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HUMAN AND GHOST ATTACHMENT IN HANNA ALKAF'S *THE GIRL AND THE GHOST*

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, authors of literary works have sought to bewitch and enchant readers with accounts of supernatural elements such as monsters, spirits and ghosts. Ghosts especially are often depicted as representations of evil and the polar opposite of mankind. In Hanna Alkaf's *The Girl and The Ghost* (2020) the adolescent protagonist, Suraya, develops an unusual bond with a ghost, Pink. This is indeed refreshing, considering the human-ghost relationship in the local literary scene is often represented as antagonistic, opposing forces, resulting in ghosts being portrayed as evil, vengeful creatures set to taunt, haunt and wreck humans' lives. Critical examination of the human-ghost bond in the local literary-critical practice is lacking. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the human-ghost bond in *The Girl and The Ghost* and how this bond contributes to the (human) protagonist's personal development. In this paper, *The Girl and The Ghost* is read using John Bowlby's theory of attachment due to its robust approach to understanding human beings' emotional bond, or attachment, with their attachment figures. We argue the human-ghost bond in *The Girl and The Ghost* sets the novel apart from other local ghost stories filled with wicked, destructive ghosts. The findings suggest other possibilities of attachment figures when the relationship between a mother and child grows apart. The unusual but enduring relationship between Suraya and Pink demonstrates that a child's secure attachment need not be limited to motherly figures.

Keywords: *Malaysian literature in english, the girl and the ghost, hanna alkaf, ghost tales, attachment theory*

INTRODUCTION

Hanna Alkaf is an up-and-coming Malaysian author who made her debut in 2019. She has written two novels and many short stories, mainly aimed at children and young adult readers, which have been well-received by readers. These works include *The Weight of Our Sky* (2019), *The Girl and The Ghost* (2020), as well as featured short stories in *Chronicles of KK* (2016) and *The Little Basket* (2017).

She first established a name for herself when her first novel, *The Weight of Our Sky* (2019), won the Freeman Book Awards in Young Adult Literature. The Freeman Awards honours outstanding children's and young adult novels that significantly contribute to the knowledge of East and Southeast Asia (Freeman Book Awards, 2021). In an interview, Alkaf states the importance for authors to "stay true to themselves" and know who their immediate audience is, which in her case would be Malaysian and Asian readers (Savitha, 2020, para. 9). Hence, she incorporates subjects that Malaysians are familiar with such as the May 1969 riot in *The Weight of Our Sky* and a Malay mystical ghost in *The Girl and The Ghost*. Alkaf's achievement is a testament to her contribution to children's literature as well as Malaysian literature in English.

Alkaf's *The Girl and The Ghost* has been listed as the finalist for the 2020 Kirkus Prize under Young Readers' Literature category with its "fresh narrative" that incorporates the story of a Malay girl who inherits

a ghost (Rosli, 2020, para. 6). The Kirkus Prize has been regarded as one of the most prestigious literary awards which honours authors of fiction, nonfiction and young readers' literature. In *The Girl and The Ghost,* Alkaf delves into ghosts because she believes that the idea of inherited ghosts is not strange in the Malaysian culture and local young-aged readers (Toh, 2020). In the novel, the adolescent protagonist, Suraya, develops an unusual bond with a ghost, Pink. This is refreshing, considering the human-ghost relationship in the local literary scene is often represented as antagonistic, opposing forces, resulting in ghosts being portrayed as evil, vengeful creatures set to taunt, haunt and wreck humans' lives. Critical examination of the human-ghost bond in the local literary-critical practice is lacking. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the human-ghost bond in *The Girl and The Ghost* and how this bond contributes to the (human) protagonist's personal development. In this paper, *The Girl and The Ghost* is read using John Bowlby's theory of attachment due to its robust approach to understanding human beings' emotional bond, or attachment, with their attachment figures. We argue the human-ghost bond in *The Girl and The Ghost* sets the novel apart from other local ghost stories filled with wicked, destructive ghosts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ghost tales in the Malaysian context

In most literary works, supernatural creatures such as ghosts are portrayed as embodiments of evil and the antithesis of humanity. Furthermore, supernatural beings in fiction are often referred to as vengeful ghosts and considered bad omens or harbingers of death (Fanany, 2016). However, regardless of how scary ghost tales are, everyone enjoys them, including Malaysians. Ghost stories in our local literary scene are greatly impacted by a combination of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures (Moorhead, 1965; Nicholas, 2004). These influences have their roots in the Malay primitives and the early Chinese settlers of the land of Malaya who believed in animism, a belief in the mystical power that pervades all of nature and the universe (Nicholas, 2004; Lim, 2005; Nur Fatin et al., 2016). In the context of animism, the Malays and Chinese do not worship an object per se but the spirits that reside within it. Taking trees as an example, Lim (2005) notes that the animistic belief in Malay and Chinese cultures is evident when "trees be respectfully revered alongside shrines to half-Malay half-Chinese spirits" (p. 5) and the members of the society would "worship both a Chinese temple and a Malay [sacred place] on the same trip" (p. 5).

