# Bonded beyond Time and Place – Exploring Malay Archetypal Images in Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky* (2019) and the Malay Historical Texts

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## ABSTRACT

Malaysian literary works in English produced by the current generation of writers have been gaining recognition both locally and internationally in recent times. Among such is Hanna Alkaf, whose debut novel *The Weight of Our Sky* (2019) was critically acclaimed in Malaysia and abroad. As part of the new generation of writers in the Malaysian Literature in English scene, Hanna Alkaf places Malay women as the main characters in this young adult novel. Henceforth, this paper endeavours to study this novel in the attempt to uncover the archetypes that represent the female characters. Other studies on archetypes in Malaysian Literature English have not explored the similarities of characters in the current fiction to other characters in the Malay historical texts, hence this analysis is significant to fill such a gap. To achieve the stated objective, this paper has utilised the theories on collective unconscious established by Carl Jung focusing on the archetypes, the reception theories posited by Wolfgang Iser with the emphasis on gaps and blanks and the theories postulated by Ruzy Suliza Hashim which bring into light the historical females in Malay court narratives. The findings have revealed that the main female characters have certain similar attributes to the historical females in the Malay court narratives written hundreds of years ago. Such similarities have managed to collapse the boundaries of time and place and concomitantly, create a link binding these characters together through the nexus of Malayness.

**Keywords:** Malaysian literature in English, archetypes; Iser's reception theory; historical female characters; Malay court narratives

## INTRODUCTION

Published in 2019 by Salaam Reads, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division, *The Weight of Our Sky* is targeted for young adult readers. This book has managed to win the US-based Freeman Book Award for the Young Adult/High School Literature category in January 2020. This award signifies that this novel carries a substantial literary merit at the international level and worth a close reading to unpack the issues brought forth by the author, Hanna Alkaf. Portraying Melati, a Malay teenage girl who suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder and unresolved trauma due to bereavement, this novel contains a brave and realistic portrayal of what might have actually taken place on May 13, 1969. Born in 1985 which then relegates her as a new generation writer in Malaysian literature in English writer (MLE thereon), Hanna graduated from the Northwestern University, United States of America with a degree in journalism. It is rather meaningful to examine how Hanna, who is a member

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of generation Y, and unacquainted personally with the tragic event of May 13, 1969 has attempted to present her fictional characters as Malay subjects during that particular tumultuous period in the Malaysian history.

This paper aspires to scrutinise how the Malays are represented via the characterisation in the novel. Rooted in the Jungian theory of collective unconscious, humans are born with primordial images in their minds which are called archetypes (Jung, 1969). These images may transpire from the community's rendering of myths, legends, folktales and dreams (Jung, 1969). Such images may manifest themselves in archetypal figures which generally take on cultural forms in their representations, and it is via these cultural representations that the images come alive (Kaminker, 2016). These archetypal figures may emerge by explaining the gaps or blanks left by the author in the narrative via the characters' thoughts and actions. The gaps and blanks are explained via Iser's reception theory, which is at the forefront of the Reader Response Criticism. This theory is chosen because the gaps and blanks which are left by the author will resurface and be explained using the frame of reference familiar to the reader, which is the one of the most important criteria in Iser's concept. It is concurred that the explanations of the gaps and blanks in the text would lead to the emerging tropes which can then be further elucidated by engaging Jung's theories of the collective unconscious on archetypes.

According to Reader Response Theory, a reader's mental images as the outcomes of reading a literary text will differ from others depending on her/his frame of reference (Shi, 2013). By the same token, the Malay archetypal figures as purported in this analysis may fare better with a reader who possesses more exposure and deeper comprehension on the Malay notions and history. A reader having a different background will respond contrarywise because she/he will necessarily have a different frame of reference. Notwithstanding, since archetypes are fundamentally universal, the readers who are not acquainted with the Malay background or knowledge may still associate with the Malay archetypal images because the tropes they represent should fundamentally be universally relatable.

On the other hand, it is rather useful to note that Malay or Malayness is a much debatable category (Shamsul Amri, 2001) and similarly to most social phenomenon, it is essentially socially constructed. Hence, the Malay category as discussed in this paper is affected by the immediate environment encasing the characters which is Malaysia because the story is situated in this particular country. Therefore, a Malay mind in a different environment may be shaped differently and subsequently may lead to different actions, speeches and thoughts from the characters.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is dedicated to reviewing past literary studies on current trends in Malaysian Literature in English, archetypes in the Malay culture and archetypes in MLE. This review is helpful to conceptualise the study of archetypes in the Malay culture and MLE to enable this particular analysis to be situated in the repertoire of archetypal analysis in these two overlapping areas.

### CURRENT TRENDS IN MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Chin (2007) has usefully grouped the writers in MLE into three categories which are the pioneers, the post-independence writers, and the new generation writers. Prevalent issues amongst the writers in MLE from the first generation until the new generation include gender, ethnicity, nationalism, multiculturalism, diaspora, hybridity and transnationalism (Quayum, 2020). Currently, writings in MLE are gaining more popularity amongst the general readers in Malaysia and abroad despite being dubbed as sectional literature. Comprising names including

the diasporic writers illustrating Malaysian lives such as Tash Aw and Rani Manicka, to Malaysia-based writers like Che Husna Azhari and Dina Zaman as instances, MLE goes further to fascinate the international readers with its oriental charm and mythical representations from the East. Gabriel (2016) reifies that while from the 1950s to the 1980s the literary coterie of MLE mainly involved the Chinese and Indians, currently more Malays are writing in the English language. Many of these Malay Anglophone writers received overseas education and their background of urban, cosmopolitan and middle-class Malays set them apart from the bigger Malay-educated and Malay-speaking community (Gabriel, 2016). Since the Malays are now becoming more prominent as Anglophone writers, it is noteworthy to study their works to situate their contribution as writers in MLE alongside other 'canons' such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Lloyd Fernando and K.S Maniam who have received much attention from other scholars.

