

## Exploring Multiculturalism in ‘The Weight of Our Sky’ by Hanna Alkaf among TESL Pre-Service Teachers

### *Meneroka Isu Silangbudaya berdasarkan Sastera Hanna Alkaf ‘Disitu Langit Dijunjung’ dalam Kalangan Guru Pelatih TESL*

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#### ABSTRACT

*One of the aspirations of the teaching of literature in English is to teach and promote ethics and values to students through literary texts by examining social cultural and political issues. In this study, we aim to examine the effectiveness of using ‘The Weight of Our Sky’ by Hanna Alkaf to interrogate multicultural issues. This novel is based on one of the darkest periods in Malaysian history, the 13th May 1969 racial riots. Since then, racial issues continue to be a concern and permeate our politics, culture, and social fabric. We examined interpretations of the text relating to multicultural issues of race and race relations by 48 Year 2 TESL student teachers from the Faculty of Education, UKM. This study employed a mixed methodology research, utilising questionnaire, and interview as instruments in collecting the data. The analysis of the data has yielded two main themes, a) the value of ‘TWOOS’ in terms of its i) multicultural values, lessons and conflicts, ii) multicultural themes, iii) multicultural characters, iv) multicultural settings, v) young adult related, and b) the relevance of TWOOS in discussing issues of multiculturalism. This study revealed the value of the novel by encouraging young adult readers to think deeply, be empathetic and be critical when discussing about the multicultural issues in our country.*

*Keywords: Multiculturalism; racial issues; English literature; The Weight of Our Sky; TESL pre service teacher*

#### ABSTRAK

*Salah satu aspirasi pengajaran Sastera Bahasa Inggeris adalah untuk mengajar dan memupukkan etika dan nilai dalam kalangan pelajar melalui pembacaan teks sastera dengan meneliti isu sosial, budaya dan politik. Kajian ini bertujuan meneliti keberkesanan penggunaan ‘Disitu Langit Dijunjung’ hasil karya Hanna Alkaf bagi meneroka isu silangbudaya. Novel ini berdasarkan salah satu sejarah hitam bagi Malaysia iaitu rusuhan kaum 13 Mei 1969. Sejak ia berlaku, isu perkauman masih menjadi kebimbangan dalam politik, budaya dan sosial Malaysia. Kajian ini meneliti tafsiran teks sastera berkaitan isu kaum dan hubungan perkauman oleh 48 pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa kedua dari Fakulti Pendidikan, UKM. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah campuran, dengan penggunaan soal selidik dan temuduga. Hasil kajian menunjukkan 2 tema utama, a) nilai teks sastera dari sudut i) nilai, ajaran dan konflik silangbudaya, ii) tema silangbudaya iii) karakter silangbudaya iv) persekitaran silangbudaya, v) kaitan dengan dewasa muda, dan b) relevan karya ini dalam membincangkan isu silangbudaya. Oleh itu, hasil kajian menunjukkan nilai potensi novel ini sebagai pilihan teks untuk pembaca dewasa muda bagi menggalakkan pemikiran mendalam, sifat empati dan kritikal apabila membincangkan isu silangbudaya dalam negara kita.*

*Keywords: Silangbudaya; hubungan perkauman; Sastera Bahasa Inggeris; Disitu Langit Dijunjung; guru pelatih TESL*

#### INTRODUCTION

Malaysian teachers experience teaching in the classroom consisting of a diverse ethnic group. According to a Malaysian census, 20.07 million (69.1%) are Bumiputras (people of the land), 6.69 million (23%) are Chinese, 2.1 million (6.9%) are Indians and 0.9 million (1.0%) are others (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2018). While Malaysia’s ethnic and cultural diversity has led

to a tourism marketing slogan of ‘Malaysia Truly Asia’ to entice more tourists to visit the country, in the classroom it could be a source of celebration, tensions and conflicts. On a scale of seriousness, at one end of the scale it would lead to stereotypical views of different ethnic groups while at the other end of the spectrum it could lead to discrimination and violence (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin 2021; Noormaizatul Akmar et al. 2021).