Malay animism was firmly rooted in the belief that our surroundings also existed with evil spiritual powers (Moorhead, 1965), contributing to the foundation of shamanism and black magic practices. McHugh (1959) argues these practices and rites of worshipping and protecting oneself from supernatural entities and ghosts in Malay culture are the remnants of Hindu shamanism. These practices hence resulted in the creation of Malay shaman, famously known as "dukun" or "bomoh" (Winstedt, 2020, p. 32). The representations of "dukun" or "bomoh" as well as magic and evil spirits in bestselling Malaysian ghost stories such as *Taiping Tales of Terror* by Joulya Oui, *13 Moons* by Ee Leen Lee, *Scream to The Shadows* by Tunku Halim and *KL Noir Series* by Amir Muhammad, Amir Hafizi and Ee Leen Lee, to name a few, are a reflection of these practices that pervade our culture.

When it comes to storytelling and oral lore in cultures that subscribe to supernatural perspectives such as the Malay culture, ghost stories have a particular place in the local readership. In their article titled "Cerita Pontianak", Nicholas and Kline (2010) believe that Malay mystical views are very distinct from supernatural beliefs in Western countries. Like the Western tradition, ghosts are negatively represented in our local culture, but much worse. Our local ghost tales have more terrifying ghosts compared to Western monsters. Western ghosts such as vampires, werewolves and mummies can only frighten us with their horror images, but Malaysian other worldly entities "would emotionally, mentally and physically haunt their victims" (Halim, 2018, p. 9; Fanany, 2016, p. 22; Nicholas and Kline, 2010, p. 197). Ghost tales are not regarded as unusual in Malay communities. Like other cultures in other parts of the world, our local culture has long been fascinated by ghost stories. Sweeney (1988, p.1) further asserts that "oral traditions" have had a significant impact on the development of Malay cultural history that explains the familiarity of local community with ghost tales, even at young age, since these horror stories are being passed down across generations. Correspondingly, Malaysian writers are embracing the culture of talking about ghost stories and translating them into written

literary horror fictions. Adding weight to this argument, Malaysian horror author Tunku Halim in an interview, asserts that Malaysians "love to share and pass around our ghouls, ghosts and spirits" (as cited in Krich, 2020).

Dubbed as Malaysia's Stephen King by the local media press (Ho, 2019; Chiam, 2019; Krich, 2020; Scream *to the Shadows*, 2021), Tunku Halim is famously known for his horror and thriller writings such as *The Rape Of Martha Teoh & Other Chilling Stories* (1997) and also his other famous masterpieces such as *Dark Demon Rising* (1997) and *Horror Stories* (2014). The major themes of Halim's novels and short stories are generally about human's inherent evilness, death and dark spirits (Asl & Ramli, 2021), and he is also known to present specifically Malay ghosts and spells to his readers such as "hantu penanggal" in *Dark Demon Rising* and "orang minyak" in *Horror Stories*. Having published with Penguin Books, an international publishing house, Tunku Halim's readership is expanding worldwide to include those who are not familiar with Malay ghosts. According to Ho (2015), Halim's writings effectively act as a medium for introducing Malaysian culture that is synonymous with ghost stories to a broader audience.

Other Malaysian authors known for their horror fiction are Chuat Guat Eng (*The Old House and Other Stories* (2007)), Julya Oui (*Bedtime Stories In The Dead Of Night (*2011)), *Here Be Nightmares (*2014), *Them Horrors Be Everywhere (*2016) and *Taiping Tales of Terror* 2020)) and Ee Leen Lee (*13 Moons* (2014)). Toh (2014) asserts that these writers are concerned with "localising"our ghost stories to distinct them from Western horror fiction by incorporating local settings such as villages and urbanised apartments. Hanna Alkaf also includes local settings of rural villages in *The Girl and The Ghost*. Hence, Malaysia's diverse cultures and local settings are essential in broadening the horror genre in Malaysian literature in English by providing an intriguing backdrop for ghost stories.

