

Literature Circle's Understanding of Race and Race Relations in The Weight of Our Sky by Hanna Alkaf

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ABSTRACT

The exploration and depiction of race and race relations in literature, particularly through the documentation of historical events, is crucial in fostering dialogue and understanding among readers. Despite the sensitivity of this topic, literature serves as a pivotal platform for learning and comprehending the complexities of race and related issues. In the Malaysian context, the reluctance of the government to address the 1969 racial riots presents a barrier to understanding race relations. Thus, restricting the means of understanding our country's past history of race and race relations. Hence, this case study aimed to explore how the literary text 'The Weight of Our Sky' by Hanna Alkaf addresses the issue of race and race relations in Malaysia to provide a deep understanding of race and race relations among literature circles. This study employed a quantitative research design where convenience sampling was implied to select 67 respondents of TESL undergraduate student-teachers who have read the novel, where a questionnaire instrument adopted and adapted from Assessing Children's literature; Anti-Defamation League was used. The findings revealed that the novel effectively contributed to a deeper understanding of race and race relations, particularly through its collection, story, character, themes, and setting. These insights are anticipated to underscore the importance of utilizing literature and providing insights on the relevance of using books to facilitate discussions on race and race relations in Malaysia.

Contribution/Originality: This paper enhances comprehension of race and race relations, particularly through its exploration of narrative elements. The insights from this analysis are expected to emphasize the significance of leveraging literature as a critical tool for facilitating informed discussions surrounding race and race relations in Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Nations characterized by multiracial and multicultural demographics display a diverse tapestry of ethnicities, languages, and religious beliefs, often accompanied by significant foreign-born or minority communities. The proficient management of such diversity presents a multitude of challenges and opportunities as these nations endeavor to promote integration among disparate cultural and societal backgrounds. Malaysia has dignified itself as an exemplar of a multiracial country with multicultural unison in over sixty-seven years of its existence and establishment as a nation. In the context of a post-colonial nation, Malaysia as a mixed population and a multiracial nation has made determined attempts to project the unity of its people as part of their national identity. However, the 13th May 1969 tragedy remains a crater in the people's pneuma thus far, as [Chin \(2021\)](#) believed that it is kept as a social memory that is not further encouraged to be discussed due to the magnitude of sensitivity regarding discussions about race relations in Malaysia. [Show \(2021\)](#) attested that the people of Malaysia are continually admonished of the tragedy, that it is used by certain groups as a tactic to fearmonger the people that the rioting outbreak will happen again if the status quo is accosted. This act of demurring the learning and discussion to understand better our country's history of race relations silenced the necessity to unfold the racial injustices and historic racism, with its possible solutions ([Williams, 2004](#); [Seth, 2020](#)). Hence, by turning away from the polarized autocratic constructions, and pivoting attention on our collective past ([Chin & Quayum, 2021](#)) we can overcome the dissimilarity, and reinstate the spirit of assimilation and friendly union to attain common goals as a unified nation. But this must be achieved with the people's good understanding of race and race relations in Malaysia, which can be obtained through reading and understanding written literary texts and literature.

Specifically in Malaysia, there are a growing number of discoveries of existing literary texts and recent book publications which call for dialogue of race and race relations ([Vethamani, 2020](#)), that can help the nation learn about their country's history and the past relations of the races in Malaysia. Quoting the context of our country which had faced a politically fuelled racial outbreak on the 13th of May 1969, meaningful dialogues and racial discussions in unfolding our race and race relations history through literature as a medium remains an unsettling issue among Malaysian citizens and its political leaders. The understanding and acceptance of the historical events commemoration regarding race and race relations still spare a vast realm of debate in the literary field due to the seriousness and significance of the subject matter towards our multiracial society. However, as [Adukia et al. \(2023\)](#) mentioned, representations of racial history and racial issues in books can address and preserve the incidents that happened in the past, helping people to acknowledge their history in its blunt honesty.

In the refashioning of one's comprehension of race and race relations in a plural society, the use of literary texts and books as a mediator to navigate race-based discussion in the literary sphere can create a safe and welcoming environment for readers to learn about their country's history and their reflection about race and ethnicity ([Willie-LeBreton, 2016](#)). Hence, it can help them to further traverse their personal experiences in reading and learning 'sensitive' and 'difficult' topics regarding race and culture. Within Malaysia, our literary terrain has observed a positive rise in racial historical and political write-ups, which can be ascribed to local writers' and publishers' efforts. The existence of books that encourage race-based discussion exposes the readers to the contents that will help them to reassess their perspectives in contributing to their understanding of

race relations (Apple, 1995), as well as leading to the development of intercultural competence (Birketveit, 2015) which can shape the readers' attitudes and beliefs about their history (Adukia et al., 2022) to be better informed and equipped individuals in a democratic nation. Corroborating that, there is a paramount significance on the use of relevant literary texts or books in literature to provide an adequate understanding of race and race relations in our country.

