



# Curriculum Connections

## *Crossing the Farak River*

by Michelle Aung Thin

Annick Press, 2020

Fiction, set in Myanmar

2020 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

### Appropriate Age/Grade Level

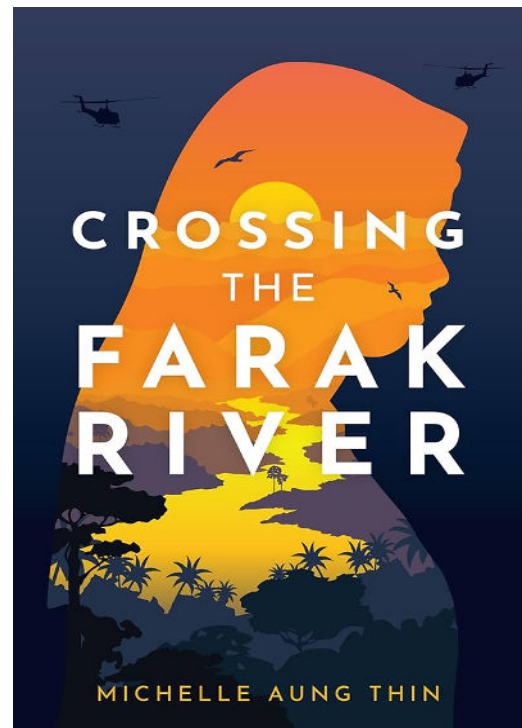
*Crossing the Farak River* is most appropriate for students in middle grades, grades 6–8.

### Contextualizing Curriculum Connections

While a significant amount of nonfiction literature has been published about Myanmar, the history of Burma, and the Rohingya crisis, only a few books on these subjects have been written for young people—and even fewer for students in middle grades. *Crossing the Farak River* stands out because it is specifically for middle-grade students.

The book addresses complex topics of ethnic tensions and violence in important yet nuanced ways. Rather than hitting the reader with the graphic realities of Myanmar’s genocide, it takes the perspective of its young protagonist, Hasina, who describes her personal experience of what goes on around her. It’s not that the realities are

not there, but just as Hasina does not understand all she sees and hears, some youth will read past the traumas while others who are ready to see them will be more open to what is described. Additionally, the reading experience can and should be guided by sensitive and experienced educators who can support students in understanding the text, as well as provide more detail if students are interested to learn more.



### Concepts and Entry Points: Middle School (6–8)

Each of the following concepts can reinforce understanding, open discussion, or serve as a jumping-off point into a portion of the book or research connected to the novel.

**Arakan:** a long, narrow southern coastal region in western Myanmar that is now known as Rakhine State. The Rohingya are said to be descendants of the Arakanese people from this region. The eastern border is formed by a mountain range that isolates it from the rest of Myanmar and the western border lies along the Bay of Bengal.



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**Aung San Suu Kyi:** a pro-democracy leader from Burma who founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) and has been held under house arrest on and off by Myanmar's military leaders since 1989.<sup>1</sup> In 1991, she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to bring democracy to Myanmar after the military coup. Since 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi has been criticized for not denouncing the ethnic cleansing and genocide in Rakhine State.

**Bangladesh:** a Muslim country to the west of Myanmar that gained independence from British India in 1947 as East Pakistan. In 1971 the country became independent from Pakistan as Bangladesh. Many Rohingya fleeing violence in Myanmar seek refuge in Bangladesh.

**Burma:** the name of the country under British colonial rule. Burma achieved independence from the UK in 1948. The country was renamed Myanmar after a military coup in 1989.

**Ethnic groups:** Myanmar's government "claims 135 'national races,'" though no census data exists.<sup>2</sup> It is generally accepted that more than a hundred different ethnic groups—which vary in language, culture, and religion—live in the country. The majority of the population is Burman, approximately 67%. Three minority ethnic groups that are mentioned in *Crossing the Farak River* are the following:

- ❖ **Karen:** the second largest minority at 7% (second to the Shan at 9%). They have origins in Tibet and Central Asia. Most are Buddhist, but as many as 33% of Karen people converted to Christianity under British rule.
- ❖ **Mro:** a sub-ethnic group of the Chin whose ancestors came from Bangladesh. The Mro are also experiencing human rights abuses at the hands of the government.

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Pletcher, ed., "Aung San Suu Kyi," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aung-Suu-Kyi>.

<sup>2</sup> Chizom Ekeh and Martin Smith, "Minorities in Burma," Minority Rights Group, October 30, 2007, <https://minorityrights.org/resources/minorities-in-burma/>.

