecting through loss. Nguyen et al. (2024) [14] similarly emphasize testimonio as a critical race method for Southeast Asian American refugee subjects. Aletheiani (2025) [12] links diaspora consciousness to community formation. This study therefore interprets narrative voice as a partial but politically meaningful practice of belonging, where displaced subjects assemble recognition from memory, kinship, archive, and public address.

The deeper structure behind these memory patterns is the gap between formal recognition and narrative recognition. When citizenship, documentation, or territorial home remains unstable, archive and testimony become alternative sites where belonging can be asserted, though never fully guaranteed. This interpretation resonates with Vicera's (2021) [5] account of home as asynchronous in Southeast Asian diasporic narratives and Sánchez's (2024) [4] reading of Vietnamese refugee experience through vulnerability that is not reducible to weakness. Gui (2025) [2], Mohan and Chandrasekharan (2025) [28], and Trimboli (2022) [29] further show that visual, graphic, and zine-based refugee narratives can theorize rupture through form itself. The corpus supports this insight by linking oral history, family photographs, digital archives, and visual testimony to post-arrival precarity. What emerges is not a romantic claim that storytelling solves statelessness. Rather, narrative supplies a fragile mode of political presence when law, territory, and humanitarian systems leave belonging unresolved.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Southeast Asian refugee narratives shift critical attention from maritime escape to the unresolved aftermath of arrival. Boats operate as visible signs of displacement, yet this study shows that precarity continues through camps, shelters, archives, humanitarian mediation, legal limbo, and diasporic memory. The most important lesson is that forced migration cannot be understood only through movement; it must also be read through suspended recognition, fragile protection, and negotiated belonging. This study contributes by integrating narrative-spatial mapping, statelessness coding, and discourse analysis of memory and voice, thereby renewing refugee narrative studies through a method that connects route, legal status, and belonging.

This study is limited by its reliance on publicly accessible narratives, institutional documents, archival materials, and media-based sources, which means that unpublished testimonies, vernacular oral histories, and community-controlled records remain underrepresented. Its corpus also compares Rohingya, Vietnamese, and Bajau Laut/Sama Dilaut materials without claiming demographic equivalence among these groups. Future research should expand this inquiry through participatory methods, multilingual field-based

interviews, and collaborative archiving with refugee communities. Further studies may also compare Southeast Asian narratives with South Asian, Pacific, or Middle Eastern refugee texts to examine whether post-arrival precarity operates similarly across different regimes of citizenship, humanitarian governance, and diasporic memory.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Author states no conflict of interest.

AI USE DECLARATION

The author used artificial intelligence tools to assist with the generation of illustrative figures and with the formatting and layout of this manuscript. AI was not used to generate the substantive content, conceptualization, data, analysis, or conclusions of the research, all of which remain the sole responsibility of the author.

INFORMED CONSENT

Not applicable – this study did not involve direct human participants. Data consisted solely of publicly accessible refugee narratives, oral-history archives, and humanitarian stories.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research did not involve human or animal subjects; it analyzed publicly accessible refugee narratives, oral-history archives, and humanitarian stories, and therefore no institutional review board approval was required. Where research does involve human subjects, the author affirms that such research would be conducted in full compliance with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies, in accordance with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki, and would be approved by the author's institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The corpus of documents analyzed in this study are publicly accessible and available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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