In understanding race relations in Malaysia, Lewison et al. (2016) noted that Malaysia is notable for its multi-racial elements consisting of its people of many races to which the three largest groups are known as the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The subdivision and polarization of race introduced by the British colonization highlighted the initial intention of the divide within our nation in Malaya. The Federation of Malaya then gained independence in 1957, which led Singapore and North Borneo to join as a unified nation. Singapore had joined Malaysia as a country in 1963, however, it stood its bearing as an independent nation which led to traction between the Malay and Chinese communities, which eventually led to the serious riot on the 13th of May 1969 (Lewison, 2016). The consequences of the riot are seen in the government's action of suspending the parliament and press under serious emergency force, which helmed the establishment of the National Operations Council, where the government functioned as a de-facto government from 1969 until 1971. In February 1971, the parliament was reunited with a distinctive rule prohibiting racially sensitive issues from being brought into any discussions or openly altercated in any circumstances (Hashim, 1983). The out-turn of this special force had created disengagement and detachment of intelligent discussions and talk regarding race and race relations, in written text and our nation (Noor, 2009) which hampered the exposure and reading of race in our country. In order to achieve racial literacy and the understanding of race and race relations, it takes on a significant symbolic status as it is embedded in the issues related to its representations in literature and language, specifically in educational and academic settings (Hirschman, 1979). With the help of relevant books or literature which can help individuals to develop their own understanding of race and race relations, so they are able to probe the past racial issues and scrutiny the effects on their own experiences and representation in the society (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Extending the comprehension of race and race relations as a distinctive understanding must require the people to first understand the knowledge regarding their country's past history, by using books and literature as the headway. Hence, this study seeks to achieve the following objective:

- i. To investigate how *The Weight of Our Sky* by Alkaf (2019) addresses issues of race and race relations in the novel based on the criteria of collection, story, character, theme and settings to provide an understanding of race and race relations in Malaysia.

2.Literature Review

2.1 Race and Race Relations in Malaysia

The term "race" in the Malay language is commonly referred to as "bangsa," which according to Milner (2007) and Nakamura (2015), encompasses the ideas of family, genealogy, and lineage but has evolved to include a broader definition related to a society's groups defined by their distinct customs, religion, culture, and origin. Nazri et al. (2022) emphasized that "bangsa" has come to represent the various racial groups in Malaysia, such as "*bangsa Melayu*," "*bangsa Cina*," and "*bangsa India*." Hirschman (1986)

suggested that the concept of race or "*bangsa*" was introduced by the British to distinguish different people based on their biological groups, while [Idris \(2008\)](#) argued that the concept of race was prevalent in the Malay world even before British colonial rule in Malaya, a view supported by [Reddy and Selvanathan \(2020\)](#).

[Hirschman \(1986\)](#) also pointed out that before the term "race" was used, "nationalities" was the preferred term, as "race" was seen to have a broader and more definitive meaning. The current delineation of people in Malaysia is based on two primary phenotypes: the "Caucasian" phenotype consisting of descendants of Dutch, Arab, British, Turkish, and Indian origins, among others, and the "Chinese" phenotype representing people of Chinese, Malay descent, and indigenous origins. [Grossberg \(2007\)](#) emphasized the importance of viewing the concept of race as a singular lens to address societal challenges rather than isolating it as a class, while [Aminnuddin \(2020\)](#) highlighted the contextualization of the concept of race as a means to understand the various relations and positions within broader social structures.

Malaysia is well-known as a country with a diverse population, and it is widely recognized globally as a prime example of a multi-racial society. Given our multi-racial makeup, according to [Nakamura \(2015\)](#), the cycle of race relations in Malaysia can be traced back to the British policies that categorized races before Malaysia gained independence in 1957, culminating in the tragedy on May 13, 1969, followed by attempts at reconciliation and the current state of affairs. Previously, the British had used local political systems to foster oppressive attitudes towards the people of Malaya, leading to political polarization and division. Malays were depicted as submissive and reliant on others, reinforcing the stereotype of lazy Malays with limited intellectual capabilities. [Chin \(2022\)](#) revealed that the British perceived the Chinese as hardworking, industrious, and potentially threatening to British economic interests. As for the Indian population, the British viewed them as compliant, subservient, and inexpensive labor, readily controllable and utilized to address labor shortages in Malaya ([Shanmugavelu et al., 2020](#)).

In line with this, it is evident that Malaysia's deep-seated racial polarization and division stem from its complex historical roots shaped by British intervention. The primary fault line in the country lies along racial and ethnic divisions ([Welsh, 2018](#)), and it is widely believed that following independence in 1957, the dominant narrative of the country has revolved around the Malays, the largest racial group in the country. This has resulted in the other ethnic groups in Malaysia, such as the Chinese, Indian, and indigenous groups in Malaya, not enjoying equal rights and status, as the Malays were granted the special status of 'Ketuanan Melayu'. Thus, [Welsh \(2018\)](#) pointed out that Malaysia's traditional hierarchy of racial groups has faced numerous challenges, laying bare racial tensions, as believed by [Yap \(2019\)](#) that one of the most significant racial challenges Malaysia has faced is the racial riot of May 13, 1969.

