

Hanna Alkaf. *The Weight of Our Sky*. New York: Salaam Reads / Simon & Schuster, 2019. ix + 288 pp. ISBN: 9781534426085.

Reviewed by Sharifah Aishah Osman

Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The young adult fiction book market both globally and in Malaysia has traditionally been dominated by British and American authors like J. K. Rowling, Suzanne Collins, John Green, Neil Gaiman, and the like, whether in terms of sales, accessibility, or public recognition. A most welcome development in recent years is the inclusion of diverse voices and experiences in the production and publication of youth literature, which acknowledges the need for greater representation of “LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities” in order to more “fully reflect and honour the lives of young people” (We Need Diverse Books.org). As a result of such activism, the YA publishing industry demonstrated tremendous growth in the last decade, as seen in the success and popularity of multiracial authors such as Angie Thomas, Jenny Han, Gloria Chao, Samira Ahmed, and Zen Cho, among many others.

The publication of *The Weight of Our Sky* (aimed at readers aged 12 and above) earlier this year heralds the rise of Malaysian author Hanna Alkaf in international circles, and is an exciting and well-deserved recognition. Alkaf describes herself as an author of “unapologetically Malaysian” stories, and her previous publications include *Gila: A Journey through Moods and Madness* (2016), and short stories in the anthologies *Champion Fellas* and *Chronicles of KK* (both 2016), and *Little Basket* (2017). *The Weight of Our Sky* is her first YA novel, and has been translated into Bahasa Malaysia (*Di Situ Langit Dijunjung*, 2019), as well as adapted into a serialized graphic novel on Webtoon since October this year.

So, what makes *The Weight of Our Sky* an “unapologetically Malaysian” work of historical fiction? Alkaf’s daring choice of subject matter, for one, given that the book comes with a warning that “it is not a light and easy read” and contains “graphic violence, death, racism, OCD, and anxiety triggers” (vii), and should thus be approached with caution. Set in Kuala Lumpur during the controversial events of 13 May 1969, the author’s depiction of her protagonist Melati Ahmad as a sixteen-year-old Malay school girl forced to confront her inner demons as she struggles to be reunited with her mother during the politically-fuelled race riots is a Malaysian coming-of-age story unlike any other. Based on archival research and driven by the desire to address “this seminal point in our past”, Alkaf reminds readers that for all its pain and horror, the events of “May 13” (as the

incident is popularly known) should not be glossed over, or relegated to “a couple of paragraphs in our textbooks”. It is part of “our story” and is dedicated to “anak-anak Malaysia everywhere”, for it has shaped our nation into the country it is today (vii-viii).

Narrated in thirteen chapters (the figure is richly symbolic), the plot revolves around music-loving Melati, who suffers from undiagnosed obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD (a condition triggered by her grief over the death of her father, and her fear and anxiety of losing her mother, or anyone else she holds dear), and whose daily routine consists of physically and emotionally exhausting moments of counting and tapping as a means of keeping “the djinn” in her head at bay. Melati finds herself embroiled in the tensions between ethnic Chinese and Malays on the fateful evening of May 13 as she is out with her best friend Safiyah in the city. Rescued by a quick-thinking Chinese woman, Auntie Bee, Melati returns home with her, but is shattered by survivor’s guilt as she feels she has been forced by circumstances to leave Safiyah behind to die. As she seeks shelter with the Chong family during the curfew in the days that follow, Melati’s OCD threatens to spiral out of control: she becomes increasingly anxious about losing her mother, while also having to deal with the overt racism displayed by Auntie Bee’s eldest son Frankie, who resents her presence in their home. Yet she also finds a friend in his younger brother Vincent, who is compassionate, thoughtful, and risks considerable danger in order to help her find her mother. With Kuala Lumpur smouldering in the background, and rival Malay and Chinese gangs threatening to destroy the other in order to protect their turf, the novel’s pace is unrelenting as readers are taken on one suspenseful adventure after another until Melati is finally reunited with her mother Salmah, a nurse.

Much of the strength of the novel rests in Alkaf’s skillful development of her themes and characters, imparting them with complexity and credibility. Her portrayal of Melati battling with the djinn as she experiences yet another draining episode of OCD, for example, is often unflinchingly brutal in its realism: such scenes could be distressing even for those without mental health issues. Yet these are never gratuitous or overdone, as Alkaf’s narrative is not only sensitive but also respectful in its representation of the intense mental anguish and self-loathing that afflict those with such conditions. A key scene from Chapter Twelve in which Melati is finally able to vanquish her fear of the djinn by recounting the moments in which she has been courageous in the face of numerous odds (“*You are more than your Djinn, the voice whispers. You always have been*”) is all the more empowering and satisfying as we realize how much she has endured to arrive at this point of healing and redemption. It is deeply powerful and emotional writing, and a highly relatable means of imparting a message of strength and resilience to young audiences faced with a challenging and confusing world in which adults do not have all the answers.

Alkaf's treatment of racism is also nuanced, constructed to challenge not only the stereotypes that have fuelled the divide between ethnic Chinese and Malays, but also to emphasize how playing such dangerous political games can result in mutual suffering and the loss of innocent lives. The extremism displayed by Frankie and the parang-wielding Chinese gangsters is countered by the kindness and generosity of Auntie Bee, Uncle Chong, and Vincent who treat Melati and their multiracial neighbours like family; Malay mobs yelling "Chinese pigs!" and burning down shops are juxtaposed with an elderly Malay trishaw man who risks his life to protect innocent bystanders of all races. The bond between "kakak" Melati and May, the lost child she rescues from the Rex Cinema, is another example of a common humanity that unites us as Malaysians.

With its riveting story-telling, compelling characters, and bold portrayal of racism and mental illness (two traditionally provocative themes in YA literature), *The Weight of Our Sky* not only demonstrates the promising development of this genre in the hands of an exciting new Malaysian voice, but also highlights the power of young adult literature in its capacity to depict profound and difficult subjects. Indeed, in light of the increasingly polarized political views being expressed in contemporary mainstream and social media, it is even more imperative that we remind ourselves of Melati's "unapologetically Malaysian" declaration in the face of chaos and conflict: "Where we plant our feet is where we must hold up the sky. We live and die by the rules of the land we live in. But this country belongs to all of us! We make our own sky, and we can hold it up—together!" (264). Despite our checkered history, Alkaf suggests that literature can help us heal as a nation, but doing this takes courage, concerted effort, and the acknowledgement of our past in all its brutal honesty.