Within the growing MLE establishment, the Malays as fictional characters have been continuously scrutinised (Rosli Talif et al., 2006). Malay representation in literary texts has unremittingly been the subject of interest in postcolonial studies for instance, to see whether it is a form of orientalist or colonialist discourse (Rosli Talif et al.,2006). Studies on Malay representations by Malay Anglophone writers are quite aplenty. Hanita Hanim Ismail & Mohammad Nusr Al-Subaihi (2020) studied the works of Che Husna Azhari focusing on the notions of powerlessness of the Malays. Collins et al., (2016) examined Karim Raslan's multiple literary identities in the latter's selected work. Nadiah Abdol Ghani (2013) analysed Salleh Ben Joned's infamous poetry from the Sufism framework. Collins (2013) looked into Dina Zaman's discussion on the complexity of Malay Muslim identity and Ida Baizura Bahar & Nor Kamal Nor Hashim (2018) investigated the use of magical realism in Dina Zaman's works. Adibah Amin also receives considerable attention as a post-independence Malay MLE writer in various studies such the ones done by Kavitha Ganesan (2016) which looks into representation of nature in the text; Farah Akmar et al. (2018) who completed an analysis of narrative techniques of using humor in Adibah' texts and Perry (2017) who examines the significance of food in binding the Malaysians together in *This End of the Rainbow*. As can be seen from the analyses listed, studies exploring the psyche of the characters by Malay authors in MLE are still rather uncommon. As posited by Hanita Hanim Ismail & Mohammad Nusr Al-Subaihi (2020) further research especially the exploration of the Malay emotions and psyche in the local MLE literary scene is desirable to add to the existing body of knowledge.

## ARCHETYPES IN THE MALAY CULTURE

Archetypes, symbols, superstitions and images in the lives have always been embedded in various parts of human's life. As Hussain Othman (2008) concurred, myths, legends as well as superstitions (Ahmad Nazri Abdullah & Maznah Abu Hassan, 2019) have been interwoven in the various historical texts in the Malay history because the Malays place such aspects as highly significant in their lives. Even though Islam has long been accepted as the way of life for the Malays, the Malay psyche is still inundated with superstitions (Ahmad Nazri Abdullah & Maznah Abu Hassan, 2019)). The important historical texts in the Malay world like *Sejarah Melayu, Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai* and *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* for instances all contain myths and legends interlaced in the narratives. As purported by Hussain Othman (2008) too, these myths and legends should be treated as parts of Malay life because they reflect the magnitude of such elements for the Malay people.

Other archetypes or ancient images which play major roles in the Malay culture from eons ago are the Hindu images. Hindu tropes cast a much earlier influence as early as 500 BC with recorded archaeological findings at Sungai Batu, Merbok, Kedah (Abdul Mutalib Embong et al., 2016). As observed by Windstedt (1925, as cited in Mohd Farhan Abd. Rahman et al., 2020), "Long before the introduction of Islamic mysticism, Hinduism had encouraged the

Malay magician to fortify his powers and command the wonder of the credulous by ascetic practices" (Winstedt, 1925, p.21 as cited by Mohd Farhan Abd. Rahman et al., 2020, pg 113). Other Hindu tropes can also be found in the writings of Maxwell in 1881 which list down a myriad of symbols which have been borrowed from Hinduism into the Malay culture. Such examples include a humungous bird called Gerda (Garuda or the eagle of Vishnu, a Hindu God) and the symbolism of sunset or *senjakala* that can be the dangerous time of the day due to wandering evil spirits as explained in its original Sanskrit form (sandhya kala) (Maxwell, 1881). Another example of Hindu image that permeates the Malay lives until today lies in the family archetype. A family which begins with a couple getting married normally commences with *adat merisik* (families of the couple getting to know each other), *bertunang* (engagement) and *berinai* (henna-wearing ceremony) (Kogila Sunder Raj & Muammar Ghaddafi Hanafiah, 2018). These three steps are originally the steps undertaken by the Hindu families prior to marriage since long ago but this tradition is also practised by the Malays until now (Kogila Sunder Raj & Muammar Ghaddafi Hanafiah, 2018).

Notwithstanding, with the ever-strong Islamic influences due to the adoption of the faith as the official religion as stated in the Federal Constitution, more Islamic tropes have proven to be pervasive among the current Malay generation. Hence, starting from the evidence of Islamic influence in 1292 in Pasai, Sumatera (Mohd Farhan Abd. Rahman et al., 2020), Islam has imbued all aspects of Malay life until today. In fact, a Malay can only be considered belonging to that particular ethnic if she/he is a Muslim, as stated in the Federal Constitution. Today, the tropes of Islam are omnipresent in Malaysia such as veiling which is more commonly known as the hijab or tudung and is linked as an ethnic identifier for the Malays (Yang & Md. Sidin, 2011, as cited in Nurzihan Hassim et al., 2015).

