

Mapping Malaysian Rainforest Landscape in Children's Fantasy Novel: Hamra and the Jungle of Memories by Hanna Alkaf

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ABSTRACT

Forests have long served as sites of mystery and transformation in children's fantasy literature, functioning not only as rich natural settings but also as symbolic landscapes of personal and cultural significance. This study analyses the spatial and geographical representation of Malaysia's tropical rainforest in Hamra and the Jungle of Memories (Alkaf, 2023) by Hanna Alkaf, examining how the rainforest operates simultaneously as a physical terrain and a metaphorical space. Through close reading and textual analysis, this research explores how geographic movement through the rainforest becomes a narrative structure that reflects psychological transformation, cultural reorientation, and mythological engagement. Framed by Tally's literary cartography, Heidegger's notion of existential anxiety and Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, this study argues that cartographic anxiety acts as a catalyst for the protagonist's emotional growth and cultural rediscovery. Each rainforest zone acts as a chronotopic node, where time and space converge to illuminate Hamra's shifting sense of self, her encounters with mythological beings from Malay folklore, and her deepening engagement with inherited cultural memory. This study demonstrates how literary cartography functions as a metaphorical device that not only maps narrative movement but also fosters a deeper understanding of self, place, and cultural belonging. In doing so, it offers new insight into the spatial imagination of contemporary Malaysian children's literature, highlighting its role in preserving traditional culture and positioning space as an essential medium through which young protagonists and readers navigate identity, tradition, and transformation.

Keywords: Geographical space; narration; literary cartography; anxiety; mythology

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature encompasses a diverse array of genres, ranging from picture books and fairy tales to fables, fantasy, adventure, and realistic fiction, crafted specifically for young audiences. Among these, the children's fantasy novel stands out for its imaginative worlds and adventurous narratives, fostering curiosity and a spirit of discovery in young readers. In Malaysia, tropical rainforest is not only a defining geographical feature but also hold deep cultural and symbolic meaning for the local population. The bond among children, the Malaysian rainforest, and children's fantasy literature is deeply intertwined. The lush, enigmatic, and unfamiliar terrain of the rainforest provides an ideal backdrop for stories of adventure and wonder. Within this setting, child protagonists frequently undertake fantastical quests, encounter challenges, build relationships with the natural world, and explore themes of identity, cultural heritage, mythology, and belonging. Beyond serving as a physical landscape, the rainforest emerges as a transformative space, facilitating personal growth and offering a unique Malaysian perspective within the broader tradition of children's fantasy literature.

Hanna Alkaf, a renowned children's author, is celebrated for her unapologetically Malaysian books for young readers and has been honoured with the Freeman Award and recognised as a finalist for the Kirkus Prize. The novel, *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* (Alkaf, 2023), intertwines a fantastical adventure through a jungle with Malaysian folklore. It describes a girl named Hamra who receives nothing but constant nagging on her thirteenth birthday, and yet another errand to run in the Langkawi jungle behind her home. Feeling stifled and angry, Hamra ignores the jungle rules she should obey, leading to owing debts to a weretiger. Accompanied by her best friend, Ilyas, Hamra ventures into the jungle on a quest to settle debts and restore her grandmother's memory. Throughout the journey, she encounters a series of trials and challenges, ultimately succeeding in aiding the weretiger's transformation back into human form.

Literature functions as a form of mapping, offering readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live (Tally Jr, 2012, p. 2). Literary cartography, rooted in an interdisciplinary approach combining literature and geography, emphasises the connection between space and narrative in literary works through the perspective of geographical space. At its core, literary cartography aims to depict the geographical setting, character movements, and spatial boundaries within a story, thereby uncovering the spatial relationships and underlying meanings within the narrative structure. Adventure is a great theme for exploring literary cartography because it involves exploration, representation, and imagination, like mapmaking and storytelling (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 127). The literary cartographer is regarded as an adventurer, embarking on a journey to explore the terrains embedded within a narrative. By linking scattered elements or events, they strive to construct a broader whole or unified vision, making adventure narratives particularly fitting for the aims of literary cartography.

In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* (Alkaf, 2023), the tropical rainforest setting serves not only as an adventure backdrop but also as a dynamic, interactive space that influences Hamra's experiences, emotions, and personal development. Through vivid depictions of geographical spaces, the narrative integrates space with myth and reality, demonstrating the unique practice of literary mapping. By delving into these themes, the paper seeks to reveal the potential of literary cartography for analysing the interplay between space and narrative while offering fresh insights into the portrayal of traditional Malaysian culture in contemporary narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advancements in physics, along with major historical events like World War II and the Cold War, significantly reshaped how humans perceive and relate to space (Tally Jr, 2012, p. 3). In addition, the powerful influences of postcolonialism, globalisation, and rapidly evolving information technologies have disrupted conventional geographic boundaries, positioning space as a central focus in academic research. Then, a wide variety of scholars have highlighted the importance of spatiality across various fields, including urban, economic, architectural, social, gender, intimacy, and cultural. The interest in the spatial dimension breaks the former tradition that time prioritised over space, which paved the way to the so-called 'spatial turn' in social and human sciences research.

