



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

CROSSING THE FARAK RIVER by Michelle Aung Thin

Genre: Fiction

Themes: Conflict, resilience, persecution, family unity, trust and friendship, ethnic cleansing, cultural identity and diversity, survival, refugee, prejudice, genocide, coming of age, trust, humanitarianism, child labor

Suitable for: Grades 6 +/ Ages 11 +

Common Core Standards: SL.7.1,1c,1d,2,3,4,5,6
L.7.3,4,4a,4b,4c,5,5a,5b,5c,6 / RL.7.1,2,3,4,6,9,10 / W.7.1,2,3,4,7,8,9,9a,10

Advisory Note: There are students for whom the themes and events depicted in *Crossing the Farak River* will be very familiar and all too real. Such students may well have fled similar conflicts and experienced displacement and trauma. It is important that teachers read the text before sharing it with their class, monitor student reactions, and respond appropriately.

SUMMARY

For Hasina and her younger brother Araf, the constant threat of Sit Tat, the Myanmar Army, is a way of life in Rakhine province—just uttering the name is enough to send chills down their spines. As Rohingyas, they know that when they hear the wop wop wop of their helicopters, there is one thing to do—run, and don't stop. So when soldiers invade their village one night, and Hasina awakes to her aunt's fearful voice, followed by smoke, and then a scream, run is what they do.

Hasina races deep into the Rakhine forest with Araf and her cousin Ghadiya. They hide there for five days, wondering when (and if) their father will come and get them. When they emerge some days later, it is to a smoldering village. Their house is standing but where is the rest of their family? With so many Rohingyas driven out, Hasina must figure out who she can trust for help and summon the courage to fight for her family amid the escalating conflict that threatens her world and her identity. She musters strength and perseverance to keep the remaining members of her family together through challenges she has never dreamed she would need to overcome.

Crossing the Farak River tackles an important topic frequently in the news but little explored in fiction. It is a poignant and thought-provoking introduction for young readers to the military crackdown and ongoing persecution of Rohingya people, from the perspective of a brave and resilient protagonist.

BACKGROUND

NAMES

As noted in the book, Myanmar is often still referred to by its former name, Burma. Burma became Myanmar in 1989, just as the capital, Rangoon, became known as Yangon. What complicates the use of names is that some countries officially call the nation Myanmar, like Canada, and others call it Burma, like the United States. Other name changes include Arakan becoming Rakhine. Arakan is the ancient name for the area where Hasina lives, the people who live there, and the former "kingdom." The new name for the region is Rakhine. Finally, while most English-language media, including the local paper, Myanmar Times, use the term "Tatmadaw," to refer to the country's military, most people in Myanmar use the term "Sit Tot" or "Sit Tat." Tatmadaw translates as "Army," while Sit Tat means "the military." This is an important nuance for everyday usage in Myanmar.

GEOGRAPHY

Myanmar is in southeast Asia and borders Thailand, Laos, China, India, and Bangladesh. It has a long coastline along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Two major river systems run roughly north/south—the Ayeryarwady and the Salween—and the land is crossed by many smaller rivers, tributaries, and streams which traditionally formed communication and trade routes. Most people live along the coast or along the Ayeryarwady valley. Mountains help form national land boundaries and the boundary between Rakhine State and the rest of Myanmar.

Generally, there are three seasons in Myanmar:

- Rainy—June to September
- Cool—October to February
- Hot—March to May

There are several climate zones in the country:

- Hot, humid monsoonal areas
- Hot, temperate higher areas with cool winters
- Central plain that is hot and dry

MULTI-ETHNIC MYANMAR

There are 135 ethnic groups recognized by the Myanmar government. The Rohingya—the region's minority Muslim community—are not within this 135. In 1982, General Ne Win's government declared them non-citizens, claiming that they were not a people. The word Rohingya was forbidden because the generals said that Rohingyas did not exist before 1823, the first phase of colonization by the British.