As such, it can be asserted that the principal archetypes predominant in the Malay culture are rooted in the myths, legends and superstitions. However, these myths, legends and superstitions are altered according to the overriding or hegemonic influences that changed with time. Earlier on, Hindu played major influences in forming the tropes in the Malay life. Nevertheless, after the arrival of Islam, Hindu symbolisms and images have been generally eroded but the traces still remain in certain Malay aspects of life. Until now, the superseding influence in the Malay culture is Islam and its supremacy can be perceived in various aspects of Malay life like clothing, food, mannerisms and day-to-day practices.

## ARCHETYPES IN MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Studies on archetypes are also rather frequent in MLE. Even though certain studies do not utilise archetypes as the main framework, the notions are still quite common. For instance, the more general reference on archetypes in texts can be found in the analysis of Lee Kok Liang's *Ronggeng-Ronggeng* and Che Husna Azhari's *Pak De Samad' s Cinema* by Hanita Hanim Ismail & Barani (2018), which looked into the representation of Malay masculinity in the two texts. Other studies using archetypes as the main frameworks can be found in the studies on K.S Maniam's *The Return* on Periathai as the spiritual archetype (Mohammad Ewan Awang & Noritah Omar, 2016); Wong Phui Nam's utilisation of persona-self in managing a newly independent Malaya in *How the Hills are Distant* (Jeyam, 2008) and Akam and Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya's (2018) analysis of Jessica's character and her journey to individuation via the hero and shadow archetypes in Tunku Halim's *A Sister's Tale*.

As can be traced in other MLE works as listed, it is noticeable that the studies using archetypes as the framework have covered various aspects from the writings of the pioneer (Wong Phui Nam), the post- independence generation writers (Lee Kok Liang and K.S Maniam) to the new generation writers (Che Husna Azhari, Tunku Halim, Preeta Saamarasan and Rani Manicka). However, most of these studies only emphasise the characters in light of the kind

of archetypes they represent. These analyses do not go beyond and link the more universal archetypes to the more specific archetypes which are culturally significant to specific ethnics or communities. Only two studies have attempted to connect the characters and the universal archetypes portrayed to the more culturally-specific archetypes. The first study was accomplished by Sharifah Aishah Osman (2020) which examined the representation of Mahsuri, a major character in the Malay folklore in three short stories by the new generation MLE writers. The second study was conducted by Muhamad Lothfi Zamri and Zainor Izat Zainal (2018) which linked the universal mother archetype to the more culturally specific archetype which is Goddess Durga as portrayed by the characters of Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*. Hence, this study aspires to add to the body of knowledge in MLE by providing the insights into the archetypal images manifested via the female characters and how these characters can be associated to the historical female characters in the Malay historiography.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### CARL JUNG'S COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS AND ARCHETYPES

The first set of theories to be discussed is the collective unconscious of the psyche which manifests in archetypes or archetypal images. Carl Jung purported that the minds contain ancient images which reside in the unconscious part of the thoughts. These images or archetypes are stored without the conscious efforts of a human, innate and can surface via a person's actions and speeches (McCarty & Klostermann, 2016). The Jungian theory reifies archetypes as original traces prearranged for humans at birth which embody feelings, personality traits, virtues, as well as cultural, social, and religious patterns (McCarty & Klostermann, 2016). Jung posited that archetypes are universal and all humans are born not with a clean slate or *tabula rasa*, but equipped with functional systems of psychological variations which essentially influence human thought, feeling and behaviour and hence, mirrored in culture via mythology, literature and art (Walters, 1994). The common archetypes substantiated by Jung include the Persona or the face we show the world; the Shadow or the negative, unpleasant side of our personality; the Father or the lawgiver and the Mother or the nurturer (Walters, 1994). These archetypes are only observable through archetypal images or archetypal figures (Kaminker, 2017).

In literary context, readers are exposed to manifold narratives and over time, will be conditioned to differentiate for instance, the good and bad characters (Green et al., 2019). Although these portrayals may have the origins in the universal archetypes, such images may also develop in culturally specific ways (Green et al., 2019). This points to the notion that one's culture and custom do leave traces in the unconscious and may affect the archetypal images in the psyche. Green et al. (2019) agreed that theories on archetypes resonate justifiably with work on narratives and literature since it can balance out and provide new depth for narrative theories in tackling issues such as the purpose of fiction, the links between fiction and social skills, the recurrence of certain types of characters as well as narrative structures across time and cultures.

In light of this, it is contended that the female characters in *The Weight of Our Sky* are also portrayed as displaying certain archetypal images which are rooted in the universal representations of the roles they played. Complemented by the cultural conditioning of the environment they live in, the archetypal images which emerge from the close reading of the novel will then be likened to certain archetypes figures which have existed in the historical Malay texts written hundreds of years ago.