2.2. 13th May 1969 Racial Riot

Malaysia was considered to be a relatively new nation which was facing very frangible race relations during the period of tragedy. The turmoil of the racial rifts happened due to the murder which occurred before the polling day on 10th May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, affecting two party workers ([Show, 2021](#)). The two party associates who were murdered were reportedly from UMNO and the communist-associated Labour Party ([Othman & Ali, 2018](#)). According to [The Straits Times \(1969\)](#) newspaper in 1969

which reported that the preliminary result of the polling day stated the Alliance were losing to the Chinese opposition parties namely GERAKAN and DAP. On the preceding polling day, conflict commenced and the funeral processions proceeded for the two affected casualties. Allegedly on 11th and 12th May 1969, the opposition parties gathered in Central Kuala Lumpur and started to wreak havoc by throwing racial insults towards the Malay people which escalated the dispute. Following that, UMNO Youth launched a counter-procession on 13th May 1969. The means of the attack from the Malay people were the results of the Chinese people's provocation regarding the encroachment of Article 152 and 153, where they demanded for equal status quo and privilege of the non-Malays and Malays. [Narayanan and Abdullah \(2012\)](#) stated that a total of 196 of Malaysians died, accumulated from the death of 143 people from the Chinese community, 25 from Malay community and 28 people from other races. The tumultuous incident of racial crises was Malaysia's turning point of political and administration system where it had affected the country's foundation of race relations. Tun Razak emerged as Majlis Gerakan Negara (MAGERAN)'s director and gave stern warning towards communists and idealists not to stir political amiy, in which [Yusoff and Mahmud \(2002\)](#) stated that the government remained to take strict measures towards people and ideas that intended to disseminate false proposition that can affect Malaysian's harmony.

2.3. The Weight of Our Sky by [Alkaf \(2019\)](#)

[Alkaf's \(2019\)](#) novel, *The Weight of Our Sky*, is set in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, during the racial riots of May 13, 1969. [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) tells the story through the eyes of the protagonist, Melati Ahmad, a sixteen-year-old Malay-Eurasian schoolgirl who was in search of her missing mother during the politically fuelled Sino-Malay racial riots. The novel addressed the historical roots of the country and had emphasized how sinister political agendas could result in the loss of innocent lives ([Osman, 2019](#)). [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) also explored elements related to race relations in Malaysia, pertaining its collection, story, characters, themes and setting that is including extremism in racism. The story introduced antagonistic characters such as the Malay mobs and Chinese gangsters while also portraying positive aspects of race relations, such as when Melati was rescued by a Chinese woman named Auntie Bee and befriended Auntie Bee's son, Vincent. The novel also delved into the resentment felt by Auntie Bee's son, Frankie, towards the Malays due to false communist propaganda wrongly instilled in him. Through her work, [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) successfully presented a bold portrayal of race and race relations, highlighting the potential of literature as a mediator in addressing complex and challenging subjects ([Vethamani, 2020](#)), while also emphasizing the need for courage, concerted efforts, and understanding of the past in promoting unity among the people of Malaysia.

2.4. Race and Race Relations in Literature

In the discussion of race and race relations in written literary artwork or literature, [Vethamani \(2020\)](#) attested that there were a number of Malaysian writers who addressed racial issues in the background of Malaysian Literature in English, to highlight that the events were crucial to be commemorated as a history of our own. Despite the subject matter is still a continuous debate in Malaysia, [Lim \(2020\)](#) stated that our nation has moved forward, but the act of silencing and erasing the possibilities of discussion regarding 13th May 1969 even if it is presented in literary artwork are an indicator of not healing and recovering from hurt, denial and repression. Even so, [Vethamani \(2020\)](#) vouched that since the 1969 racial riots had been the work subject of many radical

authors in Malaysia, it surely could be a secure foundation to discuss and learn regarding our history. The conversations which revolved around the issues of race relations in relevant literary text had proved to pave the way to initiate intelligent discussions of race, where it is able to change the people's perception after reading it (Johnson & Mason, 2017). However, Thomas and Moye (2015) attested that even with an abundance of materials regarding race and race relations produced and published by authors, the dilemmas faced by most literature circles, especially in school and tertiary education settings is the halt of the discussion pertaining to 'difficult' and 'sensitive' topics. It is crucial that we engage in open and honest conversations about racism, prejudice, bias, power, and equity. With relevant books to read upon race relations, we can create an atmosphere within readers or literature circles to learn and frankly converse about these issues, which then will help to address and destroy misconceptions or racial inequities (Thomas & Moye, 2015).

Literature undeniably serves as a powerful platform for addressing political issues and shaping beliefs, particularly in the context of race relations. In Malaysia, there are numerous literary works that demand attention and discussion about race in society. Notable examples include "Scapegoat" that was published in 1969 by Awang (1969), "Requiem" and "Echoes of Silence", published in 1976 by Ee (1976), "We Are Not Scarecrows", published in 2015 by Isfahanid (2015), and "The Weight of Our Sky", published in 2019 by Alkaf (2019). Despite their significance, these works have yet to be widely discussed due to the sensitive nature of race relations in the country. Therefore, it is imperative to actively utilize relevant literary texts to promote understanding and acknowledgment of race relations, allowing readers to make meaningful inferences from these works.