It is thus incumbent upon tertiary education in Malaysia to instil positive values among its students living in a multicultural setting which at times may be fraught with conflicts (Hairol Anuar Mak Din et al. 2021). For example, in 2010 two racist incidents acted out by two school principals in Malaysia had caused an uproar amongst all levels of Malaysian multicultural society. In the first incident, the school principal was reported to have said during a school assembly that "Chinese students were not needed here and should return to China while the prayer strings tied around the necks and wrists of Indian students made them look like dogs" (Wu 2014 October 12) after a few Chinese and Indian students had arrived late to school. In the second incident the school principal reprimanded a group of Chinese students and told them to go back to China when they were having breakfast during the Muslim's fasting month which they obviously had the right to do since they were not Muslims (Clara Chooi, 2010). More recently, in 2021, a school in Johor was criticised for segregating the co-curricular activities according to the students' gender and race.

These incidents are grim reminders of the insidious lingering presence of racism in Malaysia. Inherent in these acts is the underlying belief of the Malay's superiority sealed by the Malaysian Constitution, which delineates the Malays and indigenous people as the original people and protects their rights and privileges. In the first incident, it is a constant reminder of the Chinese and Indians' arrival to Malaya as immigrants, that they are second-class citizens. More insidious than that is the derogative remark made to the Indian students debasing the Indian culture. In the second incident, it is an attempt to impose Malay Muslim practice onto the Chinese students. The officials' and public's reactions over these incidents were a good indication of the government's zero tolerant policy on racism. The Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz said "I agree with the public on this... it is frightening to see our educators behaving like that. Severe action must be taken – we cannot, in any way, tolerate this" (Clara Chooi, 2010). Both principals were discharged of their principal position and reassigned to a desk job at a district education department.

Issues of race and racism must be examined within the social cultural and political context of a place and nation. The manifestations of racism vary accordingly depending on the nation state, institutional and citizens' ideology and assumptions underpinning the constructs of race and racism.

Educators must be equipped to examine how they are discursively constructed by the beliefs, ideology and assumptions related to race and racism and how they may continue to perpetuate it if it is not disrupted. In the Malaysian education system, examination on issues of race and racism are not encouraged or at times even allowed. Such is the case when one seeks the Ministry of Education's permission to do research in schools whereby it is stated that one of its conditions is that the research and researcher do not deal with sensitive issues of race and religion (eRAS 2.0). Even if the issue of race is considered too sensitive to be investigated in schools, student teachers need to develop an awareness and ethics and be equipped to deal with it when they start teaching in schools. However, Teacher Education program in Malaysia tend to favour more technical rational approaches focused on developing the student teachers' knowledge and skills in content subject, pedagogy, and methodology.

This study is based on a course 'Teaching of literature: Reading the word and the world', which is a Year 2 course taught to TESL undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education, The National University of Malaysia (UKM). According to the course proforma, "(t)his course is an examination on the value of literary texts to help students to read the word and the world. It aims to help students to become engaged and thoughtful readers, who are able to critically examine literary texts and develop personal responses to texts. It will further develop critical appreciation and cultural awareness for students whose English is a second language." (Course proforma 2018). During the course, student teachers would engage with literary texts that examine themes related to social, cultural, and political issues such as race and racism, prejudice, power and gender stereotyping.

The novel by Hanna Alkaf 'The Weight of Our Sky' (TWOOS) centres around a girl name Melati Ahmad, a teen who suffers from a mental illness. Melati was separated from her mother during the historic race riot in 1969. She goes through a tragic mission of finding her mother with the help of Vincent, a Chinese boy that she meets along the way. Melati has to overcome the brutality of the people who are at war, and she also has to vanquish the *djinn* that controls her thoughts. At the heart of the novel is the question of who belongs to Malaysia and who Malaysia belongs to which are the underlying assumptions driving the racist incident mentioned above.

This paper proposes how the literary text TWOOS could act as a mediator to examine history of race and race relations in Malaysia within the 1969 context, its underlying conflicts and how issues of race and race relations still lingers to the present. The significance of this research is TESL pre-service teachers learned to value the literary text TWOOS as a means to engage with the social, cultural and political issues, by reading the ‘word and the world’, connecting the personal with the political in Malaysian context or more specifically based on this study, as a means to develop their ‘historical consciousness’ which is “one’s ability to apply historical knowledge in life” (Mohd Adib Akmal Ahmad Shatir & Shazlin Amir Hamzah 2021: 51). Hence, this paper aims to investigate the values of ‘TWOOS’ and its relevance to a discussion on multiculturalism in Malaysian context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### ENGLISH LITERATURE IN MALAYSIA

For decades, the English literature syllabus in Malaysia has undergone numerous phases of development and changes were made from time to time. In the year 2000, the position of English literature in Malaysia took a fascinating turn as the Ministry of Education reintroduced a literature in action component in the syllabus of English language. Formerly, literature was perceived as reading materials instead of a subject on its own (Lim, 2018) and the implementation of English literature in both primary and secondary levels function as a purpose of mastering the language (Azlina Abdul Aziz & Nurul Shahira Mohd Raffi 2020).