This apparent shift in spatial inquiry reconceptualises ways to think about "space" in literary and cultural studies (Jethalal Parmar & Vijaya Babu, 2025). Scholars begin to investigate more deeply how narrative is influenced by geography, landscape, and spatial movement. Central

to this development is the concept of literary cartography, a theoretical approach most notably advanced by Robert Tally, who indicates the act of writing itself might be considered a form of mapping or a cartographic activity (Tally Jr, 2012, p. 45). According to Tally (2012, p. 50), narrative is a form of mapping, organising the data of life into recognisable patterns, a representation of space and place, whose function is to help the mapmaker, like the reader or writer, make sense of the world. For Tally, literary cartography refers not only to the depiction of geographical space but also involves how a literary work functions as “a figurative map, or metaphorical” (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 116), to convey social space within a narrative, revealing the psychological, cultural, and ideological orientations of characters and readers.

Another relevant theoretical concept is cartographic anxiety, developed by Robert Tally to describe “the sense of disorientation or spatial perplexity” (Tally Jr, 2012, p. 1) that is inherent in aspects of fundamental “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 53). Grounded in Heidegger’s concept of “anxiety as a basic state-of-mind” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 233), cartographic anxiety captures the emotional and psychological difficulties characters face and demands that individuals map and help them make sense of themselves. Drawing on the narrative theory of chronotope by Mikhail Bakhtin, Tally (2012, p. 58) has argued that the chronotope is a critical element of any literary cartography, for it is through the use of and reference to particular chronotopes that the meaning of the narrative, the shape of the world, is established. Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope refers to “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84), illustrating how historical temporality and geographical spatiality are fundamentally interconnected.

In children’s fantasy literature, natural landscapes frequently function as foundational settings for the narrative. Among these, forests have carried symbolic significance and are frequently depicted as a fantastical setting where magic originates and mystical creatures reside (Chinellato, 2020, p. 127). Authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling and Diana Wynne Jones have placed forests central to their narratives, often portraying them as a vessel of the numinous, a liminal space of trial and testing, a catalyst of the hero’s physical and psychological metamorphosis (Łaszkiewicz, 2017, p. 4). Nikolajeva (1991) and Mendlesohn (2008) have emphasised the function of natural landscapes in a fantasy world, which tend to externalise internal conflicts, providing young protagonists suffering with fear, loss, and identity. Despite its commercial popularity, within academia, the study of children’s fantasy literature “is relatively recent and in some ways still underdeveloped” (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016, p. 1). While Western children’s fantasy has received extensive critical attention, comparatively little attention has been paid to the representation of non-Western landscapes, such as the rainforests of Southeast Asia.

Rainforests carry unique cultural meanings in Southeast Asian literature, which serve not only as ecological environments but also as reservoirs of mythology, ancestral heritage, and cultural identity. Scholars such as Wessing (2020) and Diaz (2022) have argued that the rainforest in the Philippines and Indonesia functions as an important cultural and mythological space, symbolising spiritual entities and the enduring presence of ancestors. In Malaysian literature, Heikkilä (2014) regarded the forest as a lattice of remembrances, where place-names encode history and spirituality, intertwining ecology with cultural identity. Hussain et al. (2020) highlighted that the rainforest embodies beliefs, traditional, and ancestral presence serving as an important ecological and mythological space in the Malay community. Sellato (2023) explored the dynamic relationship between environment and society, proposing that the rainforest acts as a field of social interactions, ethnic and cultural identities.

However, children's literature written in English in Malaysia has received limited scholarly attention, with even fewer studies focusing specifically on children's fantasy literature. And no studies have applied literary cartography to explore the relationship between geographic space, folklore, and personal growth in children's fantasy literature in Malaysia. There are a few researchers studying the works of Hanna Alkaf. Some researchers explore the novel *The Weight of Our Sky* written by Hanna Alkaf from the perspective of psychology, the Malay archetypal image, the post-trauma, the gender and post-memory in response to the May 13 tragedy. Another researcher applies the theory of attachment to discuss the human-ghost bond in the novel *The Girl and the Ghost*, written by Hanna Alkaf. There is few research study on *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, as it is a relatively new work published in 2023. This research aims to address that gap by examining how *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* portray the rainforest as both a physical setting and a metaphorical space for exploring cultural identity and personal growth. In doing so, it contributes to an emerging conversation on the spatial imagination in global children's literature and underscores the value of mapping as a medium for cultural storytelling.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research adopts a theoretical framework that integrates Martin Heidegger's notion of existential anxiety, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, and Robert Tally's theory of literary cartography to explore the interplay between space, narrative, and identity in *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*. Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a multifaceted approach to understand how spatial experience in literature operates not only as a structural element of narrative but also as a site of psychological conflict and cultural orientation.

Figure 1 illustrates that Heidegger's notion of existential anxiety forms the foundation of the theoretical framework, highlighting that "as a state of mind, anxiousness is a basic kind of being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 233). It describes the ontological unease individuals encounter when faced with unfamiliarity and the absence of grounding in the world. This abstract anxiety is spatially manifested as cartographic anxiety, a literary phenomenon characterised by a sense of disorientation, unhomeliness, or psychological tension within spaces that are unstable or symbolically significant. The state of cartographic anxiety emphasises the need for literary cartography, which can help the subject in spatial anxiety to locate itself, so that the anxious subject can recognise its space and its own existence, "I map, therefore I am" (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 1).