3. Research Methods

In this case study, the population consists of TESL students, or student-teachers, enrolled in the TESL course at the Faculty of Education at the National University of Malaysia. The sample consists of a specific class of student-teachers taking the course "Teaching of Literature: Reading the Word and the World." which consists of 67 participants. The participants were selected based on specific criteria which is their enrollment in the course. This case study also used a quantitative research design, employing a questionnaire as the main data collection method. The aim was to explore how the literary text TWOOS addresses the issue of race and race relations in Malaysia, in order to gain an understanding of how readers perceive race and race relations in the novel. The quantitative data was used as the primary source in determining the respondents' views on how the novel addresses the issues of race and race relations based on its collection story, themes, characters, and setting, to provide comprehension regarding race and race relations with the use of the book. The excerpts from the novel was used to triangulate the findings, alongside the quantitative data obtained. The data was collected from this case study was analyzed using descriptive analysis in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. Document analysis was also used to support the research findings in the form of collective excerpts and dialogues from the novel.

The instrument utilized in this questionnaire was adopted from Assessing children's literature; Anti-Defamation League by Santora (2013) and adaptations were made to fit the context of race, race relations and race issues in this study. This questionnaire comprises 20 questions in 6 sections, namely demographic profile, collection, story,

character, theme and settings. The response options consists of 5-point Likert scale where “1” depicts the option of strongly disagree and “5” depicts the option of strongly agree. The reliability and validity of the instrument were assessed using Cronbach Alpha coefficient test in ensuring the reliability before administering it to the respondents. [Table 1](#) below demonstrates the Cronbach Alpha value by the number of 0.971 which shows that the instrument is reliable.

Table 1: Cronbach’s Alpha value

Cronbach’s Alpha	Cronbach’s Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.971	.972	17

4. Results

[Table 2](#) illustrated the demographic profile of the 67 participants participated in this case study. 21 or 31.3% or 7 of the participants are male, with 46 or 66.7% or participants are female. 54 or 80.6% of the participants are Malaysian and 13 or 19.4% of them are non-Malaysians. 47 or 70.1% of the participants are Malays, 12 or 17.9% of them are Chinese, 2 or 3% of them are Indians and 6 or 9% are of other ethnicities.

Table 2: Demographic profiles of the participants

Items	Percentage
Gender	Male 21 (31.3%)
	Female 46 (66.7%)
Nationality	Malaysian 54 (80.6%)
	Others 13 (19.4%)
Race/ Ethnicity	Malay 47 (70.1%)
	Chinese 12 (17.9%)
	Indian 2 (3%)
	Others 6 (9%)

4.2 Collection

[Table 3](#) displayed the first domain of the participants’ perspective and understanding, which explores regarding the novel’s collection. The highest mean is 4.34 on the statement of Item 3 and Item 4. Mutual agreement on Item 3 “*This book contains stories that meet the criteria of racial issues in literary text.*” shows that the respondents agreed that the stories by [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) meet the criteria of racial issues in a literary text. When discussing racial issues, it’s important to consider certain criteria, namely the portrayal of interpersonal, institutional, or structural, and internalized racism ([Pyke, 2010](#)). Interpersonal racism is evident in Melati’s prejudgment of Auntie Bee as she says, “...and she’s Chinese, based on recent experience, it means there’s about 50 percent chances that

she can kill me" (Alkaf, 2019, p. 43). Institutional or structural racism, shown by false beliefs in an institution or system concerning another race, is seen when Vincent mentions that Batu Road was destroyed, *"...Batu Road and Chow Kit is full of Chinese people and the triad who protects them and Kampung Baru is protected by the mob Alang and his goons..."* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 150), which reflects false institutional beliefs leading to a serious riot. Internalized racism among the people in the 13th of May 1969 scene in TWOOS is evident when Auntie Bee explains that the Malay people didn't really favor her family, *"...sometimes Malays would joke about us being pendatang, immigrants, and would refer to us as 'you Chinese,' and made remarks about 'outsiders' stealing jobs"* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 89), which shows repressed hatred and internalized racism of the Malays towards the Chinese during that time. Understanding these criteria presented in TWOOS would aid in a better understanding of our past relationship with each other.

Table 3: Analysis of 'Collection' domain

	Item Statistics					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
The book promotes an understanding of all aspects in our diverse society based on race and race relations issues surfaced in the novel.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	48 (71.6%)	19 (28.4%)	4.28
This book contains stories that speaks to all races.	2 (3.0%)	2 (3.0%)	2 (3.0%)	30 (44.8%)	31 (46.3%)	4.28
This book contains stories that meet the criteria of racial issues in literary text.	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	1 (1.5%)	39 (58.2%)	26 (38.8%)	4.34
This book contains equal representation of all groups of races involved which can be used as a relevant literary text to learn about race and race relations.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (9.0%)	32 (47.8%)	29 (43.3%)	4.34

The next mean shared the same percentage by 4.34 on Item 4, *"This book contains equal representation of all groups of races involved which can be used as a relevant literary text to learn about race and race relations."* In TWOOS, all three major races were well represented, with characters from various backgrounds rather than being limited to representing only the Malay and Chinese races. This was supported by respondents' agreement that the book equally represented all racial groups, making it a relevant literary text for understanding race and race relations. Such equal representation is crucial for acknowledging the struggles of all races in a multicultural country,

highlighting the quest for equality and justice, especially for marginalized groups. [Godsil and Goodale \(2013\)](#) suggested that narratives and stories can perpetuate racial tensions, with a focus on depicting only one group leading to the marginalization of minority groups. However, in TWOOS, as noted by [Abdul Aziz and Rostam \(2022\)](#), the novel offers readers the opportunity to explore various aspects of multiculturalism equally portrayed through its characters, highlighting the equal representation of characters.

