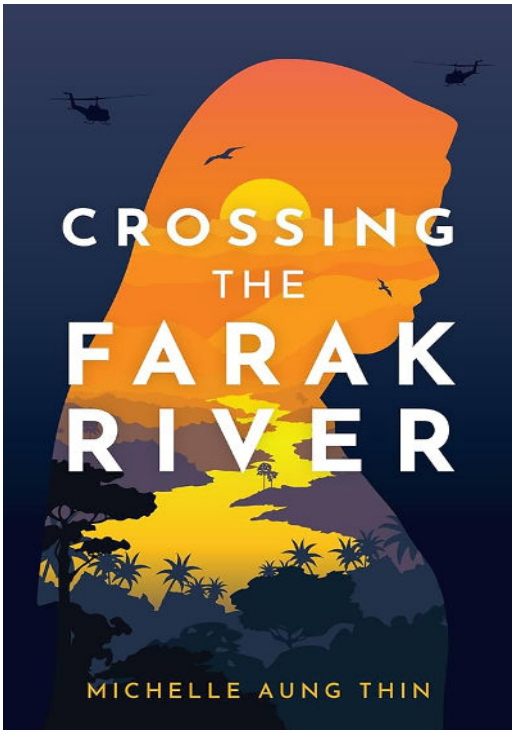
Culture Notes
Crossing the Farak River
by Michelle Aung Thin

Annick Press, 2020 **Fiction, set in Myanmar**

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



Synopsis

Crossing the Farak River is a novel of survival that illustrates the plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar (pronounced: MYAN-mah). The central character is a fourteen-year-old girl named Hasina whose family are market sellers in a riverside village. The fictional Farak River (pronounced: fah-RAK) of the title divides the town between her Rohingya people (pronounced: row-HING-jah), a Muslim minority, and the Buddhist Arakanese.

Geographical and Political Background

This story is set in the fictional river town of Taknadaung (pronounced: tak-nah-down), in southwestern Myanmar's Arakan region (pronounced: AH-rah-kan). Arakan stretches from the Irrawaddy River Delta in the south to the Naf River, which forms the western border with Bangladesh. Separated from the central region of Myanmar by a range of low mountains and from India to the north by the Chin Hills, Arakan is riven by waterways that drain into the Bay of Bengal. It is easy to imagine the novel's Farak River as one of these.

Due to its location, Arakan was for centuries an important contact zone between the Indian subcontinent and central Burma. The ancient Vaishali kingdom in Arakan is associated with the spread of Buddhism from India into Southeast Asia. The Mrauk-U kingdom ruled Arakan from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and integrated elements of Buddhist and Brahmanic court culture with Islamic elements that reflected its status as a vassal of the Bengal Sultanate. Under Mrauk-U, Arakan ports became important trading stops for Portuguese merchants, the Dutch East India Company, and later the English as they expanded into the Indian Ocean.

Before the eighteenth century, Arakan was politically distinct from the Burmese kingdoms. At times, it fell under the control of Bengal. At other times, it was ruled by

its own kings, even extending its reach into Chittagong in modern Bangladesh. Arakan was first conquered by the Burmese king Bayinnaung in 1784, when the Konbaung dynasty extended its political control into Arakan and the Indian states of Manipur and Assam. This provoked a territorial dispute with British India, leading to the first Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–1826. The resulting Treaty of Yandabo (pronounced: YAN-dah-bow) ceded Arakan to British India, along with another coastal province, Tenasserim. Later, Arakan was administered as a colonial province of British Burma until the Union of Burma gained independence in 1947.

Rebels and Citizens in Independent Burma

After independence, the new Burmese central government tried to assert authority over the many ethnic minority groups, including the Shan, Karen, Kachin, and Rakhine (Arakanese), many of which sought self-rule or even separate independence under British protection. Wartime conflicts with the Japanese-trained Burma Independence Army prompted large numbers of ethnic minority troops in the colonial army to desert and form militias for self-defense. Many, including troops in Arakan, assisted Allied efforts to disrupt Japanese operations in Burma. After the war, some of these ethnic militias turned their guns on the new government, essentially fighting the same army they had resisted during the war. In Arakan in 1947, this took the form of a revolt led by the veteran Buddhist monk U Seinda, as well as the founding of the Mujahid movement among the Rohingya.

As successive Burmese regimes tried to weld these separatist groups together with military force and diplomacy, their approach to the Rohingya was always one of exclusion or, at best, limited recognition. In theory, Burma's 1947 constitution provided the right to citizenship for all British subjects resident in Burma for a decade, but most Indians were associated with colonial labor migrations and became a target of Burmese nationalists. As a result, these Indians are widely considered by Burmese people to be illegal immigrants from the colonial period or after.[1] Instead of "Rohingya," they are usually referred to as "Bengali," "Muslim," or "Kala"—a usually derogatory racial term for Indian. This is reflected in the book when Hasina is called "kalama" (pronounced: gulla-MAH), the feminine form of "kala" (pronounced: gul-LAH). Also, a radio announcer

[1] For one example, see Aye Kyaw, "An Historian Looks at Rohingya" interview in *The Irrawaddy,* Wednesday, October 7, 2009. https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=16946

refers to Hasina's people as "Chittagonian Bengali Muslims" (p. 37), pointedly avoiding the term Rohingya and associating them with territory across the border.