In the Malay culture, ghosts such as "pontianak," "langsuir", "toyol" and "pelesit" are widely known in our society as evil creatures that would bring madness and misfortunes to people who encounter them (Winstedt, 2020, p. 23). "Pontianak", also known as "kuntilanak" in Indonesia, is renowned in the local culture. Therefore, it is only natural that it is used numerous times while narrating ghost stories. The images of "pontianak" are ingrained in our community as a female ghost with its long white dress, bright scarlet eyes and long disheveled hair (Nicholas and Kline, 2010; Lee, 2016; Duile, 2020). According to Nicholas and Kline (2010):

> Pontianak is a female vampire who either sucks human blood with her long fangs or tears out the stomach with her long fingernails to feed on the blood that streams out of the wound. She is a ghost that was formerly human but had an unhappy death during childbirth (201).

Due to the reason that only females can be "pontianak", "pontianak" is widely regarded as a renegade who opposes the idea of patriarchy and disagrees with the portrayal of women in Malay society as submissive and subjugated (Nicholas and Kline, 2010; Izharuddin, 2019). Tunku Halim has also written a short story titled "Night of the Pontianak" (2014) that focuses on "pontianak" as the subject of his writing. However, there has been a debate about the actual identification of "pontianak", which was first raised by William Skeat in his 1965 article titled "Malay Magic." The "pontianak", Skeat claims, is the offspring of "langsuir," a beautiful woman who perishes soon after childbirth (as cited in Browning & Picart, 2009, p. 169). Nevertheless, both of these female ghosts can be considered to share similar characteristics and haunting visuals with long hair and white flowy robe. Another ghost that is famously known in our local culture is a child ghost called "toyol". "Toyol" is defined as "a naked child with red eyes and sharp teeth" (Laranjo, 2013, p. 21). It is further believed that "toyol" is beneficial to provide wealth for its master because it is instructed to steal from others. In villages, individuals who have risen from poverty to wealth are often accused of having "toyol" in their homes (Laranjo, 2013; Nosowitz, 2019).

As a Malaysian herself, Alkaf keeps a solid connection to our local supernatural culture by incorporating another Malay ghost, "pelesit" in *The Girl and The Ghost*. In the Malay culture, "pelesit" is known as a hereditary supernatural entity that can shapeshift but often appears in the shape of a grasshopper or cricket (Karim, 1984, p. 164). It is said to usually take the form of these insects due to its small size and non-poisonous characteristics. Hence, it is easier for the "pelesit" to execute its master's orders without being obvious to other people around it (ML, 2021). Before

"pelesit" takes the form of a grasshopper, it is created by the resurrection of the dead first-born child through magical enhancements; his tongue is chopped off and buried at the intersection of three roads (Skeat, 1902, p. 150). "Pelesit" is also fed by its master's blood (Karim, 1984, p. 165). In most cases, the master or the owner of a "pelesit" can only be a woman due to the belief that women keep "pelesit" to ensure their beauty captivate the eyes of their lovers (McHugh, 1959, 65). It also seems that the individuals who keep these haunting spirits do so intending to elicit affection and dread from other people. This is owing to the fact that "pelesit" is believed to have the power "to inflict illness, lunacy and even death on those who are despised by its masters" (Karim, 1984, p. 164). These characteristics of "pelesit" further reinforce the notion that the "pelesit" embodies wickedness and the capability of causing damage to people under the summon of its owners.

According to the discussion of how ghosts appear to be disagreeable entities, most of our local horror writers depict negative images of ghosts in their literary fiction. For instance, Tunku Halim tells the story of a "pontianak" that haunts the lives of a group of friends in *Horror Stories* while Julya Oui writes about a bodiless ghost called "penanggal" that seeks revenge on her death in *Taiping Tales of Terror*. Ee Leen Lee deals with a murdered child ghost in *13 Moons*. In general, it seems that Malaysian ghost tales in English are replete with tales of haunting and vengeful spirits. This is also evident in stories featuring "pelesit". For instance, an episode from a 2021 local horror television series titled *Malaysian Ghost Stories* tells a tale about how a woman's restaurant goes downhill because one of her rivals in the food business has sent a "pelesit" to scare away her customers. However, Alkaf takes a different approach in *The Girl and The Ghost* when she writes about the unusual but enduring relationship between the adolescent protagonist, Suraya, and the "pelesit", Pink.