One of the aspirations of the Standards-Based Secondary Curriculum is to cultivate students with the 21st Century Skills that accentuate on thinking skills and life skills through practices. In addition, the 21st Century Skills intend to produce students with qualities that are able to assist them to compete globally. This includes their ability to think critically and creatively, to cooperate and communicate effectively (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2017). Apart from that, 21st century literacy skill is all about fostering the students on respecting and accepting the opinions and perspectives of other people on critical issues while having the ability to voice their opinion respectfully and effectively (Groenke et al.

2010). Fundamentally, it is important for our students to be taught multicultural values and Malaysia is trying to achieve this through the implementation of Literature subjects in schools. However, the racial issues in Malaysia are still a concern despite the country being a multicultural nation for decades (“Race still an issue” 2019). Komas (2018) reported in the Malaysian Racial Discrimination Report 2017 that the number of racial discrimination issues is increasing and at an alarming rate. This raises the question on the effectiveness of the implementation of current literature component in the English curriculum in producing citizens that are socially, culturally, and historically literate.

According to the National Education Philosophy, the purpose of education is to produce a holistic and integrated development of individuals on a number of aspects, which are intellectual spiritual, emotional, and physical. When the Literature subject was introduced in the English integrated curriculum for secondary school (KBSM), its purpose is to further develop a deeper level of understanding and sensitivity and awareness to human values and issues among the students. In line with that, it aims to make students grow spiritually and emotionally by providing them with ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings related to various societies, cultures, and values through the reading of literary texts (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2000).

In the year 2000, the Malaysian Ministry of Education acknowledged the importance and role of literature in teaching and learning of English by incorporating literature in the syllabus of English subject in schools. According to Tan Yuet Zhou and Azlina Abdul Aziz (2020), the purpose of the literature subject in Malaysian secondary schools should be to nurture students to become citizens of the world through the values and cultures embedded in literature materials. Throughout the two decades, the text selection for English literature in Malaysia has been through a couple of cycles (Lim 2018). Studies that focused on literature and the challenges faced by the learners revealed that some of the challenges include the literary texts did not capture the interest of learners, difficulties with the language and cultural detachment (Hariharan & Shri 2016; Nor Hashimah Isa & Che Ton Mahmud 2012; Sivapalan et al. 2017). Despite the many changes made on the curriculum of English literature, the role and position of English literature in Malaysia is still questionable.

## MULTICULTURAL YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Nilsen and Donelson (2009) categorized YAL as literature that is written for young adults aged between twelve to eighteen which include school students and the ones that have graduated from high school but are not entirely engaged in the lifestyle of an adult. Loh (2009) defines multicultural literature as literature that centers on non-Eurocentric culture, in recognition of the diversity that exist in the world. Multicultural YAL is significant as it allows students to explore the world through their reading experiences and develop an identity and consciousness as global citizens (Nilsen & Donelson 2009; Sharifah Aishah Osman 2019).

Multicultural YAL in the classroom provides great opportunities for students from diverse background to discover vast number of cultures and ethnicities through reading. Furthermore, Young Adult novels also include in-depth discussions on the lives of students of different races and enrich students' cultural values while overcoming stereotypes. Besides that, not only do students get to learn about the interesting culture of other people, they also get to learn about their own culture in detail, through literature, readers will be more understanding of other people's point of views and stories. In other words, students get to obtain new insights and experiences on other ethnic groups. Stallworth and Gibbons (2012) argue, "An effective English language classroom can advocate a sense of interconnectedness and belonging among the diverse community that results in a community that is full of respectful and open-minded people" (p.2). In addition, Samuel and Khan (2013) highlighted the importance of using literature materials that can address and discuss issues and values revolving multiculturalism in assisting the pathway of creating a multiethnic society that is socially cohesive. Fundamentally, multicultural education aids students in acquiring positive attitudes and skills to interact with people of various cultures (Alansari-Kreger 2013).