The breakdown of ethnicities includes: Burman (Bamar) 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, other 5%. The breakdown of religions includes: Buddhist 87.9%, Christian 6.2%, Muslim 4.3%, Animist 0.8%, Hindu 0.5%, other 0.2%, none 0.1% (2014 est.) (CIA Factbook)

The Rohingya were not officially counted in the recent census. Their numbers were estimated at just over a million people.

THE BEGINNINGS OF POLITICAL FREEDOM

In 2011 the government began to reform after almost 50 years of military rule. Political prisoners were released and cease-fires were signed with several ethnic groups. Aung San Suu Kyi was elected to the national legislature in 2012. In 2015, the world watched the November elections in Myanmar. The National League for Democracy (NLD), of which Aung San Suu Kyi is president, won in a landslide. An elected government was sworn in for the first time in five decades. But the military retained its own ministry, which was not and is not answerable to the government. This Ministry of Defence is responsible for the Army and the Border Police.

PERSECUTION OF ROHINGYA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

To find out more about the Rohingya, visit Save the Children site: <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/Our-Stories/Rohingya-explained>

The Rohingya have suffered various forms of persecution since the 1970s, including:

- no right to free movement; they are not allowed to travel without official permission
- no right to higher education or other social services, such as healthcare
- routine forced labor on military or government projects
- a denial of Burmese citizenship since 1982
- property and land seizure by the military. This land and property is often given to Buddhist settlers from other parts of Myanmar

* It should be noted that many other citizens of Myanmar are also subject to the first three restrictions above.

In 2016, however, the persecution of Rohingyas escalated drastically to include:

- unlawful arrest and detention
- extrajudicial killings, bombing, and placing mines in the path of refugee boats
- brutal attacks on civilians
- burning of homes, farms, mosques, and entire villages
- trapping refugees and killing them

THE RAKHINE CONFLICT

In August 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya militant group, attacked police stations in northern Rakhine State. The Myanmar military cracked down hard, running what they called “clearance” operations. Since the conflict began, over 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar for Bangladesh as refugees. This exodus had begun following smaller scale attacks less than a year earlier. *Crossing the Farak River* opens in 2016 and ends in the aftermath of the 2017 clearance operations. The Rohingya were also persecuted and chased from Myanmar in the 1970s and 1990s.

Detailed political knowledge is not necessary to understand the themes of the novel. However, one point to grasp is that there are four armed groups operating in Hasina's world.

1. AA (Arakan Army), is a resistance group that supports an independent Buddhist Arakan (Rakhine) nation, or increased independence within Myanmar.
2. ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army), is a resistance group that began as a Saudi-supported militant Islamist organization. In the novel, Hasina fears that Isak dreams of joining this group.
3. Sit Tat or Tatmadaw is Myanmar's Army or military
4. The Border Police are a department of Myanmar's police force that monitor and enforce Myanmar's borders, including the one between Bangladesh and northern Rakhine State.

The Myanmar military (Sit Tat) have sometimes been supported by the Arakan Army in attacks on Rohingya people. Attacks on the police or military by either AA or ARSA have triggered retaliation on the population by Sit Tat.

ACTIVITY IDEAS

The following activity ideas are only a start. There are many possibilities for helping students construct meaning from the text.

Comprehension activities

- help readers to extend their general knowledge from prior experience
- develop reading strategies for comprehension
- bring relevance to the act of reading
- foster discussion and reflection through response to the text

BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK

These activities build the context, introduce the topic of the book, and establish prior knowledge and interest.

Questions to ask the class:

1. Have you ever heard of the Rohingya people living in Myanmar? What have you been able to learn about them?
2. What clues on the cover give you an idea of what the book is about? Do you think the book is fiction or non-fiction?
3. Scan the book to discover what other text features are included in the novel (map, timeline, glossary). Do you think this is a book of fiction or non-fiction? What elements make you think so?
4. *Crossing the Farak River* is an example of realistic fiction. What other books of realistic fiction have you read? What did you find appealing about them? Why do you think these books are important?