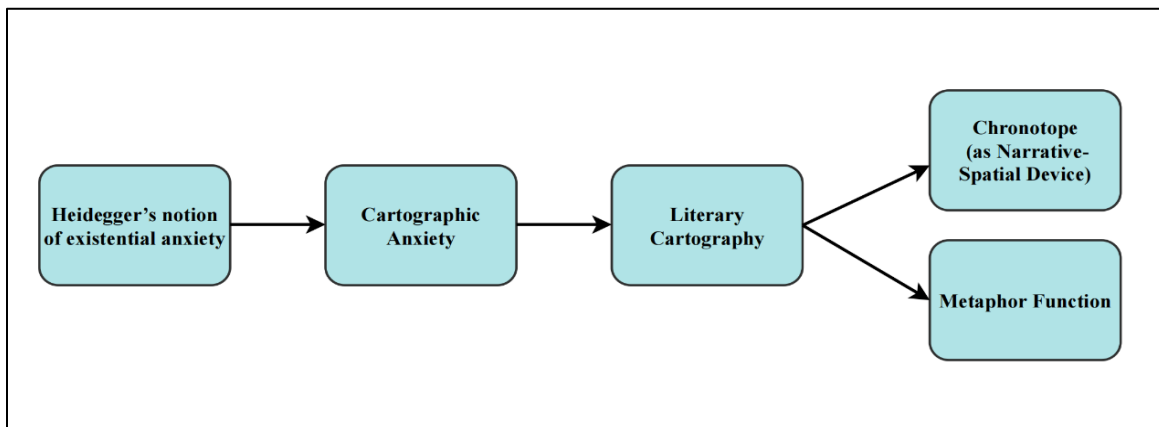


FIGURE1. Theoretical Framework

To bridge these existential and narrative dimensions, the framework integrates Robert Tally's theory of literary cartography, which examines how space operates in literary texts not just in a geographical sense, but also as a symbolic medium and narrative structure. From this methodological base, the framework branches into two analytical pathways. The first involves Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope as a way to understand the "generic techniques that have been devised for reflecting and artistically processing" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84) aspects of time and space. Bakhtin argued that chronotopes are "the organising centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250) just as Tally argued that "Bakhtin's chronotope is another tool both for comprehending and producing literary cartography" (Tally Jr, 2012, p. 56), as it integrates space, time, and genre together into a coherent theoretical construct. Chronotopes like the forest, the threshold, or the journey function as narrative-spatial devices that embody the fusion of time and space in literary texts, structuring the plot while guiding characters through transformative encounters within symbolic or liminal settings. The second analytical strand centres on the metaphorical function of space, where spatial settings serve as symbolic landscapes that express psychological conflict, cultural memory, or processes of identity formation and negotiation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach to investigate how *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* constructs spatial experience as a narrative medium for expressing themes of anxiety, identity, and cultural memory. Rather than treating the theoretical framework outlined as discrete units, the study synthesises them into an integrated analytical strategy for examining the spatial dynamics of the novel.

The method centres on close reading of key narrative episodes that depict the protagonist's movement through interaction with the rainforest environment. These selected passages are discussed through three interrelated analytical lenses. First, the study investigates how the protagonist's journey is initiated by cartographic anxiety, interpreted through the lens of Heidegger's concept of existential anxiety, which highlights the disorientation that arises when one feels homelessness. Second, drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, the study analyses how spatio-temporal configurations, such as the forest and the threshold, serve as narrative-spatial devices that structure the protagonist's journey of transformation, mediating the interplay between temporal progression and spatial experience. Third, the analysis investigates the metaphorical function of space, focusing on how the rainforest operates as a symbolic geography that encodes emotional disorientation and cultural memory.

By integrating these analytical approaches, the study reframes space not as a static backdrop but as an active and dynamic site of meaning-making within the narrative. Through this spatially grounded reading, the method reveals how existential tension shapes narrative structure, how cultural identity is mapped onto mythic geography, and how psychological states are inscribed into literary landscapes. This interpretive model lays the foundation for the thematic and textual analysis that follows.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

TOPOPHRENIA AND PLACE OF ANXIETY

Place, situated in space, seems commonplace, but the distinctiveness and related relationship of a place to spaces, and the effects of place on persons or events are worthy of further inquiry (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 17). Tally (2018, p. 18) points out that an individual establishes a place through his or her experience and perception while simultaneously being subject to a place and to the space. Tuan (1990, p. 93) coined the term topophilia to represent “all of the human being’s affective ties to the material environment, which delivers the feelings that one has toward a place because it is home and a locus of memories.” Topophrenia, a certain identifiable place-mindedness that informs our activities and thoughts, characterises the subjective engagement with a given place, with one’s sense of place, and with the possible projection of alternative spaces (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 23). Topophrenia is marked by a deep emotional ambivalence, often accompanied by a profound sense of unease and spatial anxiety. It reflects the tension between attachment to place and the disquiet it simultaneously evokes. In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, the family space carries Hamra’s sense of place. Both the family and social space are not a happy place that brings her joy, but a depressing space filled with the emotional effects of topophobia. Topophrenia gives rise to mapping anxiety, in which the subject feels unable to map his or her location and surroundings in a meaningful way. This anxiety reflects the individual’s sense of spatial disorientation and desire for freedom. This section will explore how Hamra’s journey is driven by a deep sense of cartographic anxiety, rooted in Heidegger’s notion of existential unease.