One of the characteristics of YAL that benefits its readers is the vast number of themes and issues presented in the materials that are very engaging to the readers (Connors 2013). When students engage with the reading materials and find the texts interesting, they will voluntarily read the materials. In addition to that, YAL authors usually strive to incorporate their materials with unfamiliar or overlooked topics which include contemporary and complex social issues that are faced by students (Connors 2013; Sharifah Aishah Osman 2019; Smith et al. 2018). It

is important for students to be exposed to current and complex social issues to develop their critical literacy.

Another benefit of multicultural YAL is that it is extraordinarily empowering to various demographics of students in the classroom as it provides self-affirmation to the readers through the characters and students can connect with the characters and express their empathy (Glenn 2012; Sharifah Aishah Osman 2019). The usage of multicultural literature in the classroom will give students the exposure of what is it like to be the citizens in this diverse world. Studies have shown that teachers can promote the idea of empathy by questioning the students to view the novel through the perspective of both the characters and themselves. YAL can be used as a medium to initiate critical discussion on lives and cultures among students and it helps the students to be more empathetic and understanding individuals. Apart from that, students' cultural awareness can be improved greatly, and their horizons can be broadened through the usage of relevant literature materials in the classroom. Fundamentally, YAL is a worthy source of materials for self-exploration among young adult readers. In this study, TWOOS can be categorized as multicultural YAL because the novel's protagonist is a teenage girl, the setting is in multicultural Malaysia and its theme explores issues related to race and race relations in a diverse society.

## METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employed a mixed method case study research design, utilising a questionnaire and an interview as the research instruments. The research participants chosen were 48 Year 2 TESL students from the Faculty of Education in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, who were taking the course 'Teaching of Literature: Reading the word and the World' where they had to read the YAL novel 'The Weight of Our Sky' (TWOOS) as part of the course requirement. Hence, 48 questionnaires were distributed and collected and three students (Respondent 1=female, Respondent 2=male, Respondent 3=female) were chosen as the respondents of the interview.

The questionnaire was adapted from the checklist of Assessing Children's Literature from the work of Santora (2013) and consists of 16 items. The respondents were required to answer the questions based on a five-point Likert scale

(5 = “strongly agree”; 1 = “strongly disagree”). As for the interview, the respondents were asked open-ended questions as the researchers wanted to explore the possibilities of the responses that the respondents might supply without restriction. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive analysis by providing frequency and percentage counts and the interview sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analysed into themes.

## FINDINGS

The analysis of the questionnaire and the interview have yielded two main themes, a) the value of ‘TWOOS’ in terms of its i) multicultural values, lessons and conflicts, ii) multicultural and young adult themes, iii) multicultural characters, iv) multicultural settings, v) young adult related, and b) the relevance of TWOOS in discussing issues of multiculturalism.

### THE VALUE OF ‘THE WEIGHT OF OUR SKY’ BY HANNA ALKAF

#### Multicultural Values, Lessons and Conflicts

Table 1 illustrates the frequency counts and percentages accumulated for items under

multicultural values, lessons, and conflicts. The respondents were asked whether there are various conflicts for the readers to explore when they read the novel. Only 2.1% (n=1) of them were unsure on whether there are various conflicts to be explored. Whereas most of the respondents (97.9%, n=47) agreed that there are various conflicts to be explored by the readers such as race, race relations and mental health issues. Next, the respondents were asked whether there are several values being explored in the story. Only 4.2% (n=2) of the respondents were unsure if there are several values being explored in the story. The rest of the respondents (95.8%, n=46) believed that there are several values being explored in the story.

Besides that, the respondents were asked if there are several lessons to be learned by the readers when they read the novel. 4.2% (n=2) answered that they were unsure on whether there are several lessons to be learned by the readers. While the majority of them (95.8%, n=46) agreed that there are several lessons that can be learned by the readers. Apart from that, the respondents were asked if the story promotes understanding of our diverse society. Only 2.1% (n=1) of the respondents were neutral on this question. Whereas majority of the respondents (97.9%, n=47) were convinced that the story promotes understanding of our diverse society.