Next highest mean for this section is by the mean value of 4.28 on Item 1 and Item 2. Item 1 *"The book promotes an understanding of all aspects in our diverse society based on race and race relations issues surfaced in the novel."* showed that the respondents agreed with this statement. TWOOS offered an understanding of not just race relations, but also the lessons of empathy towards other races, as well as tolerance towards other races. For example, in the diverse society of Malaysia in the novel, Auntie Bee prioritized the safety of the people and allowed many people to seek shelter at her home, other than Melati. This shows that the novel promotes the reader to understand many minor aspects in our diverse society that can unify us as a nation. As [Tyler \(2015\)](#) mentioned, in the efforts of understanding other societies or cultural groups and in preventing conflicts, one must maintain respect and attitude for each other, and have the willingness to compromise. In regards to TWOOS, this novel does not just include the major aspects of race relations, referring to facts and history, but it also serves the minor aspects pertaining to feelings and consideration that are essential in understanding our diverse society.

Consecutively, Item 2 *"This book contains stories that speaks to all races."* with the mean percentage of 4.28 indicated that the respondents agreed TWOOS encompasses narratives that resonate with individuals of all ethnicity. [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) skillfully crafted a storyline that is universally relatable in the Malaysian context. For instance, [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) effectively depicted the rioting scenes involving the Chinese and Malays, and elucidated the challenges faced by the Indian community in evading the riot sites, aligning with the factual events of 13th May 1969 ([Abdul Aziz & Rostam, 2022](#)). In TWOOS, all three major ethnic groups were explicitly addressed, with characters of prominence, thereby transcending conventional representations of Malay and Chinese races personified by Melati and Vincent.

4.3. Story

[Table 4](#) demonstrates the participants' perceptions regarding the "Story" domain of the novel. The highest mean for this theme section is on Item 6, *"This book encourages the discussion of race, race relations and racism issue."* by the mean value of 4.55. [Waite and Nardi \(2019\)](#) asserted that our past cannot be separated from the present and there exists a language for addressing race and racism, which [Williams-Washington and Mills \(2018\)](#) insist that we must confront and be at ease discussing our history. In reference to TWOOS, [Show \(2021\)](#) contended that TWOOS challenges the established truth and facts by emphasizing engagement with memories and our present understanding of history, including the details of conflicts and the involvement of characters from different races. This firmly supported the notion that TWOOS provides an avenue for conversations about race, race relations, and racism by using a language that facilitates the exploration of challenging and sensitive topics, thereby enhancing readers' comprehension of race and race relations.

Table 4: Analysis of “Story” domain

	Item Statistics					Mean
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
This book provides various conflicts of racism issue for reader to explore.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (7.5%)	43 (64.2%)	19 (28.4%)	4.21
This book encourages the discussion of race, race relations and racism issue.	1 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	24 (35.%)	41 (61.2%)	4.55
This book relates to the reader’s interest when it comes to race and race relations.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.0%)	48 (71.6%)	17 (25.4%)	4.22
This book avoids reinforcing societal stereotypes.	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	8 (11.9%)	20 (29.5%)	38 (56.7%)	4.42

Followed by Item 8 *“This book avoids reinforcing societal stereotype.”* with the mean value of 4.42. A significant exchange between Frankie and Uncle Chong exemplifies this theme, with Frankie expressing racist sentiments toward Malay individuals, only to be met with a poignant response from Uncle Chong, who resists succumbing to such prejudiced views. This powerful message encourages readers to remain vigilant against societal prejudices and underscores the importance of literature that actively confronts and avoids perpetuating racial biases. Frankie asserted that the Malays killed those they wanted to kill, and they would kill his family too, portraying classic racism towards Malay people to which Uncle Chong said *“...none of the Malays I know would. None of my friends would...”* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 83) showing that he did not succumb to the provocative discourse that leads to societal stereotypes. This conveyed an important message to the readers to not be easily drawn towards societal stereotypes, as writings which does not include the avoidant of the matter would be seen as overing racial bias (Bowen & Hopper, 2022).

Furthermore, the next item is Item 7 by the mean of 4.22 on the statement *“This book relates to the reader’s interest when it comes to race and race relations.”* According to Holmes et al. (2007), reading books about people of different races can pique readers' interest and promote new perspectives, awareness, and eventually lead to acceptance and understanding. Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) also noted that culturally relevant reading materials, including themes of race, are a personal characteristic that influences readers' book choices and keeps them engaged. Osman (2019) suggested that Alkaf's (2019) storytelling delves into racism and mental illness, traditionally provocative literary themes. Alkaf's (2019) portrayal of emotions and traumatic memories through the character Melati allows readers to virtually and metaphorically experience the riot events, evoking more excitement and interest in the novel, hence invoking interest of reading it (Show, 2021). Alkaf's (2019) depiction of her own 'postmemory' of the

tragedy makes it interesting for the current generation to read and learn about the vessel of race and race relations.