While Burma's first prime minister, U Nu, issued identity cards to Rohingya to allow them to vote in his election, this right was later revoked. Under his government and for a time afterward, Rohingya student groups were officially recognized in the university and several members of parliament self-identified as Rohingya. After the 1962 coup by military strongman Ne Win, people of Indian descent were deported in large numbers. The 1970s ushered in a war of independence in neighboring Bangladesh, causing a flow of refugees into Arakan. Some may have been returning to areas from which they had been forced into Bangladesh in previous decades. The same decade produced a wave of revolutionary and reactionary Islamic movements worldwide. Echoes of this appeared in the Rohingya area, creating further backlash, along with more restrictive citizenship tests in 1974.

A 1978 counterinsurgency operation dubbed Nagamin (Dragon King; pronounced: nah-gah-MIN) resulted in a quarter of a million refugees fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh. A new law in 1982 restricted citizenship to a particular list of "national races" who could trace their ancestry to Konbaung Burma. In effect, this rendered the entire Rohingya population stateless with no possibility of acquiring or inheriting Myanmar citizenship. Few among the Rohingya could prove their residency even back to the colonial era due to poverty, the disruptions of war, and a general lack of documentation—a reality illustrated powerfully in the novel. The inability to provide proof reinforced the idea that the Rohingya as a group were illegal and foreign, and that they did not belong in Myanmar.

The 1980s and 1990s led to further discrimination against the Rohingya population, including restrictions on their movements, attacks by Buddhist vigilantes, the burning of mosques and villages, and ultimately mass deportations that amounted to genocide. A brief glimmer of democratic hope followed Ne Win's abdication in 1988 but led to several more decades of military rule and civil conflict. In 2008, a new constitution guaranteeing military control was proposed by the military government, and in 2010, an elected government was seated for the first time since 1962. But democratic reforms and a freer press did nothing to reverse the categorization of Rohingya as illegal residents.

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The immediate context of *Crossing the Farak River* is the 2017 forced mass deportation of Rohingya people from Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships in northern Arakan, which focused international attention on their plight.

Key Cultural Themes in the Novel

Tea Shops: The Burmese tea shop, like the French café, is a cultural icon. The local tea shop is a low-cost eatery and a meeting place—part of life's daily rhythm for many. Burmese-style tea makes heavy use of sweetened condensed milk. Plain green tea can also be found, usually in a thermos at the table, to be used for chasing the sweetness and rinsing cups. Most tea shops serve snacks like Chinese-style fried dough sticks, Indian flatbreads with chickpeas, and samosas (savory Indian stuffed pastries). Although the menu reflects Indian and Chinese influences that date to the period of British colonialism, tea culture has deep roots in Myanmar. In fact, the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, is native to the mountainous region that includes northern Myanmar and southwest China. As described in the book, child workers, usually boys, are a constant presence in tea shops, where they yell orders, serve tables, and clean cups.

Here are some resources for exploring Burmese tea shops:

- "Anatomy of a Burmese Tea Shop – Myanmar," a photo essay by Dustin Main: https://dustinmain.com/home/anatomy-of-a-burmese-teashop-myanmar (Note the prevalence of young boys working in the shop.)

- "The Politics of Myanmar's Changing Tea Culture" by Victoria Milko, an article on new tea shop trends highlighting the cultural gap between generations, urban/rural populations, income levels, etc. (NPR, December 5, 2017) https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/12/05/567747948/the-politics-of-myanmars-changing-tea-culture

Child Labor and Human Trafficking: Child labor in Myanmar is not confined to tea shop boys or to the Rohingya population, though Rohingya children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation as laborers, child soldiers, and sex workers. The novel does a good job of illustrating the gravity of this issue without getting too dark. The malevolent but buffoonish U gets his due at the hands of the children. In real life, most children are

not so lucky, of course. Here are some resources that might be useful for exploring child labor in Myanmar:

- Some interesting videos are available on the International Labour Organization website. See, for example: Myanmar Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (2013–2023). None seem to be of Rohingya children, but some of the circumstances are similar: https://www.ilo.org/yangon/projects/WCMS_419969/lang--en/index.htm

- The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs has in-depth statistics and analysis of the state of both child labor and forced labor practices in Myanmar: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/burma

Chinlone: *Chinlone* is a popular sport described on p. 34. It involves kicking a cane ball with knees and feet, like playing with a footbag (e.g., a Hacky Sack, a small beanbag). One version involves a high net as in badminton or volleyball. Videos of *chinlone* in action can be found online. Here is an article about the sport being brought to Australia by refugees from Myanmar: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-11/caneball-chinlone-canberra-national-championships/8608208

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