TABLE 1. *Multicultural Values, Lessons and Conflicts*

No.	Statements	Scale / No. of Respondents / Percentage (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	There are various conflicts for the readers to explore.	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2.1)	19 (39.6)	28 (58.3)
2	There are several values being explored in the story.	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4.2)	15 (31.3)	31 (64.4)
3	There are several lessons to be learned by the readers.	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4.2)	19 (39.6)	27 (56.3)
4	The story promotes understanding of our diverse society.	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2.1)	17 (35.4)	30 (62.5)

Scale 1: Strongly disagree   Scale 2: Disagree   Scale 3: Neutral   Scale 4: Agree   Scale 5: Strongly agree

The findings corresponded with findings from interviews conducted. When asked on what are the values explored when they read the novel, all three respondents talked about how there are many values being explored throughout their reading and the most evident value is compassion, tolerance and kindness without discrimination. Respondent 1 argues,

“The story highlights multicultural values throughout the novel and it taught me that as a multiracial country, we need to tolerate each other in order to live peacefully. Nowadays, racial issues keep getting more sensitive but those are because the media is

trying to break the bond between races so as Malaysians, we must ensure that our bond will never break and always unite together because we are able to live peacefully despite the different races and religions”.

Respondent 2 is in the opinion that the novel emphasises acceptance and forgiveness as well as being receptive to help regardless of where the source is from in our time of need. He says, “*I think acceptance and forgiveness are the main values that the novel is trying to emphasise. We should accept any help or favour that come in our way despite*

where they come from". While respondent 3 thinks that integrity is needed during a time of conflict,

"From this novel I learned about integrity. It is important to choose your thoughts and actions based on values rather than for personal gains. It has been portrayed by the protagonist of the novel, Melati when she helped a little girl named May. The value that we can emphasise here is that Melati is a girl with the warmest heart. Imagine how can she manage to help others in need despite the chaotic incident with the killings and shootings. Integrity is about doing the right thing even when no one is watching".

Based on the findings above, it can be inferred that the novel 'TWOOS' comprises a variety of multicultural values, lessons, and conflicts for readers to delve into as they read the novel. This finding is supported by Samuel and Khan (2013) as they highlighted the importance of using literature materials that can address and discuss issues and

values revolving multiculturalism as it will assist the pathway of creating a multiethnic society that is socially cohesive. Hence, it can be inferred that these multicultural values incorporated in TWOOS are very relevant to these pre-service TESL teachers in discussing issues of multiculturalism as according to Alansari-Kreger (2013), multicultural education aids students in acquiring positive attitudes and skills to interact with people of various cultures.

Multicultural Themes

Table 2 illustrates the frequency counts and percentages accumulated for multicultural and young adult themes. The respondents were asked whether the story exposed the readers to multiple themes. The majority 95.8% (n=46) of the respondents agreed that the story exposed the readers to multiple themes.

TABLE 2. Multicultural Themes

No.	Statements	Scale / No. of Respondents / Percentage (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	The story exposed the readers to multiple themes.	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4.2)	16 (33.3)	30 (62.5)

Scale 1: Strongly disagree    Scale 2: Disagree    Scale 3: Neutral    Scale 4: Agree    Scale 5: Strongly agree

The respondents were asked on the various themes in this novel. The responses provided by the respondents highlighted two main themes in TWOOS which are racism and mental illness. According to respondent 1, one of the main themes of the story is on the destructive nature of racism, "I like how the story shows the theme of the destructions of unity during the 1969 racial riot and the ugliness of racism. It highlights the importance of unity among us". Another theme is on mental illness as it is experienced by the main protagonist, Melati, "The novel managed to create awareness on mental health when the theme of mental health is portrayed in the novel through one of the characters. Due to lack of knowledge, people tend to view other people with mental illness as lunatics. Basically, the author educates the readers by including mental illness as one of the themes" (Respondent 2).

It can be inferred that the themes incorporated in TWOOS are related to young adults since they live in

a multicultural world where issues on race and race relations permeate their lives. In addition, mental health issues are not confined to adults and may be experienced by young adult learners. This reflects several literatures in which it is asserted that young adult literature materials comprise of elements such as themes and issues that are very engaging to young adult readers (Connors 2013).

Multicultural Characters

When asked on the representation of characters in TWOOS, most of the respondents (93.8%, n=45) agreed that the characters in the novel represented people from a variety of cultural groups (Table 3). Furthermore, the respondents agreed that both female and male characters in TWOOS are depicted in leadership role (93.7%, n=45). Next, the respondents (95.8%, n=46) also agreed that the characters represented in the story are realistically and genuinely represented.