Next, is the statement by the mean of 4.21 on Item 5 *"This book provides various conflicts of racism issue for reader to explore."* [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) skillfully presents internal and external conflicts in the novel, centering on the theme of racism. Conflict, as explained by [Cooper \(2003\)](#), involves a clash of opposing interests. In the novel, a prominent internal conflict is depicted between Melati and the djinn, highlighting issues of race and race relations. Melati grapples with internal conflict when the djinn questions her trust in Vincent, when Vincent was away to get aid to help Jee, the pregnant lady who hid in the Chinese tea shop. Jee asked Melati whether Vincent can be trusted since he is Chinese, to which Melati answered, *"I do, I trust him completely."* but the djinn ridiculed her by saying he did not trust him, *"You trust him, do you?"*, *"What's to stop him from going away and never coming back?"* ([Alkaf, 2019, p. 170](#)). Despite the djinn's attempts to sow distrust in Vincent, Melati maintains her trust in him until his return. This display of resilience illustrates the strength of interpersonal trust amid racial tensions, as noted by [Chia \(2021\)](#) in reference to the 13 May 1969 tragedy—a time when trust between individuals often surmounted the divisive ideology of racism and political manipulation. In addition to internal conflicts, TWOOS also depicted external conflicts that are worth examining. External conflict refers to the struggle between individuals and outside forces, such as man against man or man against society ([Hamzah et al., 2020](#)). In TWOOS, external conflicts are evident in the confrontations between Malay mobs and Chinese gangs, who threaten each other to protect their territory. This is particularly evident in the initial scene in Petaling Street, where Melati describes the mobs approaching with weapons ([Alkaf, 2019, p. 44](#)). The riots were fueled by political ideologies between Malays and Chinese, as highlighted by [Noor \(2009\)](#), who described the conflict as not just a racial issue, but also a reflection of deepening racial divisions and relations.

4.4. Character

[Table 5](#) demonstrates the character domain analysis, which shows, the highest mean is on Item 10, with the mean value of 4.55, on statement of *"This book depicts good and bad characters to reflect the variety of the background in racial riots of the novel."* contending that the novel effectively depicts the variety of good and bad characters and the background diversity of racial riots. Writers of literary works always strive to capture and captivate readers' attention, evoke deep emotional engagement, and provide intrinsic satisfaction to create a lasting impact on readers' memories ([Lim, 2020](#)). Therefore, creating impactful protagonist and antagonist characters is crucial to shape and reflect the story's background. Character portrayal in novel enables readers to navigate various aspects of the story, including the representation of background scenes offered in the novel ([Lausberg, 1998; Salgaro et al., 2021](#)). When examining the portrayal of protagonist and antagonist characters reflecting the diverse backgrounds of racial riots in TWOOS, it's evident that the novel aims to broaden and challenge the prevailing narrative regarding victims and perpetrators ([Show, 2021](#)) by delving into the characterization and scenes of the novel.

Table 5: Analysis of "Character" domain

Item Statistics

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
The characters represent people from different races, cultural groups and age ranges.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	53 (79.1%)	13 (19.4%)	4.18
This book depicts good and bad characters to reflect the variety of the backgrounds in racial riots of the novel.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	30 (44.8%)	37 (55.2%)	4.55
The character represented significant relationship between people of different races.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	41 (61.2%)	25 (37.3%)	4.36

Consecutively, the next mean value is 4.36, on Item 11, by the statement of *“The character represented significant relationship between people of different races.”*. The relationship between characters in a literary work, especially in historiography, is crucial for developing the plot and shaping the historical narrative (Setri & Setiawan, 2020). Establishing significant relationships between people of different races in the novel is essential for character development and exploring themes related to race relations. In the novel, TWOOS facilitated the interaction between Melati and Vincent, a Malay girl and a Chinese boy, demonstrating the coexistence of trust and distrust in the society's race relations. Trust between races is important in society, as it expedites liaison with each other and helps society strive (Hardin, 2002; Stets & Fares, 2019) where it can keep people in the society connected and engaged in cultivating civic involution. Despite the racial tensions, their bond exemplifies the importance of trust between different races, fostering connections and civic engagement. Vincent's support for Melati during a tumultuous period in Malaysian history illustrates their positive and trusting relationship, despite the wider atmosphere of distrust among others.

Next, is Item 9, by the mean value of 4.18, on the statement of *“The characters represent people from different races, cultural groups and age ranges.”*. The characters in TWOOS certainly come from different racial, cultural, and age backgrounds. For instance, the characters in the novel include Melati, a Malay girl; Auntie Bee and Uncle Chong, a

middle-aged Chinese couple who offered shelter to Melati; Jagdev Singh, a young Sikh man who gives Melati and Vincent a ride to Sungai Buloh during the riot; Paati, an elderly Indian woman who shares a similar fate with Melati; and Vincent and Frankie, two young Chinese men who happen to be Auntie Bee's sons. All the characters in the book represent every race in our society (Chia, 2021), coming from various age groups and cultural backgrounds, which can create a feeling of familiarity for readers of different races and ages.