Attachment Theory

In this paper, we examine the relationship between Suraya and Pink, drawing on attachment theory. Since the 1960s, Bowlby's attachment theory has become an essential framework in understanding human beings' emotional bond, or attachment with their attachment figures. According to Bowlby (1969), people have inherent desire and rights for secure attachments with other human beings (3). He further asserts that a secure attachment between mothers and children which is filled with intimate and pleasant interactions would contribute to the happiness of both parties, especially children (20). Likewise, insecure attachments can be formed without affection in mother-daughter relationships. Hence, human bonds are a primary factor in a child's personal development.

However, there has been a significant change in society whereby people move away from social interaction and toward solitude and individualism. Research has shown that people are becoming less involved in their communities (Turkle, 2017, p. 54), avoiding social interaction (Putnam, 2001, p. 37) and becoming more isolated as more people are living alone (Klinenberg, 2013, p. 137). People who become more socially isolated are less likely to depend on other human beings (Uchino, 2004, p. 6), resorting to attachment figures that include non-human targets. Bakal (2021) examines the relationship between individuals and their pets and the proclivity to use animals as attachment figures. She argues that people unable to feel secure in their interpersonal connections may establish attachment bonds with their pets to make up for unfulfilled attachment requirements because "the human-animal bond has similar qualities as human-human interpersonal relationships" (p. 35). Bakal then reveals that people with insecure attachments with their mothers and significant others are closer to their pets, especially when they are involved in a dispute with their partners or family members (p. 95).

Indeed, dependable and secure relationships from a wide variety of non-human targets such as pets, toys, places, fictional characters and supernatural elements in the absence of human beings as attachment figures have been sought after (Keefer et al., 2014; Ahmad Sabri, 2019). Mcleod (2017) further posits that without the presence of human beings or mothers, similar associations of human-to-human attachment can be adapted to other non-human figures. Although the idea of attachment figures has evolved, the argument remains that close relationships and secure passions are necessary for sustaining healthy, mental well-being (Bowlby, 1969, p. 3).

There has been several research in literary studies involving the application of attachment theory. Ronald

Granofsky (2009) applies the attachment theory to examine the protagonist's masculine identity in D.H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913). He asserts that the protagonist's relationship with his mother during childhood plays a significant role in shaping the protagonist's masculine identity in later years (p. 244). Next, Jillian F. Logan in her 2001 dissertation also uses Bowlby's attachment theory as a framework to analyse Ernest Hemingway's *The Nick Adam's Stories* (1972) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is The Night* (1934). She underscores how the absence of mothers is a major influence in molding the characters' lives. The main characters in these novels do not have close relationships with their mothers during childhood which causes them to have "distant relationships" with people around them in their adulthood (85).

Ahmad Sabri (2019) examines attachment to non-human beings in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002). She analyses the mother-child relationship between Coraline with her real mother and the "Other Mother", a supernatural creature who resembles Coraline's biological mother. While attachment theory accounts for the attachment between a child and a mystical entity in the absence of a real mother, Ahmad Sabri also foregrounds the protagonist's "disapproval and rejection towards the existence of her Other Mother" (339). Despite establishing a good relationship with her "Other Mother", Coraline's rejection and her return to her real mother illustrate that a secure attachment with a supernatural being may not be suitable for children in the long run.

Attachment theory provides a robust framework to explain children's character development concerning the absence or presence of their mothers and how they negotiate this. This is evident in the studies discussed here which exemplify the application of attachment theory in literary works. These critical insights have paved the way for the critical undertaking of Alkaf's *The Girl and The Ghost,* particularly on the human-ghost attachment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research was conducted using both primary and secondary sources. An in-depth literary analysis was carried out by applying Bowlby's attachment theory to the analysis of the unusual relationship between the adolescent female protagonist, Suraya and her inherited ghost or "pelesit", Pink. In analysing Suraya's relationship, this paper incorporates Bowlby's attachment theory as found in his work, *Attachment and Loss. Volume 1: Attachment* (1969). Psychiatrist John Bowlby first proposed this theory in the 1950s. It was developed in collaboration with his colleague, Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby (1969) based much of his views of the theory of attachment on Freudian psychoanalysis, ethology, control system theory and developing concepts such as the patterns of attachment between mother and child namely secure attachment, anxious-resistant insecure attachment and anxious-avoidant insecure attachment (pp. 47-330). Ainsworth assisted Bowlby by adding in another insecure attachment which is anxious-disorganised insecure attachment, an extension of previously mentioned Bowlby's insecure attachments (as cited in Howe, 2011, p. 55). As a result of Bowlby's and Ainsworth's joint work, Bowlby wrote a trilogy entitled *Attachment and Loss* (1969), which demonstrated a substantial amount of research conducted to expand further the theory in the field of social, psychological and emotional development of an individual (Bretherton, 1992, p. 759).