## WOLFGANG ISER'S RECEPTION THEORY

The second theory to be deliberated is the reception theory as explicated by Wolfgang Iser. Iser (1972), posited that in exploring a literary work, the actual text should not be the only consideration; actions implicated in responding to the text is essentially of equal prominence. A text takes on life when it is realised by the act of reading, which is dependent on a reader's disposition and hence, the text will inevitably invite different interpretations (Iser, 1972). Iser strongly supported Sterne's notion of a literary text which says that it is a space where the reader and author become engaged in a game of imagination (Iser. 1972). This game necessitates the creation of gap in the narration because if everything is told to the reader easily, the text will not be challenging to read and the reading experience will be a dreary pursuit. By the same token, Iser (1972) also expounded that a literary text is a product of the writer's intentional actions. Thus, the creation of gaps in the narrative or indeterminate elements are purposely done to invite the reader to become active participants in the reading process. Such active participation will allow the reader to be creative within the confines of the text and the reader's own schemata in order to fill in the gap. Negation is another strategy for eluding the shackles of existing concepts of the real in order to articulate what is unsayable (Iser, 1972). Negation is imperative in the reception theory because it allows the reader to question the gap or information that is withheld by the author so that a probable explanation can be given to help a reader comes to a better understanding of a text.

Another central concept in Iser's reception theory is the question of how and under what conditions a text contains meaning for a reader (Shi, 2013). To Iser, a literary work is an amalgamation of text and the subjectivity of the reader (Shi, 2013). Iser deemed the text as a frame of schematised aspects that must be actualised by the reader (Shi, 2013). Iser further placed a great significance on the mental images created when trying to build a consistent and cohesive aesthetic objectivity (Shi, 2013). The next important concept in Iser's theory is the implied reader which is situated in the text itself but is not the actual reader. An implied reader is formed within the text itself and is anticipated to respond in various ways to the response-inviting structures of the text vis-a-vis the gaps (Iser, 1972). This concept of the implied reader then enables the literary text to take a range of possible meanings which are dynamic. A reader is also allowed to possess the wandering viewpoint which suggests that the meaning of something we read is not static or fixed but rather contains a series of continuously changing views (Iser, 1972). The reader's experience of delving into the book is an unceasing process of modifications; a reader inevitably will have some expectations, based on her/his memory of characters and events, but these expectations and imaginations are recurrently transformed, and these memories are also altered as she/he reads the whole text (Shi, 2013).

In the context of this paper, the creation of gaps and blanks in the novel facilitates the reader to raise questions within the evidence specified in the text and also within the reader's frame of reference or knowledge of the world. Such questions will be helpful to engage an active reading process between the text and the reader, allowing for the blanks to be filled in order to provide coherence to the story which can then aid the reader's understanding of the text.

## RUZY SULIZA HASHIM'S THEORY ON MALAY FEMALE COURT CHARACTERS

The third set of theories to be included in this novel's analysis is Malay studies which contain a body of knowledge which attempt to theorise various aspects of life of the ethnic Malay. One key study that has been chosen to aid the analysis is Ruzy Suliza Hashim's (2003) seminal analysis of Malay court narratives which has substantially brought into light the important female Malay characters from the historical realm to the academic sphere, providing the indispensable if not missing female archetypes in Malay studies. Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2003)

basically has categorised the female court narratives in the Malay historiography into three : the silenced, the consenting voices and the dissenting voices. For instance, images of a Protector or Nurturer as in the Mother archetype have been evident in the portrayal of Malay women like Tun Kudu (the silenced), Puteri Syahrul Bariah (the consenting voice and Tun Fatimah (the dissenting voice) (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2003). Even though they could differ in terms of how they had been positioned to play their roles according to the situation at the time they lived, the overarching archetypal images as protector or nurturer still persist.

These Malay archetypal figures are the ones which become the phantasmagorias referred to as comparisons to the female characters in the novel studied. Even though the archetypical figures may not be exactly representatives of the female characters in the novel, the similar experiences, decisions or actions taken by both the historical figures and the characters in the novel may well provide the bond that connect them beyond the time and place in this study.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Only two main female characters in the story, Melati and her mother Salmah are scrutinised to compare their portrayal in the story to the archetypal figures derived from Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2003). The emerging archetypal images are uncovered in light of the reception theory by Wolfgang Iser. By focusing on the gaps and blanks left by the author which activates the wandering viewpoints and awaken the implied reader in the text, the incipient archetypal images are able to be explained via Ruzy Suliza Hashim's theories on Malay female court characters and Jung's theories on archetypes. The female characters' portrayals are studied via the characters' thoughts, speeches and actions. Iser's reception theory, Jung's archetype and Hashim's theory on Malay female court characters are used in combination to help illuminate the bond between the main female characters in the novel and the female characters from the historical court narratives.

## DISCUSSION

### MELATI THE DISSENTING DAUGHTER: TUN FATIMAH AND PRINCESS SAADONG

The first character to be examined is the protagonist of the novel who is named Melati or Mel in short. The name Melati which is translated to jasmine as in the small, white, fragrant flower is a typical traditional name for a Malay girl. She is a secondary school girl suffering from OCD or obsessive-compulsive disorder but this ailment has never actually been verified scientifically by a medical doctor. Melati's most probable reason of OCD is unresolved bereavement due to his father's death. Findings in grief theory suggests that grief relating to long-lasting symptoms over the duration of at least six months may cause either complicated or prolonged bereavement disorders which require psychological medical assessment (Dyregrov, 2017 as cited in Lesley & Stallbaum, 2020). Melati, who has lost her father for six months clearly shows symptoms of suffering from complicated bereavement disorder. Furthermore, since Salmah refuses to believe that her daughter is suffering from mental issues, Melati takes it upon herself to solve her own problems by resorting to self-talk and subsequently has projected her pain into a Djinn character in her mind that controls her actions.