TABLE 3. *Multicultural Characters*

No.	Statements	Scale / No. of Respondents / Percentage (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	The characters represented people from a variety of cultural groups.	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (6.3)	9 (18.8)	36 (75)
2	Both females and males are depicted in leadership role.	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (6.3)	17 (35.4)	28 (58.3)
3	The characters are realistically and genuinely represented.	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4.2)	21 (43.8)	25 (52.1)

Scale 1: Strongly disagree   Scale 2: Disagree   Scale 3: Neutral   Scale 4: Agree   Scale 5: Strongly agree

The findings were in line with findings from the interview. The respondents highlighted how the characters are representation of real people in real life. Respondent 1 argues, *“The characters play roles that we have seen a lot in our daily life and the way of their thinking is a norm in our society so that is how their characters impact on how multicultural issues are being taught in class”*. Respondent 2 asserts *“Each character has their own defining way of how to interact with one another based on their different upbringing and understanding of other cultures around them”*. Respondent 3 argues that the characters’ emotions conveyed in the novel aids the readers understanding of their situations arising from the racial conflicts, *“The characters represented in the novel help in teaching multicultural issues in a way which from the emotions portrayed, readers can understand their situation. For example, we can clearly see the main character’s fear and determination”*. Melati was in fear of her mother’s live and was determined to find her safe and sound even when she had many obstacles to overcome.

This element of the novel is very advantageous to the readers as they get to explore multiculturalism through the characters. These findings are supported by Glenn (2012), and Sharifah Aishah Osman (2019) as they mentioned that young adult literature is extraordinarily powerful to various demographics of students in the classroom for its ability to connect with the readers through the characters. Even if the characters in young adult literature are different culturally, readers will be able to express their empathy as young adult literature is a great way for them to learn about community and culture.

#### Multicultural Settings

In Table 4 below, the majority of the respondents (95.8%, n=46) agreed that there are a variety of settings reflected in the story, the cultural settings in the story were represented realistically (93.7%, n=45) and 95.8% (n=46) of the respondents believed that a diverse population were represented in the story.

TABLE 4. *Multicultural Settings*

No.	Statements	Scale / No. of Respondents / Percentage (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	The story reflects a variety of settings.	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4.2)	20 (41.7)	26 (54.2)
2	The cultural settings in the story represented realistically.	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (6.3)	16 (33.3)	29 (60.4)
3	A diverse population represented in the story.	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4.2)	19 (39.6)	27 (56.3)

Scale 1: Strongly disagree   Scale 2: Disagree   Scale 3: Neutral   Scale 4: Agree   Scale 5: Strongly agree

One of the respondents argued how the settings attract the curiosity of the readers. According to her, while the setting is within Malaysian context, its historical setting of 1969, only 12 years after Malaysia’s independence was rather unfamiliar to her in light of the race relations at the time, which makes the story fascinating. She says, *“Since readers are not familiar with the settings, they will*

*keep wondering and questioning on the plot and what is going to happen as they read the novel and I find that very exciting”* (Respondent 3).

The findings also revealed that when readers are exposed to a variety of cultural settings that identified with them, it will help them to connect with the materials better. Existing literatures argue that some of the challenges faced by learners in

dealing with literature materials include the literary texts did not capture the interest of learners and cultural detachment (Hariharan & Shri, 2016; Nor Hashimah Isa & Che Ton Mahmud, 2012; Sivapalan et al., 2017). Thus, the incorporation of a variety of cultural settings that were realistically represented and relevant to the readers is essential.

Young Adult Related

In Table 5, 91.6% (n=44) of the respondents are convinced that the story is interesting to young adult readers. They also believed that the story is age appropriate to ensure what is presented can be understood by the readers (87.5%, n=42).

TABLE 5. Young Adult Related

No.	Statements	Scale / No. of Respondents / Percentage (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	The story is interesting to young adult readers.	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (8.3)	16 (33.3)	28 (58.3)
2	The story is age appropriate to ensure the readers can understand what is presented.	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (12.5)	14 (29.2)	28 (58.3)

Scale 1: Strongly disagree    Scale 2: Disagree    Scale 3: Neutral    Scale 4: Agree    Scale 5: Strongly agree

One of the respondents when interviewed mentioned on YAL appeals to young adult readers through the issues portrayed and language used. Respondent 1 says, "I find young adult literature very appealing to young adult readers as the issues highlighted are very interesting and they can relate to. Also, the language used in young adult literature materials are appropriate".

This finding reflects several studies by Connors (2013), Sharifah Aishah Osman (2019) and Smith et al. (2018) as according to them, young adult literature is equipped with unfamiliar or overlooked topics which include contemporary and complex issues that young adults can relate to and should be

exposed to so that they can engage with the materials better.