Bowlby further emphasises the importance of the natural motherly role as a means of security and comfort for every child. The relationship between mother and child influences children's behavioural and personality development when they grow up. Logan (2001) adds that mother-child attachment plays a key role in a child's development because children's early life experiences foster "mental representations of an attachment figure, the self, and the environment that form important internal working models which in turn become the basis for the child's decision-making in a future relationship" (p. 7).

Secure attachment under this theory refers to an affectionate mother-child relationship that provides a good foundation for establishing healthy relationships in the child's future (Bowlby, 1969, p. 338). This foundation is characterised as a "safe haven" (Bowlby, p. 141) and "secure base" (Bowlby, p. 262). When people are faced with problems or threats, the "safe haven" function protects them from imminent harm (Bowlby, p. 141). Potential threats such as diseases, sickness, bullies and accidents might motivate children to look for an attachment figure who will help them. Following

that, the "secure base" serves as a support system for the children to go to if they need it (Bowlby, p. 262). The "secure base" enhances children's ability to explore their environment and develop their personalities. The qualities of safe haven and secure base seem to be identical on the surface. However, on a granular level, a safe haven serves as a guardian or a protector. At the same time, a secure base is an overarching concept that allows children to explore the world while knowing that there is a base that they can return to at any moment. The children are assured that an attachment figure, who would be the mother according to Bowlby, will be with them if they need it. Hence, a safe haven and a secure base are two qualities of an attachment figure that contribute to the development of children's personalities and mental well-being.

Secure attachments are characterised by the presence of mothers as attachment figures who would be the "safe haven" (Bowlby, p. 141) and "secure base" (Bowlby, p. 262) in the child's early life. Unfolding how a ghost is possible to become an attachment figure to a human being by using Bowlby's attachment theory is significant to the shift of perspective in the approach itself. Even though the attachment theory originated by focusing on human beings – particularly mothers – as the attachment figure, it has expanded to non-human targets such as animals, objects, and places and even to include supernatural elements, as exemplified in Alkaf's *The Girl and The Ghost*. In terms of the ways in which the traditional theory of attachment may be used in the modern world, the core of Bowlby's theory attachment continues to be applicable since certain discoveries can be derived from the theory's initial framework. Bowlby has always been clear that the early environment that a child is exposed to is important, while characteristics such as a secure base and safe haven are crucial for the child to have a positive take in their growth development. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) further agree that without secure attachments, "development is disrupted, and the consequences can be severe and long-lasting" (p. 7).

The lack of a secure base and safe haven for children will lead to insecure attachments, which come in many forms. First, in "anxious resistant insecure attachment", children avoid believing their mothers and constantly scrutinise their surroundings for indications of desertion (Bowlby, 1969, p. 338). Second is "anxious-avoidant insecure attachment." In this type of insecure attachment, children develop a sense of self-loathing and grow up feeling neglected (Bowlby, p. 339). Finally, the third type of insecure attachment is "anxious disorganised insecure attachment". Children suffering from this type of insecure attachment are prone to experience prolonged episodes of intense rage and trauma at the hands of their mothers (as cited in Howe, 2011, p. 55). Bowlby asserts these negative attachment types will jeopardise children's mental health and their ability to establish and sustain relationships in the future (3).

Specifically, this paper examines Suraya's anxious-avoidant insecure attachment with her mother due to emotional detachment and lack of intimate and close relationship with her mother that influences her anti-social personality in her early childhood years. This is because the distance and inattentiveness from her mother lead Suraya to feel ignored and unwanted. Therefore, the reading of Alkaf's *The Girl and The Ghost* using Bowlby's attachment theory resonates with the significance of secure attachment in early childhood as a means to develop healthy relationships and mental well-being and overturn the loneliness of insecure attachment.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Alkaf's *The Girl and The Ghost* tells the story of a Malay adolescent girl named Suraya and a "pelesit", or a ghost in the form of a grasshopper. She lives in a local village with no other family members present except for her widowed mother, Mama. Suraya finds herself as the companion of a "pelesit" which her witch grandmother passes down after her death. Suraya and the "pelesit" - affectionately referred to as Pink - develop a close relationship despite being an odd pair and later embark on an adventurous journey together, unravelling the untold grim stories of Suraya's family. When Suraya's father passed away, Mama decided to start a better life with her mother in the village. However, she is left with unresolved grief and anger due to the death of her son -Suraya's brother - which turns her into a cold and aloof person. She blames herself when her son is found drowned in her backyard's pool and harbours resentment against her mother, whom she sometimes blames. With lingering bitterness and a dearth of support

from neither her mother nor husband, Mama moves to a new place and cuts ties with her mother. This dark episode later negatively impacts her relationship with Suraya when she becomes emotionally detached from her daughter.