"Take me to the madhouse, please," I told her at one point, weak and weary. "I can't live like this anymore." (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 6). This particular excerpt illustrates how resigned and tired Melati is with her mental anguish but her mother's retort as cited below forces Melati to be stronger in her own silent way.

"Never," she said, shaking her head firmly, the tears still visible on her cheeks. "And nobody ever will, unless they plan on killing me first." (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 61). This remark and Melati's own observation "Before my very eyes, she shriveled and shrank until all that was left was shadows." (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 62), clearly indicate the worsening situation of her mother. Hence, this only manages to strengthen Melati's resolves so as not burden Salmah with her predicaments anymore.

Futhermore, the day Melati tells her mother she is getting better, she is so struck by her mother's relief that she says, "The day I gave my mother back her light, I vowed I would never let her know my darkness again." (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 62). Starting from that day onwards, Melati's self-talk and her verbal banter with the Djinn remains hidden from anyone else.

A research by Brinthaupt et al. (2009, as cited in Lysiak, 2019) on regularity of self-talk indicates that frequent self-talkers are inclined to be inwardly self-focused and exhibit obsessive–compulsive tendencies. In Melati's case, her self- talk has indeed eventually led to the OCD. Melati's OCD is manifested in her submission to the character Djinn who inhabits her psyche and haunts her with gory images of her mother's deaths in all manners possible. This Djinn threatens her incessantly and so real are his threats until Melati is forced to keep on counting in threes to prevent her mother's death. Djinn is a character that is rather ubiquitous in the Malay world. The Malays profess to the Islamic faith and Djinn is one of the creatures mentioned in the Al Quran. Djinns in the Malay-Muslim world inhabit the mythical realm and the ones who are created to be Muslim djinns only play the role of praying to Allah SWT. Even though Melati's aunt, Mak Su, has firstly suggested the influence on Djinn in Melati's illness when she is talking to Salmah, Melati, being a Malay-Muslim girl, has also unconsciously accepted the Djinn to be her sparring partner in the self-talk most probably due to her Malay-Muslim identity. In the novel, this Djinn has forcefully exerted his invisible power, ruling as if he is a master in Melati's mind and taken over Melati's sense of self. By becoming her master, the Djinn dictates how Melati must prevent her mother's death by counting in threes to appease him. As Melati recounts,

> He started off slowly: If you tap your toothbrush against the sink three times before you brush, if you take exactly twelve steps to get from your bed to the kitchen, if you flick the light switch on and off six times before bed, then Mama stays well and happy and healthy…. If you DON'T do these things, then mama will NOT stay well and happy and healthy. Mama will die.
>
> (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, p. 13)

However, regardless of the OCD and her relatively young age, Melati has shown remarkable maturity, common sense and sensitivity. Her plight, despite being untreated has only managed to allow her to grow in maturity despite her age. Readers are actually allowed to experience her maturity and inherent common sense by the technique of interior monologue employed by the author. According to Vinci (2019), the technique of interior monologue presents the reader direct access to the fictional mind sans any filter: readers can discern the commotions inside the character's mind, without the usual restrictions usually imposed by social conventions or circumstances. Consequently, it is easier to identify with the character due to the direct involvement in her internal world, which eliminates the distance between reader and character Vinci (2019). The first-person point of view technique which is utilised by Hanna Alkaf has enabled the reader to share the internal journey in the minds of the protagonist and has assisted the reader to comprehend the main character better.

This technique has been handled deftly by the author because if this has not been done, a reader may question the credibility of the narrator, who is the protagonist of the story. Being only a secondary school girl, with an undiagnosed and untreated mental illness, Melati is a prime example of an unreliable narrator. Since this novel is narrated in the first-person point of view, the reader is presented with strict focalisation on one main character and thus, creating

a highly close proximity between the reader and the narrator (Vinci, 2019). Due to this, the reader's understanding of the text relies heavily on the account given exclusively by the narrator, making her unreliable since she communicates her perception and impression of the world which often does not correspond to reality (Vinci, 2019). However, by allowing the reader an in-depth access to Melati's thoughts via interior monologues, the reader can now empathise with the portrayal of a young person with a mental illness who thinks maturely and commonsensically in most of her actions.

Reading through the events in the novel, several gaps which accentuate indeterminacies in Melati's characterisation are noticeable. Firstly, Melati is quick to adapt to the situation of having to stay with Aunt Bee's family. Being someone who has to wrestle almost unremittingly with the Djinn in her head and keep to the ritual of counting in threes almost throughout her days, Melati is still astonishingly energetic enough to adapt and almost able to assimilate into the daily life with Aunt Bee's family. Aunt Bee's family is Chinese and she has two sons, Vincent and Frankie, whom she raises with her husband, Uncle Chong. Melati maintains her composure, courtesy and seemingly normal countenance when she stays with them. Even though there are evidences of her struggling to hide her internal demons especially when the Djinn's voice is unbearably loud and too threatening, she still holds fast to her sanity and acts calm as best as she can. Once, while helping a Malay man escape the roadblocks, Melati has even become the master mind of a plan to dress the guy up in a sari.

> He's dark – and tall, but not impossibly tall for a woman. He can drape the shawl over his head so nobody sees his bandage. And if he rides in the back with them – I gesture at the two women – it'll look like we're just driving a group of Indian ladies somewhere.
>
> (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, p. 129)

The above suggestion, coming from Melati, a mere secondary school girl shows how confident and calm she is despite the turmoil inside her mind. This indeterminacy leads to negation on the part of the reader and raises questions which requires further explanation on the character's actions.