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- ❖ **Rohingya:** a Muslim group of people from Arakan/Rakhine State who have been victims of government discrimination since independence and of targeted ethnic cleansing and genocide since 2016. Some speak Rohingya, which is similar to a dialect from Bangladesh. Others, Arakanese Muslims, speak the same language as Buddhist Burmans.

**Myanmar:** the name chosen by the new regime after a military coup in 1989.<sup>3</sup> There has been international resistance to recognizing the military regime or using the name Myanmar. Most nations currently accept the name Myanmar; the United States and the UK do not.

**Rakhine State:** the western state of Myanmar that was formerly known as Arakan.

**Sit Tat:** a term for the Myanmar army.<sup>4</sup> Some believe this term to be more neutral than *tatmadaw*, which has been the traditional word used for Burma's military. People believe *sit tat* removes the connotation of glorification from (the *daw* in) *tatmadaw*. However, given the acts of violence by the current military, *sit tat* has become a preferred term by those who do not want to give reverence to the military.

**Sittwe:** The capital city of Rakhine.

### Literary Themes: Middle School (6–8)

Ethnicity, ethnic tension, political division, family, resilience

### Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

<sup>3</sup> Tong-Hyung, Kim, and Hyung-Jin Kim. "Myanmar, Burma and Why the Different Names Matter." AP News, May 15, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-burma-different-names-explained-8af64e33cf89c565b074eec9cbe22b72>.

<sup>4</sup> Myat, Aung Kaung. "Sit-Tat or Tatmadaw? Debates on What to Call the Most Powerful Institution in Burma." Tea Circle, September 29, 2022. <https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/sit-tat-or-tatmadaw-debates-on-what-to-call-the-most-powerful-institution-in-burma/>.

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CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-WRITING STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY.WHST.6-8.7: Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

CCSS.ELA-WRITING STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY.WHST.6-8.9: Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-WRITING STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY.WHST.6-8.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

### **Guiding Questions**

1. Why do you think that the author opened the narrative with helicopters?
2. What role do smartphones and social media play in the book and the broader political landscape of Myanmar and Rakhine?
3. What purpose does the Cat Girl serve in this story? Why do you think she leaves Hasina's grandmother to live with the Mro?
4. What role did the lawyer play in finding and saving Araf?
5. Ultimately, what factors keep Hasina and Araf safe?

### **Suggested Learning Activity/Evaluation/Assessment**

1. The narrative provides many examples of the dangers that Rohingya and other ethnic minorities in Arakan face. Identify at least two of these dangers, along with a specific example from the text (including supporting quote and page number).
2. The narrative also provides many examples of the good in people—the kind of compassion and courage that can save another person from a dangerous



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outcome. Identify at least two examples, along with a specific example from the text (including supporting quote and page number).

3. Go to the United States Holocaust Museum website (<https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide>) to learn more about the stories of Rohingya in Myanmar. Read at least three stories and **note the commonalities** in the following areas so that you can discuss your responses in small groups and as a class:
  - a. Challenges
  - b. Hopes and Dreams
  - c. Values

### Selected Resources

- Albert, Eleanor, and Lindsay Maizland. "The Rohingya Crisis." Council on Foreign Relations, January 23, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/rohingya-crisis>.
- Blinken, Antony. "Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya in Burma." U.S. Department of State, n.d. <https://www.state.gov/burma-genocide/>.
- "Burma's Path to Genocide." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed February 4, 2024. <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide>.
- Chan, Elaine. "Rohingya." Encyclopædia Britannica, January 12, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rohingya>.
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- "Myanmar and the Rohingya." Choices Program, January 31, 2022.  
<https://www.choices.edu/teaching-news-lesson/myanmar-and-the-rohingya/>.
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<https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/sit-tat-or-tatmadaw-debates-on-what-to-call-the-most-powerful-institution-in-burma/>.
- Rahman, Raya Rashna, and Inshra Sakhawat Russell. *The Unexpected Friend: A Rohingya Children's Story*. Oakland, CA: Guba Publishing, 2019.
- "Rohingya Crisis." UNICEF, February 16, 2024.  
<https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/rohingya-crisis>.
- "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained." USA for UNHCR. The Un Refugee Agency, August 23, 2023. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/>.
- Tong-Hyung, Kim, and Hyung-Jin Kim. "Myanmar, Burma and Why the Different Names Matter." PBS, February 3, 2021.  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/myanmar-burma-and-why-the-different-names-matter>.

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