Suraya is deprived of maternal attachment to Mama and familial relationships with other family members, such as her father and grandmother. Suraya never has the opportunity to experience a father's love due to her father's early death. She never has the privilege to feel her grandmother's love. Apart from the fact that she is no longer alive, Suraya's grandmother does not leave any fond memories for her grandchild since she is always referred to as a witch and has a terrible reputation for not being kind to other people. Suraya's relationships with her family members, particularly with Mama, underline her need for a supportive and reliable human environment, which she does not have access to. Suraya cannot rely on her mother for a secure attachment, much less to seek assistance from her deceased family members.

Even though she is the only child in her family, Suraya never feels her mother's love. Mama is emotionally distant and never expresses her love to her daughter. It is not common to see Mama giving "hugs or kisses" to Suraya, just like how she sees her friend's mother doing it (p. 65). Mama's cold personality has minimalised and limited mother-child interaction and communication:

> "Look, Mama!" she said proudly, brandishing the crumpled paper. "I made this for you!" "Very nice," the woman said, and it was as if she was a tube that every last bit of toothpaste had been squeezed out of, leaving her dry and flat. (p. 9)

The above excerpt exhibits Mama's poor communication skills. She never takes the time to provide Suraya with proper verbal support. Due to the little interaction between the mother and the child, Suraya cannot get close to and feel attached to Mama. Mama's dry response after seeing her drawings shows her lack of interest in Suraya's hobby, which disheartens her, as shown when her "shoulders sagged" (p. 3). Mama's poor communication also leaves Suraya with no say in their communication, which should be a two-way street. For example, Mama decides to move Suraya to a new school without consulting her (p. 23). In doing so, this further drifts the mother-daughter relationship apart because Suraya is expected to agree with her mother's decisions without having any chance to express her thoughts.

Mama's cold demeanour is also noticed by other people as well. During Suraya's fight against the "pawang" or the ghost collector, he taunts Suraya about her detached mother, who does not care about Suraya's well-being and would be unconcerned if she were to die during the night of their duel (144). This incident affirms Suraya's lack of a mother-child relationship with Mama. To Suraya, Mama is estranged from her. Mama's lack of attentiveness and distant personality are forms of negative attachment, contributing to Suraya's loneliness. Hence, the distance between the mother and daughter has resulted in Suraya feeling unloved and uncared for by her mother. Suraya's relationship with her mother can be classified as an anxious-avoidant insecure attachment because she feels detached from her mother. She has concluded that her mother would be different from the mothers of her friends who would pack her "a proper lunch" (Alkaf, 2020, p. 28) and notice her disappearance (p. 107). Suraya ceases to anticipate any reaction from her mother because Mama is ignoring her emotional needs such as attention and care. In anxious-avoidant insecure attachment, mothers are emotionally distant and inattentive to their children, which then causes children to feel neglected and "halt their approach to the mothers" for support (Bowlby, 1969, p. 331).

Consequently, this type of insecure attachment prevents children from seeking consolation and comfort when they are emotionally vulnerable and disturbed. When Suraya is being bullied to the point of tears and outcasted by her new schoolmates, she keeps it to herself and never mentions it to Mama at any point throughout the ordeal. She learns it is better to avoid showing her intense emotions and vulnerabilities to her mother rather than being disappointed with her cold reply or unresponsiveness. The lack of closeness between Suraya and Mama has made her believe she is unimportant. Suraya keeps on feeling unloved and insignificant, resulting from anxious-avoidant insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1969, p. 339). This attachment contributes to a child's anti-social personality, much like Suraya's. She cannot make friends with others

and prefers to sit by herself, despite her need to feel a sense of belongingness among those around her. When she sees others around her having fun: "Suraya winced, sending a peculiar pang rocketing through her chest…For a moment she imagined herself among them. For a moment, she wondered what it felt like to belong." (p.19). Even though Suraya craves a sense of belongingness among her friends, she finds it difficult to express her feelings of wanting to be in a relationship, such as a friendship, at a young age. As an anti-social child, Suraya cannot establish friendship and prefers to observe people from afar rather than approaching them.