ANXIETY AT HOME

Hamra lived on the edge of the tangled Langkawi jungle with her parents and grandparents. She was the only child in the family, and for this reason, her birthday had always been the family’s big deal in the past. She would receive gifts, surprises and wishes from all family members. But on her thirteenth birthday, her expectations were met with disappointment, no presents and no wishes, and nobody even remembered her birthday. Both of her parents were occupied with work and couldn’t make it home on time. Hamra had to undertake household chores and take care of her grandparents. “Ready to do anything her parents ask, ready to be the perfect daughter, the perfect granddaughter, and not even a “happy birthday” in return” (Alkaf, 2023, p. 13). She felt deeply upset and anxious due to her family’s ignorance of her birthday, her parents’ absence, and her grandparents’ constant nagging.

She was tired of wiping up messes and cooking and listening to Oprah say things that didn’t make sense, and worst of all, Hamra was really tired of her grandparents. Every time she heard grandpa singing songs she hated, she was quite angry inside. It made her feel like an abyss opening up in her chest, and the darkness inside was suffocating.

(Alkaf, 2023, p. 16)

The metaphor of an “abyss” opening in Hamra’s chest evokes a sense of inner emptiness and disorientation, representing a critical moment of internal crisis within a familiar domestic space. Hamra’s emotional turmoil reflects a form of psychological dislocation and emerging existential anxiety, aligning with what Heidegger (2010) identifies as a fundamental “state-of-mind”, and a basic mood “being-in-the-world”. Home is traditionally conceived as a topophilia space where one is marked by emotional attachment, but “even when we are ‘at home’, we

maintain our awareness of the unfamiliar, the unheimlich, and a subtle, yet visceral feeling of spatial anxiety subtends our thought and actions” (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 23). This aptly describes the everyday anxiety linked to feeling lost or simply uneasy in a particular location, and it also illustrates how even familiar places can evoke feelings of fear and unease. In fact, this might be thought of as the fundamental impetus behind the desire for mapping, which is also the desire for narrative (Entrikin, 1991, p. 133).

SOCIAL SPACE CAUSED ANXIETY

The abstract space Hamra inhabits, namely social space, is the objective expression of cartographic anxiety. Cartographic anxiety animates the desire for narrative itself, which is necessarily a socially and spatially symbolic activity by which the subjective and objective modes are bound in inextricable, tense, yet productive relation (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 131). In this social space, prolonged isolation from society due to the pandemic exacerbated Hamra’s anxiety about leaving home. Hamra reflects that “the world was not normal; the world was sick, with an illness nobody really seemed to understand” (Alkaf, 2023, p. 10). The lockdown kept all people, except those in special occupations, in their homes for one month due to the epidemic. Hamra sat at the dining table at home instead of her desk at school, occupied with housework instead of homework. Hamra’s mother cared for virus-stricken patients in a distant hospital and returned to a cramped apartment to rest between shifts, rather than being home with her family. Hamra’s father drove his van across the island, transporting volunteers and supplies to support the poorest families, nursing homes, and refugee communities hesitant to accept government aid, instead of ferrying the usual cheerful, boisterous tourists. The virus felt like a great thief, taking her parents away from home and robbing her of freedom and normal life.

Hamra was tired of seeing her friends as little squares on screens, she was tired of waiting in long lines just for bread and eggs, and she was tired of all the masks she had to wear, the real ones and the ones you couldn’t see.

(Alkaf, 2023, p. 15)

These are the real projections of Hamra’s emotional repression and anxiety, and she was eager to go outside and lead a normal life. This anxiety reveals not only one’s sense of being lost, but also a distressing feeling “unable to map one’s place and surroundings in a meaningful way, a crisis of representation” (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 131). A place can be understood as the ensemble of crystallised social relations, which in turn represent a complicated skein of intersecting narratives and traumas (Tally Jr, 2014). The breakdown of relationships with family members and outsiders in space signals the emotional alienation and increases the anxiety of members in the physical space “home”. Both physical and abstract spaces had a disruptive impact on Hamra’s sense of place. So, Hamra longs to escape this oppressive place immediately. When she was told to go on an errand in the jungle, she seized the opportunity and rushed to leave without hesitation. The jungle seems an ideal place for Hamra to inhale fresh air, experience a brief sense of freedom, remove the mask, and relieve anxiety. The accompanying sense of tropophobia triggered her cartographic anxiety, driving her mapping efforts to achieve spatial mobility.

SEARCH FOR FREEDOM

If the human subject does not exactly feel “at home”, then at least they can develop strategies for navigating these uncanny spaces of daily life through human interaction activities with the world (Tally Jr, 2012, p. 67). The family space did not provide Hamra with a sense of place or belonging, and the feeling of disorientation in location became the source of the cartographic anxiety, driving her to venture into new spaces in search of meaning, freedom and existence. Hamra went to the jungle with anger and forgot the rules she should have obeyed. As a child growing up near Malaysian jungles, they have known the five rules all their life.

Rule 1: Always ask permission before you enter.

Rule 2: Don't challenge what you can't even see.

Rule 3: Never use your true name.

Rule 4: Never take what isn't yours.

Rule 5: If you hear someone calling your name, never look behind you.