4.5. Theme

Table 6 displays the theme section where the highest mean value is on Item 13, with the mean value of 4.55, on the statement of *"This book includes the lessons from the racial riots for readers to learn."* Literary works are able to depict race relations and racism in multicultural literature can help readers learn about history, address social issues, prejudice, and interpretations. TWOOS offers many lessons about the riots for readers to learn from (Vethamani, 2020). And one important lesson from the book is the phrase used by Alkaf (2019, p. 112): *"Di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung."* An incident involving Melati and her mother being confronted by two armed Chinese mobs led to a Malay man standing up for them, emphasizing the unity among different races (Osman, 2019). Melati and her mother was about to be detained by two weaponised Chinese mobs, Frankie was present at the scene where the mobs ridiculed him by saying *"...you making friends with Malay scum now?"* to which came a Malay man with a *parang* murmuring angrily to him, *"...did you try to hurt her (Melati), filthy dog?"*, *"...keep your hands away from our women..."* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 263). Melati came clear by confessing that it was Frankie and his family who saved her, *"...they are Chinese and I'm Malay, and they helped me anyway. Because none of that actually matters!"*. Through Melati's dialogue, it brought the meaning of where we plant our feet is where we must hold up the sky, which conveyed that we must remain unified and be true to the tenets of our faith among races. 13th May tragedy must also be understood of not only the violent acts, but it also serves as a binding point of unity and patriotism. Patriotism plays a crucial role in fostering unity among nations and making the country's independence meaningful for the future (Deraman & Abdul Razak, 2018; Ku Samsu & Mohd Nor, 2009). Next, is the Item 14, with the mean value of 4.39 on the statement of *"This book contains themes that explores regarding race and race relations, as well as preaching values related to it."* Majority of the respondents agreed that TWOOS indeed explores themes related to race and race relations, presenting both positive and negative aspects. For example, the positive theme of race relations is illustrated in Melati's history teacher's statement, *"Do not ever let anyone tell you that you do not belong here. We all do. There is space for us all."* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 74), emphasizing the idea that the country belongs to everyone and that unity is essential. The book also addresses the negative aspects, delving into the destruction of unity among races. The importance of unity is refined in TWOOS (Abdul Aziz & Rostam, 2022) where it highlights the positive theme of race relations that can be learned by readers. Whereas for the negative theme which revolves around the theme of unity destructions among races, Show (2021) attested that TWOOS offers an appropriate space to articulate the nuanced racism in realistic words, where it teaches the readers another value that the tragedy and feelings of those who were affected by 13th May 1969 cannot be dismissed or overlooked.

Table 6: Analysis of “Theme” domain

	Item Statistics					Mean
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
This book addresses racism issues that offer readers various things to think, consider and question in relation to race relations.	1 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.0%)	52 (77.6%)	12 (17.9%)	4.10
This book includes the lessons from the racial riots for readers to learn.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	30 (44.8%)	37 (55.2%)	4.55
This book contains themes that explores regarding race and race relations, as well as preaching values related to it.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	41 (61.2%)	26 (38.8%)	4.39

The least highest mean for this section is 4.10 on Item 12, specifying the statement of *“This book addresses racism issues that offer readers various things to think, consider and question in relation to race relations.”*. indicated that most respondents agree with this perspective, suggesting that the book encourages readers to reassess their views on race. Scholars argue that adopting a postmodernist viewpoint is necessary to challenge the unchanging narrative of the 13th May 1969 riots and to encourage the exploration of diverse narratives (Noor, 2009; Show, 2021). The novel presented a dialogue by Vincent, *“...your people, my people, our people, they are everyone. They’re Malaysian. It is not Malays killing Chinese or Chinese killing Malays. It is stupid people killing stupid people...”* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 112) in which Vincent emphasizes the idea of people being seen as Malaysians first, rather than being categorized by ethnicity. Despite tensions and violence between ethnic groups, Vincent’s neutral stance encourages readers to consider the complexities of racial relations. It becomes evident that societal failure to acknowledge the truth may have fueled the riots and their repercussions (Othman & Ali, 2018). It’s also important to recognize that not all members of the Malay and Chinese communities supported the violent acts—many worked to mitigate the conflicts (Chia, 2021). Through this exploration, readers can develop a more nuanced understanding of the historical events and reassess past race relations within our society.

4.6. Settings

Table 7 depicts the analysis of the domain “Settings” in TWOOS. The highest mean for the settings section for this research findings is on Item 17, with the mean value of 4.21 by the statement of *“The scenes portrayed in this book contain diversity represented within cultural groups of races.”*. Where it can be seen that the portrayal of diversity is vividly depicted across various settings in the book. This includes Auntie Bee’s house,

Chin Woo stadium, and the hospital. Notably, at the stadium, Melati's observations of numerous Chinese families being rescued and treated serve as a poignant representation of the community coming together in times of need (Khalid & Baharuddin, 2020). Furthermore, the scenes at the hospital provide a rich and multifaceted view of diverse cultural groups, where individuals from Malay, Chinese, and Indian backgrounds are shown receiving assistance to recover and heal, showcasing the unity and support among different ethnicities in the community.