In addition, Melati also resorts to listening to the Beatles with Vince. Even though it is acknowledged that Vince, Aunt Bee's more rational and balanced son is highly tolerant and open-minded towards Melati, it is Melati's friendly response to Vince which creates an indeterminacy in the plot. Melati shares most of her life story with the audience via her confiding scene with Vince. So comfortable is Melati with Vince until she tells herself that: "…I don't feel the urge to count anything at all." (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 107). Such closeness, derived after only a short meeting of a few days and with a boy who is practically a stranger again creates a negation on the part of the reader and requires deeper explanation.

These characteristics of Melati point to the fact that regardless of her mental state, she is still highly functioning as an individual. This characteristic seems to negate the usual circumstance for a mentally ill person. Various studies have pointed to the fact OCD can impede the sufferers' functionality in different domains of their lives cognitively or socially (Krebs & Heyman, 2015; Cain et al., 2015 & Stengler-Wenzke et al, 2004). This gap between the actual research findings in psychiatric studies and the portrayal of the protagonist entails an elucidation to provide coherence to the story. In order to do this, it is possible to explain Melati's seemingly normal disposition by looking at her identity as a Malay-Muslim subject. Even though Melati is not religious and even goes to the extent of claiming that "God and I weren't currently on speaking terms." (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 56), she has been brought up as a practising Muslim by her parents. This upbringing has most probably instilled in her the deep sense of spirituality and morality. Therefore, it is this deep-seated spirituality and morality that in the end which becomes the cushion to her pain. She likes The Beatles because in spirit, this

group of performers has elements in them that can reach to her spiritually and enable her to calm her chaotic mind. Hence, not being religious may not mean that one is not spiritual.

Another indeterminacy that is created via the portrayal of Melati's characterisation is her ability to stand up to the angry mobs who are trying to do harm to Melati, Salmah and Ethan in the van which suddenly breaks down on the way to the hospital. This shocking action by Melati is so out her character because from the beginning of the story, she has been painted as a docile, shy character and tentative in her mannerisms. Coupled with her OCD predicament, she also appears nervous most of the time especially when she tries to cover up her ceaseless tapping on any surface. This is the main reason that when Melati suddenly finds the strength to open the door of the van to stand in the middle of the two vicious mobs, the moment has become significantly incredible. She even goes to the extent of giving a highly patriotic speech:

> "*Di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung.* Have you heard this before? It means where we plant our feet is where we must hold up the sky. We live and die by the rules of the land we live in. But this country belongs to all of us! We make our own sky, and we can hold it up-together",
>
> (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 164)

If the atmosphere has not been so intense such a speech would even cast a comical effect since it is given by a young lady who is barely out of her teen and wearing school uniform at that. More incredible is the effect of the speech on the audience. Even Frankie, Aunt Bee's second son who is in the Chinese mob and has always been hostile to Melati is moved until he turns his back on his own mob to help Melati, Salmah and Ethan to escape the venue. Another immense outcome of Melati's outburst is when finally, she is brought to her own realisation that she can actually shut the Djinn out from her thoughts and mute his voice. This realisation most probably marks Melati's initial stage of recovery from her OCD and also signifies the end of her bereavement. This is evident when Melati reveals that, "I know the Djinn stirs when we arrive, emboldened by the specters and spectacles of death at every turn. But I also know that I ignore him". (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 269).

One way to reconcile such a fantastical portrayal is most probably the motherly love and support Melati has received from her mother. Melati's love to her mother is all-encompassing. From the beginning of the story until the end, the reader has been displayed with Melati's concern and worry over her mother. Her bravery and other hurdles she has gone through while being separated from her mother have all been motivated by her determination to be reunited with her mother. To her, all else are not important and what she desires utmost is to find her missing mother amidst the chaos of 13 May 1969. Since she is now left with only her mother, Melati has set her mind to dedicate her life to be a good daughter and a protector to Salmah. Hence, it is this extremely strong force of love of a daughter to her mother and fear of losing her mother forever that finally save Melati from the raging mobs, her OCD and finally, enable her to overcome her bereavement.

In comparing Melati's portrayal to the archetypal figures from the Malay historiography, two characters emerge from the past. How Melati takes all the pain inside herself and bear it all on her own so that the world can pass by normally for others is actually typical in the portrayal of Tun Fatimah in *Sejarah Melayu*. Tun Fatimah, during her time, was unable to shout like how Melati does to the mobs. However, she still openly opposed the abuses of the male power in the Malay court by ensuring that the plans set by Sultan Mahmud, the husband she involuntarily got married due to the political maneuvering, were all ripped asunder (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2003). For instance, whenever she found herself pregnant, she would abort the fetus. This was done because she had a bigger plan of not desiring her stepson, Sultan Ahmad to be the heir to the throne. Sultan Mahmud, unable to say no to Tun Fatimah again due to the political motive of the court, went to the extent of killing Sultan Ahmad so that the throne could be given to his offspring with Tun Fatimah. Thus, Tun Fatimah here could be

likened to Melati because she ended up abusing her own body to disrupt the power structure in the Malay court (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2003); just like how Melati ends up abusing her own self by holding in her pain to undesirable outcomes. Hence, the more generic archetypal image that Tun Fatimah and Melati have drawn is of a suffering or sacrificing mother figure who turns all the pain back into herself as long as her children can live as normally as they can.