(*Alkaf*, 2023, p. 20)

Hamra initially broke the first forest rule unintentionally, driven by a surge of anger that felt like fire beneath her skin, clouding her thoughts. She hesitated to return, but the memory of her grandmother's eyes flashing in her mind solidified her decision. She experienced peace and comfort as she clipped herbs and leaves in the forest, so that she didn't realise how deep she had ventured into the jungle. When she broke the second rule, it was with full awareness of her actions. The third rule, once defied, brought her a surprising sense of liberation and joy. She dismissed these “nonsensical rules”, believing that children deserved clarity and autonomy. By the time she picked the vibrant fruit from the tree, breaking the fourth rule, and later violating the final rule while fleeing the weretiger, Hamra had begun to carve her own path.

This gradual, rule-defying progression reflects Sartre's existential premise, derived from Heidegger's philosophy, that “one must have the freedom to create one's own meaningful existence, establishing a sense of place and purpose in the world” (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). Anxiety, which leads to feelings of disorientation or being lost, also allows one the freedom to create a conceptual map of the world and one's place within it, offering a way to make sense of the surrounding chaos. Freedom may be the root of existential anxiety, and it is also the path to overcome it. By mapping, partly a metaphor for constellating the various forces that directly and indirectly affect human life, but here with a specifically spatial valence, it may be possible to overcome this anxious, transcendental homelessness (Tally Jr, 2012, p. 67). Hamra's transgressions are not merely acts of defiance but steps in a cartographic process of existential self-definition. Venturing into the jungle and repeatedly defying its rules not only helped Hamra ease her anxiety but also enabled her to pursue freedom and a sense of existence.

SPACE AND NARRATIVE INTERACTION

Maps presuppose narratives, which in turn may function as maps, and the act of storytelling itself is also a process of mapmaking (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 31). Narratives, in some ways, serve as devices, methods or mapping machines, used to map both real and imagined spaces of human experience. Space and place are inherently intertwined with narratives, just as narratives must shape and structure spaces and places. Mieke Bal (2009, p. 127) recognised that space is not only frames, places of action and background in a story, but it is also thematised and becomes an object of presentation itself. At the heart of the dynamic interplay between space and narrative lies Bakhtin's

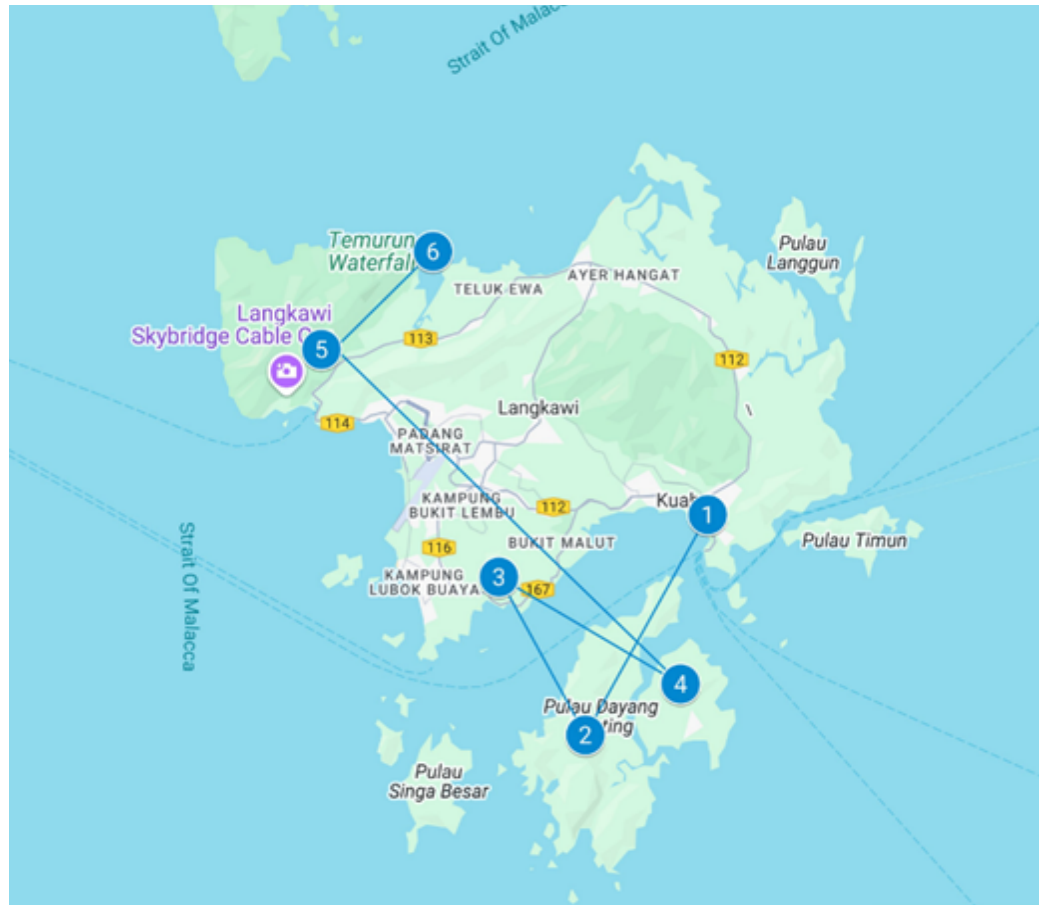
concept of the chronotope, which functions as a narrative device integrating space and time to shape characters and move the plot forward. The chronotope is “the place where the knots of the narrative are tied and untied” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250), shaping the meaning and structure of the narrative. This section examines how chronotope provides a narrative framework through a given place, the Malaysian tropical rainforest.