RELEVANCE OF TWOOS IN DISCUSSING ISSUES OF MULTICULTURALISM

In Table 6, most of the respondents (97.9%, n=47) agreed that the story offers readers a variety of things to think about, to question and to consider. Also, the respondents were asked if the story encourages discussions and the majority of them (93.7%, n=45) agreed. The respondents (97.9%, n=47) also believed that the story exposed the readers to multiple perspectives.

TABLE 6. Encourages Discussions on Multiculturalism

No.	Statements	Scale / No. of Respondents / Percentage (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	The story offers readers a variety of things to think about, to question and to consider	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2.1)	18 (37.5)	29 (60.4)
2	The story encourages discussions.	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (6.3)	17 (35.4)	28 (58.3)
3	The story exposed the readers to multiple perspectives.	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2.1)	18 (37.5)	29 (60.4)

Scale 1: Strongly disagree    Scale 2: Disagree    Scale 3: Neutral    Scale 4: Agree    Scale 5: Strongly agree

During the interview session, the respondents were asked whether they find the usage of TWOOS is relevant in teaching issues of multiculturalism. All three respondents responded that TWOOS is relevant and very useful in teaching issues of multiculturalism among the readers. Respondent 1 says, "It is very useful in giving a clear vision of the issues being discussed and the language used to talk about multiculturalism are not that hard so it appeals to young adult readers in which it doesn't

bore them with bombastic words". Respondent 2 argues, "YAL authors mostly write their stories that focus on multiculturalism issues through interesting themes and characters, and this works. Not just that, sometimes YAL authors write based on their own personal experience or experiences of people around them and because of this, their stories are compelling to the readers".

The respondents were also asked in what way the story presented in the novel encourages discussions.



Respondent 1 mentioned how the several perspectives from various characters played a huge part in encouraging discussions among the readers. She argues, “*The story encourages discussions by giving different perspectives of each character and how they view any situations*” (Respondent 1). Additionally, respondent 2 responded that when the readers are provided with multiple perspectives, it enables them to be more emphatic and understanding of the situations that the characters are in. To quote him, “*The reason why it is important for readers to be exposed to multiple perspectives is because it encourages readers themselves to have multiple point of view on the characters’ thoughts and feelings, thus justifying their actions and decisions that were made*” (Respondent 2). Finally, respondent 3 has this to say on the message of TWOOS,

“The story and messages from *The Weight of Our Sky* by Hanna Alkaf are based on a real history and a true event that happened in our beloved country. We need to study our politics and our history to avoid anything like it from ever happening again. Hence, it is very important for our youths to be exposed to this kind of novel. The decision ultimately lies in the hands of the people. Fighting is incited by the people, but so is peace. It all comes down to whether or not we want to see each other as Malaysians, as people, and whether or not we are willing to hold up our sky together, no matter the forces that try to drive us apart”.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the novel TWOOS is relevant to young adult readers in discussing issues of multiculturalism as the elements in the novel encouraged them to think deeply, be empathetic and be critical when discussing about the racial conflicts in our country. This is in line with Sharifah Aishah Osman (2019) in which she has stated that it is essential to give great opportunities to students as young adults to have in-depth discussions on the lives of students of different races and enrich students’ cultural values while overcoming stereotypes.

### CONCLUSION

This paper offers several recommendations elicited from the findings. Firstly, with regard to the potential of TWOOS in discussing issues of multiculturalism among its readers, a national survey among students and English teachers in Malaysia needs to be done to identify their perception on the usage of TWOOS and its implementation in the classroom. Since Malaysia is a multiracial country, it is important for

our younger generations to be taught the values of multiculturalism in order for them to function as citizens who are culturally and critically literate. Finally, the government needs to be aware of the potential values of the materials being used in the classroom in promoting ethics and moral values. It is vital for our students to be provided with literature materials that will help them to grow as individuals who are respectful and mindful of their multicultural surroundings.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that the multicultural novel TWOOS has many values that can be offered to its readers. Apart from that, this research also revealed that TWOOS is relevant to young adult readers in discussing and exploring issues of multiculturalism through the incorporation of multicultural and young adult elements. In addition, it is hoped that this study has provided clearer insights on how suitable implementation of young adult literature like TWOOS can further a discussion with students on issues of multiculturalism.

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