Even in her new school, she initially rejects the idea of starting a friendship with Jing Wei because Suraya grows accustomed to being alone. Suraya's anti-social behaviour and her difficulty to open up her feelings are results of her loneliness at home owing to the lack of reliable mother-child interactions which should provide safe haven and secure base. Suraya does not have an intimate and secure relationship with Mama. Due to the absence of proper attention and care as a child from an attachment figure, Suraya is burdened with anxious-avoidant insecure attachment. She tends to suppress her emotions and finds it difficult to trust others, which develops into anti-social behaviour.

Although she is living together with her mother, Suraya is estranged from her mother due to her mother's aloof nature and busy schedule as a teacher. Mama lacks the qualities of providing secure relationship when she is emotionally and physically absent in Suraya's life, shaping Suraya to be anti-social. Bowlby (1969) asserts that a mother should be attentive to her children's emotional needs and desires besides meeting their physical needs (p. 56). However, this does not apply to Suraya's Mama (her mother) since she fails to attend to her child's emotional needs.

Yet, Suraya's life changes when she meets with Pink, a "pelesit" which she inherits from her witch grandmother, who recently passed away. Alkaf's representation of "pelesit" in *The Girl and The Ghost* follows the traditional definition of this supernatural creature. Pink is owned by an old woman, bound to its master by feeding her blood (p.1), created by biting a recently deceased child's tongue, and buried "where three roads meet," (p. 90). While Pink is represented according to the form of "pelesit", it is also represented in a different light. Pink is able to feel emotions such as guilt, jealousy and sadness, which is unlike other ghosts "[that] don't have feelings" (p.11). Furthermore, Pink acts out of its character when at times, it does not act on the master's commands. Pink hurts Suraya's friends and schoolmates without any orders from her (p.20, p.45), which in turn displays its ability to make decisions independently. When Suraya accepts her "pelesit" heritage, Pink quickly becomes her friend and guardian that replaces Mama as an attachment figure. The presence of Pink has impacted Suraya's early childhood since she gets minimal support from her mother and has no friends of her own. Finally, she is no longer alone and has a friend when Pink offers her "the seed of friendship" (p.17). Although Pink is regarded as a ghost without emotions, he exhibits feelings while he stays with Suraya. He laments that she feels neglected by her mother, ridiculed by her peers and lacks the material possessions that other children enjoy. Suraya receives excellent attention and care from Pink, which contrasts sharply with Mama's detached treatment: "[Pink] had done nothing but watch over her. Protect her. Be her companion, her guide, her family. Love her" (p. 18). Here, the ghost serves as an attachment figure since it takes on the role of Suraya's caretaker and protector. And so, Suraya feels appreciated and discovers that the love she has been searching for in her mother is available in the form of a ghost. Pink protects Suraya from harm in many occasions, saving her from broken bones from falling trees, stomachaches from eating unripe fruits and severely bitten by red fire ants (p. 7). Suraya and Pink have a good time together and enjoy each other's company by always playing and drawing together. Pink's existence fills in the void and loneliness in Suraya's life when Mama pays little attention to her. Pink's companion contrasts Mama's constant absence and detached personality.

Suraya's relationship with Pink is a secure attachment. Although both of them have gone through hiccups in their friendship, Suraya cannot stand losing Pink to the "pawang." She is willing to risk everything and fight against the "pawang" for Pink, and at the end of the novel, she feels distraught when Pink leaves her. This is akin to a child being pleased with the mother's company and feeling distressed during the mother's absence (Bowlby, 1969, p. 338). Suraya's mother is

replaced by Pink. Pink also acts as Suraya's caretaker, by not only taking care of her physical well-being from any danger but also looking after her emotional happiness. Suraya successfully resolves her family's conflict with the help of Pink after they learn about her family's dark secrets during their journey. To Pink, the real story about Suraya's family needs to be told at the expense of its departure so that when Pink is no longer with Suraya, she may remain and live with her mother in a more positive relationship than the one she now has. Thus, Pink takes care of Suraya's conflictual relationship and plays the role of her guardian even until the last moment before it leaves. The ghost provides a defence for Suraya to be safe from any physical and emotional damage and therefore serves as Suraya's safe haven.