SPACE AND PLACE

Narrative space includes both places and spaces. Space is an abstract physical concept made up of various relations and dimensions. Places are defined by specific boundaries that make them measurable and enable them to be mapped. As Tuan (1977, p. 6) points out, “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” This process of endowing space with value, which Tally (2012, p. 148) refers to as the “cartographic impulse”. The place where the action takes place is crucial to the narrative, especially because of the characteristics associated with this particular setting. In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, the story is set in the Langkawi jungle and its nearby islands and beaches, belonging to a tropical rainforest landscape. The writer maps a beautiful and lush tropical rainforest picture with canopy trees, mountains, waterfalls, caves, limestone formations, and various wildlife. This literary expression of geographical landscape is the writer’s subconscious projection and an intuitive reflection of imagination.

During the adventure, Hamra transgressed different spaces, starting from the night market, passing through Pulau Dayang Bunting, jungles, Gua Wang Buluh in Pulau Tuba, the waterfall and the beach before returning home in Figure 2. As Westphal (2011, p. 45) asserts, “space is fundamentally transgressive; it is not fixed, it fluctuates, and it is caught by forces (or generates dynamics) that cause (or are caused by) permanent flows.” In this sense, space is not static but animated by movement. Hamra’s journey, undertaken as a form of atonement for breaking the forest’s sacred rules, involves crossing both physical boundaries and moral thresholds. Transgression here is twofold which refers to the literal crossing of spatial limits and the violation of cultural or ethical codes. The transformation of space maps a path of adventure through different places, and it shapes the entire geographical space of the novel, blending the real and imagined space to create Hamra’s daily geographical world. Numerous unique geographical features and depictions of landscapes about the Langkawi jungle are presented in the novel, constituting the cartographic project.

The rainforest functions as a chronotope in Bakhtin’s sense, both as a narrative place, a specific setting, and as a narrative space, an abstract dimension where space and time converge to shape the trajectory of events. The narrative progresses through the transformation of spatial scenes, with the markers of each location on the route map making the movement of the novel clearer and providing a cognitive map for the accurate description of the route and place names.



- ① Night Market Kuah Town
- ② Pulau Dayang Bunting
- ③ Jungle
- ④ Pulau Tuba
- ⑤ Telaga Tujuh (Seven Wells Waterfall)
- ⑥ Pantai Tengkorak Beach

FIGURE 2. Movement Roadmap

CROSS THE PORTAL

In both portal and quest fantasy, the protagonist departs from familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unfamiliar or fantastical realm. As Mendlesohn (2008, p. 61) explains, the portal fantasy is about entry, transition and negotiation, with the portal functioning as a narrative device that initiates the journey. The portal here finds a narrative counterpart in Bakhtin's chronotope of the threshold, which "as the place of conjoining of two different spaces, e.g., entrances, doorways, corridors, staircases, where a turning point occurs" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 49). The portal functions as a threshold chronotope, where space and time intersect to stimulate narrative movement and represent the opening to a new world or state through crossing the boundary. The portal typically occurs early in the story, often serving as one of the starting points, marking the key moment when the character begins their adventure. In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, the bridge serves as both a portal and a chronotopic threshold for the key turning points

in the narrative, and it acts as the element that seems to catalyse the frame story. Prior to crossing, Hamra walks down a long, deserted street strewn with dead leaves, the landscape marked by the stillness and isolation of pandemic lockdown, an atmosphere of liminality and unease. After solving three riddles, they cross the bridge, guarded by the hornbill, and enter the night market. This crossing signifies more than physical movement, but a symbolic transition into a new chronotope, where time, memory, and identity are reconfigured.

The Pasar Malam market was filled with many wonders and marvels of an entirely different kind; the air was filled with strange, spicy scents mingled with exotic perfumes and the loud calls of traders begging visitors to sample their wares.

(Alkaf, 2023, p. 110)

The protagonist enters a world filled with mysterious forces, and upon entering this new world, they discover that it operates under rules and structures different from their original world. Hamra found the Seer of Fates and got clues to help weretiger, then she accepted the challenge task, marking the beginning of the adventure. The bridge functions as a narrative threshold, structuring the story's frame by separating the mundane world from the fantastical realm. As a chronotopic threshold, it not only delineates the boundary between reality and imagination but also heightens narrative tension by suggesting the unknown that lies beyond.

SPACE OVER TIME

The complex and dynamic plot unfolds across various spatial settings and transitions, driving the storyline forward, shaping character development, and heightening conflicts. In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, the writer unfolds the narrative in which space serves as the dominant axis of meaning, overshadowing temporal continuity. Each time Hamra ventures into a new zone of the rainforest, the narrative engages with a different chronotope. Although events proceed in sequence, the narrative shifts emphasis from temporal progression, “what happens next”, to spatial movement, “where Hamra travels next”. This reorientation subtly restructures the plot into a succession of chronotopic nodes and each setting becomes a discrete spatio-temporal unit. Bakhtin argues that “in the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one concrete whole. Time thickens, takes on flesh, becomes visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Bakhtin makes possible the full integration of space with time, embedding time within spatial dimensions. Chronotopes remain operative, but their temporal dimension is overshadowed by the spatial structure unique to each forest zone.

