

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of information pertaining to research. It includes the following: research background, statement of problem, research purpose, research significance, research scope, previous studies, and the definition of key terms used in this research.

1.1 Research Background

Malaysia, as a postcolonial country, is one of the contributors to Anglophone literature. Anglophone literature usually reflects multicultural societies and complex histories, including Malaysian Anglophone literature. Malaysian literature written in English flourished until the year of independence in 1957. By 1957, writers and their works in all languages were flourishing. For English writers themselves, it is still done by a small group that is considered a minority. This is because the Malays have their own distinctive traditions and have always fought hard for the Malay language to replace English after Malaysia's independence (Quayum, 2021).

Although English is not the national language, Anglophone literature in Malaysia has developed into an important form of expression for writers there. Typically, the themes explored by writers include issues of identity, gender, ethnicity, nationalism, multiculturalism, diaspora, hybridity, and transnationalism. These themes are certainly very relevant in the context of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, where literary works often serve as a medium for reflecting on life experiences. Anglophone literature always strives to reach not only a national audience but also an international one, thereby creating a space where history, trauma, and local identity can be voiced beyond the borders of other countries.

In this context, contemporary writers such as Hanna Alkaf have drawn renewed attention to Malaysian Anglophone fiction by using English to tell stories deeply rooted in Malaysian history and culture.

Hanna Alkaf, a Malaysian writer, contributed to the richness of Anglophone literature with her novel *The Weight of Our Sky*, published in 2019. Set against the backdrop of the May 13, 1969, racial riots, a dark event in Malaysian history that actually happened in real life. The novel is based on real history, as well as being fictionalized. *The Weight of Our Sky* attempts to show the fear and chaos at the time, which was caused by the political and economic disparity between ethnic groups, especially Malays and Chinese. This novel really presents the original events that occurred in Malaysia. Alkaf presents the original facts of the incident in this novel. Starting from the date of the incident, events in the theater, emergency events, the number of victims, and others. The book is written in English, which serves as an example of how writers from non-native English-speaking countries utilize the language as a tool and medium to tell stories while maintaining their cultural authenticity. Alkaf's choice of English enables her to share a story that resonates globally while preserving Malaysia's cultural as well as historical context.

Through her novel, Alkaf not only revisits historical events in Malaysia but also shows an engaging narrative. One of the literary devices in Alkaf's narrative is irony. Defined by Perrine (1996), irony itself is a situation where something shown does not match what happens in reality (Maarif, 2024). Besides that, according to Frye (2020), irony can be used to explore themes and deeper meanings in literary works. Hutcheon (1995) argues that irony can also serve as a weapon for social criticism and denigration of various interests, such as satire. Irony can take several forms, such as verbal irony, structural irony, stable irony, unstable irony, Socratic irony, dramatic irony, tragic irony, cosmic irony, and romantic irony. Irony can also be used to create layers of meaning in the narrative.

Until now, irony is still widely used not only in the literary field but also in everyday human life. Irony itself comes from a character in Greek comedy called *eiron*, who likes to brag. *Eiron* has a distinctive way of speaking in a dismissive manner and likes to pretend to be less intelligent than himself. On the other hand, there is *alazon*, the self-deceived and foolish boaster (Abrams & Harpham, 2009). Historically, the use of irony can be seen from classical antiquity, especially in the works of Greek drama. In classical Greek drama, irony, such as dramatic irony, is

usually used to create tension, as the audience is made aware of the truth that is unknown to the characters. Furthermore, one common way that modernist authors present their fiction as fiction is through irony. It attempts to let readers know that what they are reading is indeed fiction (Dobbin, 2014).

Although irony originates from ancient traditions, it continues to play a significant role in modern culture and literature. In the digital era, younger generations often use irony as a tool for interaction, expressing social criticism, or conveying dissatisfaction in an indirect manner. This aligns with Hutcheon's argument (1995) that irony can serve as an effective means of provocation and a way to challenge existing norms.

In literature, irony not only enriches the story aesthetically but also plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative's overall structure. As a literary device, irony can influence how readers interpret events (plot), understand characters (characterization), and perceive the underlying ideas (theme). More than just a rhetorical technique, irony often reflects the complexity and contradictions of human experience. As stated by Ihab A. Hassan (in Chrzanowska-Karpińska, 1984):

“Irony selects from the tragic situation the element of absurdity, the demonic vision, the sense of isolation. [...] It is pre-eminently suited to the needs of the present situation. [...] Irony is all certainty we can allow ourselves where uncertainties prevail.” (Chrzanowska-Karpińska, 1984).

This statement shows that irony can serve as a lens to highlight the absurdity and ambiguity of modern life. Irony also becomes a means of conveying not only what is said, but also what is not said, revealing the tension between what is presented and reality, and between expectations and outcomes. Therefore, the study of irony in contemporary fiction is relevant, especially in narratives born out of multicultural and postcolonial contexts such as Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky*.

Therefore, this research focuses not only on irony as a profound literary device but also on how the functions of irony affect the narrative in *The Weight of Our Sky*. This novel was published in 2019, which is still relatively new and has not been widely researched and explored, especially in the context of irony and its

functions in the narrative. This study examines the relationship between different types of irony and the functions of irony in narrative, offering a new perspective on the role of irony in contemporary literary works. By identifying types of irony and analyzing their functions in the narrative, this study attempts to show how irony shapes themes, characterization, and plot in the novel. This study is expected to reveal the role of irony as a structural device that deepens the meaning and complexity of narrative in Malaysian Anglophone literature.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Based on the background explanation above, this research seeks to examine irony and plot in Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky*. The researcher has developed two primary research questions to attain this objective. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the types of irony found in Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky*?
2. How do the functions of irony affect the narrative in Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky*?