Suraya holds a secure attachment with Pink because she feels safe exploring the world. Since Pink is constantly by her side, she would be protected by Pink regardless of what has occurred. For instance, Suraya "went through her days without a care in the world, secure in the knowledge that she would somehow always be safe" (Alkaf, 2020, p. 7). When the surrounding is considered safe, the secure base encourages people to explore their surroundings and hence this will broaden their personalities. This is exemplified when Pink encourages Suraya in developing a friendship with Jing Wei, her schoolmate. Pink becomes her sole friend when Suraya struggles to adapt to her new school. Initially, she feels apprehensive about making friends with Jing Wei, but with Pink's encouragement and support, she succeeds when Jing Wei quickly becomes her best friend.

Suraya's attachment to Pink enables her to develop a friendship with Jing Wei. Furthermore, Suraya dares to step out of her comfort zone and embark on a dangerous adventure after securing the knowledge that Pink will be going with her. Suraya gets the assurance from Pink that everything will be fine: "I need you to say it", she whispered. "I need you to tell me we're doing the right thing. That we have to try." (p. 104). Pink provides her with a secure base. Throughout the novel, Suraya's quiet and timid demeanour is evident. Despite being a reserved person, she can muster the confidence to go on an expedition against the "pawang" with the knowledge that Pink is her secure base.

As previously mentioned, Suraya's relationship with Pink has its ups and downs especially when jealousy gets the best of Pink. It finds numerous ways to make the life of Suraya's new friend, Jing Wei, miserable such as "a lost storybook", "a scratch on her favorite Star Wars DVD", "a smack to the face during a game of netball", "a ruined English essay", and loss of pocket money because of "a hole in the pinafore" (p. 45). Suraya further discovers the dark side of Pink when it harms her friends and schoolmates who once bullied her. She resents the act of revenge that Pink offers. Their conflicting outlooks taint the positive relationship they always have. However, this does not disqualify Pink from being Suraya's secure attachment figure. Although their relationship has endured a great deal of joy and also heartbreak, they always have each other's back.

Secure attachment is not synonymous with a perfect and flawless type of attachment. According to Main and Goldwyn (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 51), secure attachment reveals mothers or caregivers who are actively caring and welcoming of the children and committing to their child's healthy growth. These authors affirm that "this does not mean the parent was perfect". They emphasise that a secure attachment can be formed even though the attachment figure – which is usually the mother – has been unsatisfactory in regard to being loving or attentive to the child. They also claim that a secure attachment categorisation may be established if the mothers are present most of the time. Any uncaring or emotionally distant behaviours may be compensated by many other warm and affectionate behaviours. In light of this argument, Pink serves as a safe haven and a secure base to Suraya.

A safe haven and secure base are complementary in a secure attachment. When Suraya feels threatened, Pink as a safe haven protects her from harm and risks. Such risks will prompt people to look for help from an attachment figure. On the other hand, pink as a secure base encourages Suraya to explore her environment and surroundings, which benefits in expanding her personality. Instead of stopping herself, Suraya, who feels safe in her secure attachment with Pink, successfully overcomes her reserved personality by making new friends and going on an unknown adventure.

CONCLUSION

Hanna Alkaf's *The Girl and The Ghost* foregrounds the importance of an attachment figure in a child's life that is considered crucial for the child's development. This study highlights other possibilities of attachment figures when the relationship between a mother and child grows apart. To deal with the lack of support and security from their mothers, children may look for secure attachments in a wide variety of non-humans, such as ghosts. In *The Girl and The Ghost,* Suraya seeks security and attachment in Pink, a "pelesit", or a ghost, to fill in her emotional void caused by the lack of maternal attachment. Suraya's childhood is filled with loneliness when her mother fails to provide a safe haven and a secure base for her daughter. Pink's presence in her life has given her a glimpse of what an attachment figure should be. He protects her from danger and provides her with support and comfort whenever she needs them. Alkaf's representation of a ghost in *The Girl and The Ghost* sets it apart from other Malaysian ghost tales in English that are replete with stories of haunting and vengeful spirits. Instead of depicting a human-like, haunting and vengeful ghost, Alkaf depicts a different kind of ghost – one that is by and large anthropomorphised, doing away with the representation of ghosts as evil and the polar opposite of mankind. Instead, Pink is animal-like and is attributed with tender human emotions and qualities such as protection, support and benevolence. Moreover, Pink does not embody wickedness, as is usually the case in the representation of "pelesit" in the local literary scene. Thus, the unusual but enduring relationship between Suraya and Pink provides an alternative viewpoint of understanding children's attachments, reiterating Bowlby's argument that attachment figures need not be limited to motherly figures.

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