In all five locations Hamra visited, the writer expands on the spatial descriptions while condensing the portrayal of time, where space becomes the primary carrier of narrative. At Pulau Dayang Bunting, the cave is described as vast, steep, deep, and enveloped in darkness, anchored only momentarily to “night time” (p. 153). During their move through the forest fleeing the Bunian, the focus remains on the shifting spatial zones, with time almost entirely unmoored. At Gua Wang Buluh, the narrative immerses readers in a detailed spatial chronotope, wooden walkway, stone steps, white fence, rock formations, steep limestone cliffs, caves, and rock cracks. At the same time, time is reduced to vague terms like “fifteen minutes” (p. 241) or “a long time” (p. 244). Similarly, the plot to the waterfall evokes a mobile chronotope, including trails, streams, mountain pools, rock slides, monkeys in the trees, and a concrete pathway, time referenced only by “after the morning meal” (p. 289). On the beach, the chronotope shifts again, detailing elements like sand, water, sky, sun, clouds, and wind, while keeping the timeline merely with “this time” (p. 350).

The narrative reconfigures time through space, privileging spatial meaning and transformation by letting each chronotope define its own temporal dynamics. Each new area Hamra enters offers unique challenges and revelations. This prioritisation of space encourages readers to experience the adventure as a series of interconnected landscapes, which helps to map the panoramic picture of the Malaysian rainforest geography.

METAPHOR FUNCTION FOR INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

Literary cartography functions metaphorically, with the map serving as a symbol for the linguistic and creative act of writing, blending both figurative and literal elements. As Tally Jr (2018, p. 131) indicates, literary cartography is “the practice by which writers figuratively represent the social space of the narrative or text, as well as the relationship of the individual or collective subject to a larger spatial, social, and cultural ensemble.” Through this metaphorical lens, the map transcends its geographical function to become a narrative structure that inscribes personal identity and cultural belonging onto space. This spatial engagement becomes a catalyst for personal development, as each encounter with a new place marks a moment of transformation, a symbolic waypoint in the character’s evolving identity. In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, Hamra’s journey through the rainforest vividly animates this metaphorical act of mapping. The presence of mythical figures embedded within these landscapes serves as narrative anchors, connecting spatial movement with cultural memory and traditional values. Each location Hamra encounters serves not merely as a narrative setting but as a spatial metaphor that facilitates her emotional, psychological, and cultural development.

INDIVIDUAL GROWTH

The protagonist Hamra exhibits different emotional states and evolving identities in each geographical space, presenting a dynamic process of personal transformation. At the beginning, her journey is marked by mistrust and emotional volatility. When the tiger speaks to her in a parental tone at the fantastical night market, “the flames were liquid heat in her veins” (p. 113), revealing her resistance toward the tiger. Her anger flares again when Ilyas offered to help, “flames were flickering to her ears” (p. 142), since Hamra couldn’t control her feelings and was unwilling to trust and accept help from others. As the narrative progresses through various locations, Hamra’s emotional landscape begins to shift.

In Pulau Dayang Bunting, the dark and steep cave evokes intense fear that “fear gripped her heart and squeezed her lungs so that she almost choked” (p. 166). This spatial experience leaves a psychological imprint that lingers even after she leaves the cave. Yet even as Ilyas offers comfort, Hamra initially resists “trying not to let that familiar fire leap from her chest to tongue” (p. 184) before later regretting her harsh words, signalled by the retreat of those inner flames. As the space moved to the NeNek hut in the jungle, the tiger tells her the truth and reveals that her grandmother cannot be saved. Her emotions are described as “the rivulets of fire that ran through her veins, threads of hurt and rage and sadness all woven together” (p. 218), capturing the emotional complexity of grief and realisation. Though exhausted, Hamra chooses to continue the journey, recognising the stakes not only for herself but for her family.

This emotional and psychological transformation becomes especially pronounced in Pulau Tuba, where Hamra's reaction to the crisis shifts from despair to resilience. When a bee attack causes chaos, a wave of hopelessness "unspools in her chest, thick and black, smothering the fire that usually burned bright" (p. 239), yet she does not yield to anger. Instead, she takes initiative, refrains from blame, and begins to show genuine empathy and caring for the tiger, reassuring her companions and even comforting Ilyas, whom she had previously scolded. Her growing compassion is captured in her words, "we are a team" (p. 245) and "if we're together, maybe it won't be so bad" (p. 248). At the waterfall, Hamra fully steps into a leadership role, offering comfort, apologising for past hurts, and taking the lead to negotiate with the fairy. When the tiger hesitates, she walks beside him and hugs him, saying, "You have friends now, me and Ilyas; We are your friends" (p. 316). This gesture of emotional affirmation illustrates her development from self-protective solitude to open trust and solidarity.

Hamra's journey is more than a sequence of events across physical landscapes, and it is a symbolic map of inner growth. Each location functions as a spatial metaphor and narrative node that charts different stages of her evolving self. Literary cartography, in this sense, maps not only external geography but also the protagonist's emotional terrain, marking her passage from fear, anger, and isolation to trust, compassion, and responsibility. The act of moving through diverse and symbolically charged spaces enables Hamra to reorient her identity, much like a map trace shifting coordinates.