The second archetypal figure that is comparable to Melati is Princess Saadong. Princess Saadong is an archetypal image of a heroic woman who fights to save her loved ones. This is also the image that fits the portrayal of Melati especially towards the end of the novel when she finds enough strength in her to retaliate by keeping the Djinn muted and by being brave enough to face the rampaging mobs. Melati accumulates enough strength to do what she does due to the tremendously strong force of love to her mother. This was similar to Princess Saadong who also found the strength to repudiate the advances from the King of Siam because she strongly loved her husband. The more universal archetypal image representing Melati and Princess Saadong here is a princess warrior or a heroine, who is willing to go out and fight for the people she loves.

## SALMAH THE SILENCED TURNED A DISSENTING MOTHER: TUN KUDU AND PRINCESS SAADONG

The second main character to be analysed is Salmah, Melati's mother. Despite being a nurse, Salmah shies away from modern diagnosis for her daughter when Melati shows signs of suffering beyond physical pain. Worried about the stigma surrounding mental health, which is a common belief shared by many Malays or even Asians, Salmah resorts to seeking alternative treatment from *bomohs* or shamans or *ustazs* instead of seeing a proper psychiatrist. Salmah's reaction of seeking alternative treatment in this way is typical of a Malay. The Malays have long ago until now depended on the magical and mythical realm to seek treatment especially for ailments which are not visible to the eye (Laderman, 1988). Salmah's decision of seeking an alternative treatment is of utmost importance in determining further actions to unfold in the novel. It is precisely because of this decision that Melati is forced to channel the pain into her own self and try her best to deal with it in her own crippling way just as long as she can survive.

In the context of the novel, even knowledge in modern medicine which Salmah has acquired during her training as a nurse does not hinder her from resorting to the age-old practice. Salmah's decision to continue with alternative treatment creates an indeterminacy in her characterisation. Her training in nursing and her years of working as a nurse does not seem to tally with her decision, hence creating a negation on the part of the reader. When Salmah explains, "Those quacks will just send her to the asylum, or worse, I hear they cut up people's brains, trying to fix them. Nobody's doing that to Melati", (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 25), her words appear incomprehensible due to her nursing background. As a nurse, her acceptable response when asked how to help her daughter should be to get a specialist help when normal prescription proves ineffective. The incoherent image which is created here requires a reader's creativity to fill in the blank in order to achieve a satisfactory explanation.

As a Malay subject, Salmah has been brought up with the notion of communal life which is a substantial aspect of Malay life. Since mental health brings with it a stigma generally common in Malaysia (Yeap & Low, 2009; Norhayati Ibrahim et al., 2019; Ainul Nadhirah Hanafiah & Van Bortel, 2015), acknowledging it may mean losing face, another significant concept in the Malay community. Even without acknowledging it Melati and Salmah are already losing their relatives one by one.

"..the abandonment was so gradual that I didn't even know it was happening until one day I realized that it had been six months since we last saw my aunts or uncles,…I was a curse, they told my mother and they wanted nothing to do with me…" ,

(Hanna Alkaf, 2019, p. 106)

Therefore, in affirming her identity as a Malay subject who puts the notion of saving face and holding on to the communal importance, Salmah has left her daughter to the girl's own devices to fend for herself emotionally and mentally. Salmah's inability to face her fear regarding her daughter's mental state further exacerbates Melati's determination to handle things in her own desperate manner. Melati is truly affected by the way Salmah responds to her when she first opens up about her predicament as evidently written in the novel, as illustrated by this excerpt, "And she recoiled…But I'd seen her eyes widen in …fear? Disgust? I'd seen her flinch and turn away". (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, pg. 14).

In the first part of the novel before the 13 May 1969 incident, Salmah has been portrayed as a mother who loves her daughter but unable to reconcile to her mental illness most probably due to her upbringing as a Malay subject who avoids facing stigma and fear of losing face in her community. Furthermore, seeking alternative treatment is also highly acceptable in the Malay community since hundreds of years ago and Salmah does not really accede to something that is atypical of a Malay subject. All these aspects only help to accentuate the image of a submissive and succumbing person who attempts not to go against the parameter of the image already drawn for her. These 'skeleton of schematised aspects' as Iser (Shi, 2013) has posited help to draw the mental image of a woman who lives up to her identity as a consenting character. This consenting character only responds expectedly to the events happening around her so as not to disturb the status quo of the situation. Relating this to the archetypal figure as found in the Malay historical texts, a consenting character which displays almost similar responses to the conflicts around her is Tun Kudu.

Tun Kudu, who appears in many Malay court narratives as a silent, consenting woman, represents the duties and expectations of a Malay court woman (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2003). Tun Kudu who was a daughter of a Bendahara, then became a consort of a Raja, and lastly, the wife of another Bendahara, was 'passed' from one highly powerful man in the empire to another in the attempt to soothe the political tug-of-war and maintain peace in the Malay court (Ruzy Suliza Hashim,2003). She had no say in what happened to her because in the court narratives Tun Kudu only appeared as a name and a role but she had not been given any speech. In short, she was a muted woman who did not have the privilege to voice her thoughts and feelings. However, she was still extremely significant because her consenting actions had managed to ensure peace in the Malay court (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2003). Contrastingly. Salmah is a main character and an active contributor to the plot development. Her voice or speech carries weight and facilitate further course of actions which occur in the novel. Notwithstanding, it is Salmah's own voice and later, decisions which then draw the archetypal image of a consenting woman likening her to Tun Kudu. Salmah, as discussed earlier, has chosen not to step outside the boundary of familiarity in being a Malay subject, thus alienating her daughter and becomes a woman who places traditional practices and beliefs more than her daughter's welfare.