1.3 Research Purposes

The researcher aims to conduct a thorough research on irony and its influence on the plot in *The Weight of Our Sky*. This research aims to further explore irony in the novel. Based on the formulation of the research questions, the purposes of this research are as follows:

1. To find out what types of irony are found in Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky*.
2. To analyze how the functions of irony affect the narrative in Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky*.

1.4 Research Significance

The researcher hopes that readers will gain a deeper understanding of the irony and how it functions in the narrative of a literary work, such as a novel. This research was also created with the hope that it can be used as a reference for other parties in need.

Theoretically, this research aims to enrich literary studies with the main focus of irony, especially in the realm of Anglophone novels. This research is expected to increase the understanding of how irony affects the narrative of a story. Furthermore, this research is also expected to serve as a reference for students worldwide and academics interested in Anglophone literature. In addition, it is also hoped that this research can be used as a basic foundation for further research in the future.

Furthermore, this research seeks to provide knowledge about the types or forms of irony proposed by M. H. Abrams (1999), as well as to discuss irony more deeply.

1.5 Previous Studies

Several prior works were found to serve as fundamental references, one of which was Rahayu Oktarini's (2020) article titled *An Analysis of Irony in "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* This research uses Childs and Fowler's irony theory with a descriptive qualitative research method. In this study, the researcher tries to find what irony is in Harrison Bergeron's novel, and the result is verbal irony and situational irony.

Another researcher's thesis, by Meifithtriana Latifah (2022), is entitled *Irony in Jonathan Stroud's The Amulet of Samarkand*. This study examines what irony is found, how irony is depicted, and how it relates to the plot of the story. Using literary criticism, the results of this study consist of five types of irony.

Another research was conducted by Patricia Vania Septhine Yulia Asthereni (2016) entitled *An Analysis of Irony in John Grisham's The Rainmaker*. This research discusses the plot structure of the story, how irony is depicted in the novel *The Rainmaker*, and also discusses the relationship between irony and plot. The method used is a literature study with Abrams and Harpham, Arp and Johnson's irony theory. The results obtained are that the plot structure of the story consists of exposition, crisis, climax, and resolution. Verbal irony is found in the exposition and crisis parts of the story, while situational irony is found in the crisis, climax, and resolution. Irony is considered to add tension to the storyline.

Furthermore, R. Ega Fitria Kemalasasi's research entitled *Irony in Marry Shelley's Novel Frankenstein* (2017). This research discusses what types of irony appear in Frankenstein and how irony develops themes in Frankenstein by using Abrams' theory (1999) to analyze the types of irony found, and DiYanni's theory (1986) to analyze how irony develops themes in Frankenstein. Based on this, three types of irony were found, namely verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony. In addition, the way irony develops the theme by means of verbal irony is used to describe the events, dramatic irony uses the reader's knowledge, and finally situational irony is used to describe an event that has been expected to contrast with what actually happened.

The fifth research was conducted by Salwa Diva Az Zahra (2024) entitled *Irony in David Mamet's American Buffalo*. This research focuses on the discussion of verbal irony, situational irony, and cosmic irony, and how they interact to enrich character development and plot. This thesis concludes that David Mamet not only uses irony as a narrative tool but also as a medium to criticize and question the values espoused by American society.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

There are several key terms used in this study. The terms that will be discussed are irony, plot, character, and characterization. The definitions of the keywords below will narrow the scope of this research as well as help the reader understand the context of each key term in an effort to avoid misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

1.6.1 Irony

Irony is defined as a means of conveying a deeper meaning than what is apparent on the surface. Irony uses simple words but carries a profound meaning. Irony can be used to explore themes and deeper meanings in literary works (Frye, 2020). Irony can enrich the appeal, humor, pathos, depth of character, strengthen plot structure, define the author's attitude, and imply a theme (Stanton, 1965).

1.6.2 Narrative Elements

Narrative functions as a human strategy for understanding time, change, and disturbances to the balance of the story world. It can be said that a story not only presents a series of events, but also creates a story world that can experience conflict (Herman, 2009). Narrative in this study also serves as the basic structure for the presence of irony, particularly through the tension between expectations and reality.

1.6.3 Theme

A theme is defined as the main idea or central insight of a work of fiction. The theme can be the author's thoughts on a topic concerning human nature. The theme is what underpins a story.

1.6.4 Character and Characterization

Characters play a crucial role in a narrative story. Characters appear in the story and are perceived by the reader to possess moral traits, specific emotions, and intelligence, which are conveyed through their dialogue. In addition to a character's dialogue, characters also perform actions (Abrams & Harpham, 2009).

Furthermore, a character plays a role in a story, while characterization is how the author attempts to portray the character's personality. There are two ways to further introduce the characters in the narrative: showing and telling.

1.6.5 Plot

A plot is an interesting part of a story. According to Cuddon (2013), a plot is a plan of events in a literary work, such as drama, poetry, or fiction, that aims to provide suspense and curiosity. It is usually divided into five parts, the introduction of characters, places, and stories (exposition), the introduction of conflict towards the climax (rising action), the peak of conflict or tension (climax), the process of resolving conflict or tension (falling action), and finally the outcome of the story (resolution).