By the end of the novel, Hamra returns home transformed, "Her steps felt freer and lighter. I'm home, she thought" (p. 376). When she hugs her grandfather, she no longer sees a nagging old man, but feels warmth, comfort, and unconditional love that "there was nothing in the world but the comfort of his arms, nothing but the love she felt radiating from every pore, reaching out and enveloping her in its warmth" (p. 378). In her grandmother's room, "Everything exactly the same as it was, except for Hamra herself, who was never going to be the same again" (p. 380). These concluding moments confirm that Hamra's journey has not only transformed but also redefined her perception of others and her selfhood. Her cartographic journey through diverse spatial settings serves as a metaphor for her emotional and psychological growth, resulting in a deeper feeling of belonging and identity.

CULTURAL AWARENESS

The exotic zones depicted in the narrative are incorporated into an overall system of geographic, historical, cultural, and other knowledge for which the map itself is an entirely apt figure (Tally Jr, 2018, p. 131). Beyond its physical presence, space operates as a symbolic domain in which identity is shaped and multiple cultural and social forces intersect. Literary cartography functions metaphorically and spatial navigation becomes a means of interpreting culture, embedding personal experience into landscapes shaped by myth, memory, and tradition. The inner space of the novel is embodied in the formation of the protagonist's individual growth, while its externality points to deeper traditional culture representations. The novel, *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, integrates mythological figures from traditional Malaysian folklore, such as the "weretiger", "langsuir" (female ghost), "pray man" (rock man), and "fairy", into the narrative through the depiction of different geographical spaces in the rainforest. Each mythological figure is deliberately situated within distinct narrative environments, dense forests or huge caves, corresponding to spaces deeply rooted in Malay folkloric tradition.

In Malaysian folklore, stories of shape-shifters, such as weretiger, werewolf, and crocodile, seek to explain the origin of a particular custom, that is, the taboo of taking something from the wild (Shamsuddin, 2021, p. 84). Variations of the weretiger myth suggest it may originate from a jinn gifted with transformative power or from individuals who acquire the ability through fasting and incantation (Albelaihi et al., 2021, p. 2912). In the novel, transforming the weretiger back into a human is central to Hamra's quest, and the weretiger becomes a key companion on her journey. Langsuir, derived from Malay legend, is a ghostly woman who dies from the shock of a stillbirth and transforms into the Pontianak, a terrifying figure marked by long black hair, a green robe, and tapering nails (Skeat, 1965, pp. 325-326). Her appearance in the novel is dramatised through haunting spatial settings like caves and nightmares that "The shadows emerged a tall figure, deathly pale, with long, long black hair that trailed along on the ground behind her" (p. 170). Hamra's confrontation with the Langsuir becomes a liminal experience, where the boundaries between life and death, real and supernatural, are blurred.

The pray man, a rock formation resembling a man for mercy, originates from the Si Tanggang legend, an allegory of filial piety and consequence (Shamsuddin, 2021, pp. 116-117). In the novel, the pray man is located in cave Wang Buluh, a cave tied to collective memory where villagers once hid from Japanese forces. The praying man, "silhouetted against the harsh glow of the afternoon sun" (p. 248), represents inner resilience and symbolic endurance. Similarly, Malaysian fairy lore, from djinns to sky maidens of Kayangan (Shamsuddin, 2021, p. 4), is embedded in the narrative, portraying fairies as both beautiful and powerful, yet capable of cruelty. Fairies will exact punishment when humans cross natural boundaries, but in the novel, they offer help to ensure forest safety by removing their strength from the eighth well.

Before her adventure, Hamra regarded the folktale figures her grandfather described as mere legends with no basis in reality. However, through her encounters with magical beings in adventure, she came to realise that "Opah had only ever told her the truth" (p. 309). Throughout Hamra's adventure, the integration of space and mythology, combined with the protagonist's interactions with mythological figures, traditional culture transcends being mere abstract knowledge, becoming tangible through vivid settings and living characters. Hamra undergoes more than a fantastical journey, but the symbolic systems of Malay culture. Each location becomes a cartographic node, connecting space to cultural memory. In this metaphorical mode, literary cartography maps cultural consciousness, allowing both Hamra and the reader to navigate a landscape rich with cultural meaning. This metaphorical mapping process plays a crucial role in the preservation and revitalisation of traditional Malay folklore, ensuring its continuity not only through memory but also through embodied narrative experience.

CONCLUSION

In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, Hanna Alkaf employs literary cartography to intertwine narrative, space, myth and reality through vivid depictions of the rainforest's spatial and geographical landscapes. This practice not only shows the protagonist Hamra's evolving understanding of space and culture during her adventure but also reveals the role of geographical space as a vital medium for exploring self-identity, interpersonal relationships, and cultural connections. From the symbolic landmarks within the rainforest to interactions with mythological figures, space transcends its role as a mere backdrop to become a central element driving the narrative. Moreover, the portrayal of space integrates traditional Malay culture into the storyline,

enriching the symbolic significance of mythological characters. This dynamic approach transforms traditional culture from a static memory into a living, transmittable element within the narrative. By blending spatial anxiety, narrative development, and cultural heritage, this practice of writing deepens readers' understanding and appreciation of traditional culture. It also demonstrates the immense potential of literary cartography as a tool to unravel the intricate connections between culture and space, and between individual growth and broader cultural contexts. Ultimately, this study not only contributes to the growing discourse on spatial theory in literature but also affirms the significance of Malaysian children's fantasy as a legitimate and meaningful field of academic inquiry.

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