

The Weight of Our Sky

By HANNA ALKAF

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Reviewed by Zoë McLaughlin



The *Weight of Our Sky* by Hanna Alkaf centers on Melati, a Malaysian schoolgirl who is a fan of the Beatles and loves going to the cinema with her best friend. But one thing sets Melati apart: she believes she has a *djinn* inside of her, a creature out of Islamic mythology who regularly shows her scenes of death and pain, compelling her to count and tap to keep her loved ones safe. One day, Melati's carefully ordered world falls into chaos as her home city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, becomes engulfed in race riots. Separated from her mother, she must rely

on the kindness of others to survive and make her way across a city she no longer recognizes. Set during Malaysia's May 1969 riots, this historical novel explores much more than Malaysian history, tackling broadly relevant topics such as trauma, racism, mental health, and nation-building, which are applicable beyond a strictly Malaysian context.

The riots that began May 13, 1969, occurred in response to Malaysia's general election held May 10, 1969, in which the ruling coalition maintained power but lost seats to the opposition. Various celebrations held in Kuala Lumpur in reaction to the election results quickly led to retaliation and violence. A curfew was enacted, but there were nevertheless several days of looting, burning, and killing, leaving many displaced within the city. The official death toll was 196, with 340 injured, but reports from nongovernmental sources number the deaths much higher.

The violence occurred along ethnic lines, reflecting the state of Malaysian politics at the time. Granting special privileges to Malays, as opposed to embracing a pan-ethnic Malaysian identity and eschewing race-based policies, was a hotly debated topic. The perception that the Chinese population was wealthier in comparison to the Malay population led to these calls for Malay-only benefits.¹ However, these benefits also fostered resentment within the Chinese community.

Alkaf, trained as a journalist, deftly weaves these historical details into the novel. Well-researched details on everything from methods of transportation across the city, historical attitudes toward obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and the riots themselves give the setting a firm grounding in historical accuracy while opening up space to explore individual characters' complicated relationships with each other and with Malaysia.

Because the riots were race-based, race and racism play a major part in the novel. Examples of casual racism, such as rumors of Chinese throwing pig meat at Malay houses or retorts that Malays are lazy and to blame for their lack of success are scattered throughout, illustrating the racial situation in Malaysia and the deep societal divides that existed even before the riots broke out. These examples, however, are often paired with an examination of the attitudes behind the casual comments, such as when Melati notes that her best friend's Malay father always thinks that Chinese people are Communists, even if they turn out not to be. Eventually, Melati must face how "casual," everyday events of racism can lead to the building of racist rhetoric that can spill over into violence. While various characters offer explanations for the violence, ranging from Malaysia's long history with complex race relations to economic strains to politicians stirring up trouble, it is ultimately clear that in situations of true violence, no one is safe, no matter his or her race.


Malaysia's society, divided largely among Malays, Chinese, and Indians, may at first be foreign to students unfamiliar with common Malaysian racial stereotypes. However, the depiction of racism and race relations within the novel transcends a Malaysian context as characters grapple with national narratives and their own lived experiences. Conversations characters have concerning race in Malaysia can easily be used as steppingstones to a broader classroom discussion of race. For example, Melati considers offhand comments about race she has heard growing up and wonders if and when she has made such comments herself. This line of thought can lead to a larger discussion of race within society and how we are influenced by others to form ideas about race. How have ideas about race been embedded into Malaysian society, and how have they been embedded into our own society? Like the characters in the book, how do we experience the differentiation between our own personal struggles and larger systematic inequalities? How does political rhetoric influence social interactions in the novel and in our own lives?

Another major thread throughout the novel is Melati's struggle with mental health. Because she is a Muslim in Malaysia in the 1960s, her OCD and anxiety are continually dismissed and hidden. While Melati's mother does take her to various healers who call upon their faith and Islamic folk medicine to cure Melati, the rest of Melati's family shuns her and her mother when they become aware of Melati's ongoing mental health


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struggles. Melati, meanwhile, has already had her faith shaken due to the violent death of her father, and as religious interventions do not bring her relief, she begins to lose her faith. Though not a primary focus of the novel, Melati's complicated relationship with Islam is an undercurrent throughout. There are small references to Islam, such as her Chinese host's avoidance of pork for Melati's benefit and descriptions of prayers. However, more significant to the overall arc of the novel is Melati's faith journey, which parallels her mental health journey, as she both finds some relief from her mental struggles and returns to God. Ultimately, instead of relying on the solutions placed upon her by her community, Melati must come to terms with herself and her faith.

Again, the depictions of mental illness, while grounded in historical Malaysia, transcend the setting. As Melati narrates and discusses with other characters what it feels like to grapple with her djinn, readers come to understand not only Melati's understanding of the logic and illogic behind her counting and tapping, but also her need to be accepted for who she is, even as she also tries to hide her symptoms so as to be culturally acceptable. This again raises questions about mental health within our own society. How do we view mental health, mental illness, and mental well-being? What are acceptable and unacceptable ways of discussing mental illness, of treating mental illness, of living with mental illness? How are the ways that we view and interact with mental illness shaped by our cultural values and norms, or even by our religious views or the religious views of others?

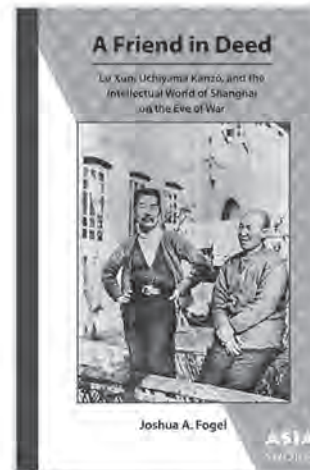
Ultimately, though a work of historical fiction, Alkaf's novel addresses themes with continued resonance today. The novel depicts Malaysia and Malaysian history with an eye for detail, and provides enough context and explanation for readers unfamiliar with Malaysia to understand the setting and become immersed in the story and the complicated messages that arise. While certainly well-suited to a course devoted to Malaysia or to literature, the novel's themes are applicable to courses with other foci, and especially to courses working to incorporate more diverse content. The elements of race, mental health, and religion can open up broader discussions in a class on social issues or current events. There is also room for crossover with courses including historical events in other countries, such as Indonesia's May 1998 riots—also involving strong anti-Chinese sentiment—or even further afield, such as the 1958 violence in Ceylon. The Islamic themes lend themselves well to a religious studies course. Though Malaysia is not a main focus of many curricula, *The Weight of Our Sky* is broad-reaching enough that it can be applied beyond courses focused only on Malaysia, or even only on Southeast Asia. Indeed, while the issues dealt with in the novel apply especially to Malaysia and its continued grappling with racial identity and nation-building, issues of belonging and identity are more broadly applicable and relevant in the continued histories of many countries, near and far. ■

NOTES

1. For more on the May 13, 1969 riots, see Virginia Matheson Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West* (Crows Nest, N. S. W.: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 230–232.

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