Table 7: Analysis of “Settings” domain

	Item Statistics					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
This book reflects the scenes of racial riots in a variety of settings.	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	12 (17.9%)	41 (61.2%)	13 (19.4%)	3.99
The cultural setting is represented in the book realistically.	1 (1.5%)	4 (6.0%)	14 (20.9%)	23 (34.3%)	25 (37.3%)	4.00
The scenes portrayed in this book contain diversity represented within cultural groups of races.	0 (0%)	0 (1.5%)	4 (6.0%)	42 (62.7%)	20 (29.9%)	4.21

Next is Item 16, with the mean value of 4.00 on the statement of *“The cultural setting is represented in the book realistically.”* indicating a stance that is neutral. TWOOS realistically portrays cultural settings, but only a limited number of cultural settings are depicted. For example, the house of Auntie Bee is portrayed as belonging to a Chinese family, and her religious practices are also described. Despite the limited representation, this provides an opportunity for the protagonist, Melati, to learn about different cultural and religious beliefs, particularly the differences between Malay Muslim and Buddhist Chinese practices. Although the novel may not fully realistically represent cultural settings, it does offer valuable insight into religious and cultural diversity, which can be beneficial for understanding race relations in our society.

The least highest mean value is on Item 15, with the mean value of 3.99, by the statement of *“This book reflects the scenes of racial riots in a variety of settings.”* indicating limited settings. TWOOS did offered few interesting scenes at different settings, for example, the incident of Petaling Street where Malay people stabbed the Chinese people while screaming *“Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!”* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 44) where the soldiers shoot into Chinese-owned housing and business buildings randomly, and the incident of random shootings in Kampung Baru that Melati, Vincent and Jay experienced, and the incident outside of the hospital where Melati, her mother and Ethan was cramped within two groups of mobs that were throwing words of insults to each other, *“Stupid Malays!”*, *“Chinese pigs!”*, *“Death to the Malays!”*, *“Go back to China, ungrateful dogs!”* (Alkaf, 2019, p. 258). Alkaf (2019) too offered the grime images of the pile of bodies of those who were the casualties of the violent racial riot, which explains

to the reader that the riot did happen and it was not a small commotion as it happened in few other settings around Kuala Lumpur. However, the variety of settings offered were still limited and not varying.

5. Conclusion

The study's findings conclusively demonstrated that the provided excerpts effectively showcased the evidence and elements crucial to understanding race relations. Furthermore, the study asserted that [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) purposefully shifted her focus from the polarizing depiction of race in Malaysia to highlighting how different racial groups overcame their differences, restoring patriotism and unity to achieve a unified nation. By utilizing literature as a means to educate readers about race and race relations, [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) effectively encourages normalized discussions about race. The study emphatically suggests that TWOOS achieved its primary objective of fostering an understanding of race and race relations by bringing together characters from different races without bias and depicting historically accurate rioting scenes, with suitable narratives and themes. Additionally, the novel offers a significant and impactful portrayal of historical rivalries and racial tensions, urging present-day Malaysians to overcome such challenges ([Vethamani, 2020](#)). In the context of Malaysian literature, the novel effectively sheds light on the racial riots of May 13, 1969, aiming to foster racial literacy among readers regarding their own history. Moreover, the study asserts that the novel's depiction of survival involving all racial groups presents valuable lessons for reconciliation and coexistence in modern Malaysia. In conclusion, the study strongly affirms that TWOOS serves as a valuable reference for cultivating racial literacy, promoting unity, empathy, and cooperation among different races in Malaysia.

13th May 1969 catastrophe is seen as not as it were a beginning point of generational bigotry in Malaysia, but moreover a confirmation which develops the truth that the racial pressures between diverse races bunch in Malaysia is unsettled. The endeavors of our citizens to be racially-literate by perusing significant books that can depend them satisfactory data and truths, which can shape their understanding of race and race relations is vital. Consequently, it can be concluded that the novel TWOOS by Hanna [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) is a important reference as it included numerous values related to race and race relations that can be advertised for the readers and people of Malaysia to learn and comprehend ([Toh, 2019](#)), and it apparently tended to the issue of bigotry in a nuanced and directed way based on its collection, story, subject, character and settings.

Relating to that, this novel has given numerous values of races in Malaysia that can be implied in building up common understanding and belief between races as we catch on to the fact that race stereotyping is ever implanted in our nation. Race continuously show up as the country's major battle, subsequently TWOOS has treated the 13th May 1969 grisly occasion with legitimate and limit truth, to remind the display eras that it was without a doubt a rough minute of history which advance polarized us as a country. With this novel, discoveries proposes that [Alkaf \(2019\)](#) has served a ponder understanding of race and race relations for the readers to see the way ahead for our country to accommodate and mend from the 13th May 1969's wound. In expansion, it is belived that this think novel will give thoughts and experiences that can be utilized in race-based discourse of writing circles in talking about issues with respect to race relations based on Malaysian's writing in English which can give the understanding of race and race relations, in writing and in common ground.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Approval to conduct the research was obtained from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Additionally, permission was granted by the Faculty of Education for the collection of data. Participation in this study was consented for all participants involved. A consent form was provided and distributed where it detailed the objectives of the study, outlining the participants' involvement and participation, and informed them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were assured that their involvement would be voluntary, their privacy and confidentiality would be protected, and their information would be used solely for the purposes of this case study.

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