On a different note, following Iser's wandering viewpoint concept, a reader's experience is not fixed but rather changes accordingly as she/he progresses further in the text. Similarly, in the context of this novel, this concept is also highly relevant especially since Salmah herself is a dynamic character who changes towards the end of the novel. In the story, when the riot of 13 May 1969 occurs, Melati is involuntarily separated from her mother. At the onset of the separation, only Melati's version of the story is made known due to the strict focalisation brought forth by the interior monologue technique. Towards the end of the story, after various attempts made by Melati to find her mother, fate brings them together when they

meet accidentally at a school-turned-a hideout for the school children, teachers and others. At this point of the story, the reader is presented with a different Salmah.  She is now ready to put her life at stake in order to help others. She is prepared to leave the safe haven of the school to bring Ethan, a child who is injured to the hospital by driving a van owned by the school and she is even willing to leave Melati behind at the school so that she can bring Ethan to the hospital.

> "I was saying that they have a van here," Mama says slowly, finally lifting her eyes back up to my face. "The school van, the one they use to pick kids up and send them home. I could go, drive Ethan to the hospital. You'd be safe here with them"
>
> (Hanna Alkaf, 2019, p. 248)

One indeterminacy is noticeable here and that is caused by the total change experienced by Salmah. The reader is rather jolted to face the brave Salmah because her character has totally transformed at this stage. Despite only meeting Melati after days of not hearing anything about her beloved daughter, her willingness to leave behind Melati seems rather surreal and has created a negation on the part of the reader. However, since the reader now is playing the role of the implied reader and has the authority of wandering viewpoint to fill the gap with her/his creativity, Salmah's conversion may be explained satisfactorily.

In attempting to explain Salmah's transformation, the context of the story is of immense importance.  13 May 1969 is a date that brings with it the whole magnitude of the complexities of ethnic relations in this country. It is not a date to celebrate but surely a date to remember due to the painful lessons all citizens in this country must learn and truly ponder. That is the date when most Malaysians now become who we are due to certain policies passed to curb the ugly, extremely negative emotions overflowing to a bloody, indescribable mess. Malaysia, prior to that date had never witnessed any overt racial clash. Therefore, when the racial tension erupted with such violence, those who were directly affected by it had to change overnight, adapt and be a different person to survive. This is exactly what has happened to Salmah. If prior to that date Salmah used to be a mother who plays safe, not willing to cross over from her comfort zone to save her daughter, now she is finally equipped to be the fighter. The horror, struggle and suffering she has experienced and witnessed around her has been successful in shattering her cocoon. As much as she loves Melati and as much as she misses her, Salmah is now a fighter who can leave her daughter behind if needed be, because she has a mission to accomplish, that is to save Ethan. The desperation surrounding the bloody 13 May 1969 has been massive enough to transform Salmah into a martyr.

Relating this change in Salmah's characterisation to an archetypal figure in the Malay historiography, Salmah is represented in the image of a heroic princess who fights to protect her loved ones. Princess Saadong, as depicted in *Hikayat Seri Kelantan* was a valiant princess who thwarted the King of Siam's aggressive advances to make her his woman so that she can return to be with her beloved husband (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2003). Both Salmah and Princess Saadong have to fight and play the roles which are not their usual forte due the desperate situations they are in. Salmah becomes a highly conscientious nurse willing to put her life at risk to save a child and Princess Saadong becomes a fighter to save her womanly dignity because both of them are faced with life and death circumstances. Ethan may die if he is not saved; Princess Saadong might have to live in Siam forever and be separated from the love of her life which was akin to death for her. Hence, this archetypal image of a fearless woman fighter has been generated and simultaneously linking these two Malay characters together because of the pressing events occurring in their lives.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the gaps created by the author to generate moments that force the reader to ruminate deeply over their meanings have been successful in drawing the archetypal images which can be linked to the main characters. Melati and Salmah may be likened to Tun Kudu, Tun Fatimah and Princess Saadong who are the Malay archetypal figures which have existed in the Malay historical texts. The archetypal images of warrior princesses and nurturing but suffering mothers which link these contemporary and historical characters have been able to collapse the boundaries of time and spaces, resulting in a consequential acknowledgement that these women share similar shades of experiences. Being Malay women in Malaysia, they should always share almost similar circumstances in their lives due to the hegemonic forces of religion, custom and tradition that bind them together. As reiterated by Noritah (2014), the medium of writing does not truly affect the meaning of the writings produced because the medium remains its function as a transport; it is the content which carries with it all the baggage of culture, hegemony and monolithic practices. In the end, it is our identity that permeates other areas in our lives and concede who we are. The bonds these female characters share beyond the time and space have created a sisterhood of Malay women born in Malaysia which divulge their plights, pain, struggles and affinity for survival. These should be the imperative lessons numerous women, Malays or otherwise, can garner to be more resilient in confronting life's trials and tribulations. Further research in this area may benefit by uncovering the portrayal of Malay, Chinese, Indian or other Malaysian ethnic archetypal images in other MLE texts.

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