Vocabulary Activity

The novel deals with issues encountered by refugees. Hasina is not a refugee; she is one of the people who stays behind in a country beset by civil unrest. She is discriminated against, almost to the point of starvation, and lives under threat of injury or death if she is the victim of violent persecution. Her parents, aunt, and uncle, however, are refugees by virtue of having been forced out of their country. To discuss the situations regarding refugees from Myanmar or other countries, help students develop their vocabulary around these issues by brainstorming definitions for:

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|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| • persecution | • discrimination | • civil conflict | • political unrest |
| • citizen/citizenship | • militia | • refugee | • asylum seeker |
| • stateless person | • property rights | • ethnic cleansing | • government-sanctioned violence |

WHILE READING THE BOOK

These activities check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

Character and Conflict

1. At the beginning of the story, when the helicopters come, how do you think Aunt Rukiah feels at this critical moment? What information might she have that her students do not?
2. Hasina only just makes it into the door of the madrassa for cover. Have you ever experienced or witnessed a situation that would add to your understanding of how Hasina might have felt when she first heard the helicopters coming? What did you do in that situation?
3. What thoughts or feelings do you think Hasina might have had when she realized she was responsible for her brother and cousin when they had to flee?
4. To what do you attribute Hasina's resolve to stay strong and make sure her loved ones are safe?

Realistic Fiction

5. What does the author include to add to the realism of Hasina's story?
6. How does the author deal with vocabulary that might be unfamiliar to some readers?
7. How would you feel if you were not allowed to attend school, but other people could?
8. To keep track of the events in the story, create a timeline that chronicles Hasina's journey from her time in the madrasa to her final phone call with her parents.

Understanding Rohingya History

9. What did you learn about the discriminatory policies and attitudes against the Rohingya people through the events of the story?
10. Why do you think the young soldier Hasina encounters on her way into town after hiding out in the forest does not turn Hasina in? Where do you think his sympathies lie? What other examples in the novel suggest there are others who have sympathies for the Rohingya?
11. Hasina returns to her home to find the Eighth Quarter District deserted. Explain the significance of the smashed water pump and the slaughtered Monu Mash. Why would the soldiers have done this?
12. Why do you think it is important for Hasina to maintain customs and practices in dangerous and chaotic times?
13. U Ko Yin and Zaw Gyi reveal themselves to be untrustworthy characters. How would you describe them and their attitudes toward Hasina and other Rohingya?

AFTER READING THE BOOK

These activities inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this novel, and stimulate further extensions.

1. Discuss what the main complications of the story were (e.g. immediate survival after the burning of the house; keeping everyone safe and fed in the months after; finding Araf; finding their families). Create a table of the main plot points in *Crossing the Farak River* explaining how a problem was resolved and what, if anything, the resolution added to your understanding of characters and issues.

Problem	Resolution	What did you learn about the characters or issues from the way this problem played out in the book?

2. The author has created characters of depth and credibility, drawing much empathy towards the protagonist, her family, and friends. Using various media forms, create a piece of art that represents the character you find the most inspiring or the most sympathetic.
3. In this novel, we hear, feel and see everything through Hasina's experience—her perspective or point-of-view. Though all characters are referred to as "he," "she," "it," or "they," the reader only knows as much about the other characters' thoughts and feelings as Hasina knows. This narrative voice is called third person limited. When reading the novel, how aware were you of being "inside" Hasina's head? Did the third person limited voice increase your identification with Hasina? Explain your answer.

Did this narrative voice deny the other characters their own voice? What other voices did you want to hear (more) from?
4. There are many books about refugees geared for younger readers that tell of the harrowing experiences they have gone through when seeking safety. One such book is *Stormy Seas: Stories of Young Boat Refugees* (Annick Press, 2017). Create a picture book edition of *Crossing the Farak River*. How would you choose to illustrate the key events of the story? What style of art or type of image would you use?
5. Research the international refugee aid organizations that have helped the Rohingya people in their struggle against the government of Myanmar. What kind of aid have these groups been able to offer? What volunteer organizations could you join or support if you were interested in helping Rohingya refugees?