

Introduction to singaporean literature essay sample



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The history of Singaporean literature is closely connected with the country's own inception as a republic in 1965. Autonomy, first from its British colonial masters and later by separation from Malaysia, gave rise to the urgent necessity to find a separate and distinct national identity, one that could clearly be called Singaporean. The endeavor to establish this identity is echoed in the literature through the themes they raise. In particular, this is most true of the Singapore Short story which was by comparison to other forms of literary expression most prolific during the early years of Singapore's history. This study first provides a brief historical overview of the Singapore Short story written in English after which it examines the development of the genre through its first decade dating from 1978 and subsequently, the next ten years to the present. The Short Story in Singapore

Singapore is a cosmopolitan Asian city, unique in that there are four major language groups promoted by the government. From the very beginning, English was chosen as the language of government, law and social discourse. Being the native language of none of the ethnic groups, its choice favored none. The presence of the different ethnic communities with their strong cultural identities and heritage suggests that the influence they exert over the development of Singapore literature cannot be insignificant.

Chinese literature dates more than 3, 000 years while the classic Hindu tales of Mahabharata and Ramayana are well-known, passed from generation to generation and transplanted to the alien soil of Singapore, both by merchants who travelled to these regions in the 14th century as well as through the influx of migrant workers well into the 19th and 20 century.

Further add to this rich mixture, Malay culture which has seen the integration of Portuguese and Dutch language and culture from its earliest colonial influences and the strong sway of Islam. Yet, in the early history of Singapore literature, the threads of each literature developed very separately from each other.

The Singapore short story written in Chinese in the sixties and early seventies had probably more in common with one written in Hong Kong in the same language. The Singapore short story written in English drew from Maupassant and Poe rather than reflected the rich cultural ethnicity of its populace. There was consequently no 'borrowing' between the ethnic languages to express the commonality of a Singapore identity. What is significant is that Singapore literature in each distinct language community individually faced the challenge of defining what that culture is in the context of an newly adopted homeland and coming to terms with change. The short story written in English had its obscure beginnings in the then-University of Singapore. There, the first generations educated at tertiary level in the English medium began to experiment with the mode of expression of the short story. The first published record of the short story in English in Singapore was in 1959; *The Compact*, edited by Herman Hochstadt represented incipient efforts of local writers to produce a volume of stories in the English medium.

It was in 1978, in the introduction to the seminal *Singapore Short Stories*, Volumes I and II, the editor Robert Yeo observed that if the published output of short stories is compared to that of poetry in English in the same period, it will be seen that there are fewer writers of short fiction than there are poets.

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Nearly a dozen individual collections have been published but no book of short stories by a single author has appeared. In the interim, there were only two other significant attempts to promote the short story form. These were *Stories from Africa and Asia*, edited by Chandran Nair and Theo Luzuka, and *The Sun In Her Eyes: Stories by Singapore Women*, edited by Geraldine Heng. These two collections were said to have registered the start of a “concerted effort in making the short story assimilate the Singapore life and locale.” Within the same year of publication of *Singapore Short Stories*, a modest volume of short stories made its mark on the local literary scene. *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* by Catherine Lim sold 3, 000 copies on the local market within six months. This naturally rendered Yeo’s earlier assertion untrue; this was the first collection of “short stories by a single author.” Soon, other writers such as Goh Sin Tub, Lim Thean Soo and Baratham formed the wave of writers issuing collections of their works.

Today, the acceptance of Singapore short story in English as a unique genre is unquestioned. *Little Ironies* has since sold well over 45, 000 copies and undergone ten reprints. It has been accepted by Cambridge Examinations Syndicate as the text for the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level Examinations. Lim has published seven collections of short stories to date. Her second book, *Or Else the Lightning God... & Other Stories* is also studied in schools and her other books have found their way into required reading lists. Demand for collections of locally written short stories has also led to the re-issue of collections. Early anthologies by Gopal Baratham, Goh Sin Tub and Nicky Moey have been reprinted under new titles.

Wong Swee Hoon's *The Landlord & Other Stories*, first published in 1984, was reissued in 1991 under the title *A Dying Breed* and included three new stories. Philip Jeyaretnam, then a relative newcomer to the literary scene, amazed literary circles when his debut collection, *First Loves*, clung to the top position of the "Times Best Sellers" List of Books for a record of more than forty weeks. The significance of Jeyaretnam's achievement and that of his fellow writers marks the change of perception of local writing. Where once local literature had a less than popular following and there were prejudices regarding styles and standards of writing, the rising volume of sales of short story collections is the best indicator of an increasing acceptance of literary works locally written and published.

Brief History of Singapore

The earliest known mention of Singapore was a 3rd century Chinese account which described Singapore as "Pu-luo-chung" ("island at the end of a peninsula"). Little is known about the island's history at this time but this matter-of-fact description belies Singapore's colourful past. By the 14th century, Singapore had become part of the mighty Sri Vijayan Empire and was known as Temasek ("Sea Town"). This was no less accurate than the 3rd century name. Located at the natural meeting point of sea routes at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore had long known visits from a wide variety of sea craft, from Chinese junks, Indian vessels, Arab dhows and Portuguese battleships to Buginese schooners. During the 14th century, this small but strategically-placed island had earned a new name - "Singa Pura", or "Lion City". According to legend, a visiting Sri Vijayan prince saw an

animal he mistook for a lion and Singapore's modern day name was born.

The British provided the next notable chapter in the Singapore story.

During the 18th century, they saw the need for a strategic "halfway house" to refit, feed and protect the fleet of their growing empire, as well as to forestall any advances by the Dutch in the region. It was against this political backdrop that Sir Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a trading station. The policy of free trade attracted merchants from all over Asia and from as far afield as the United States and the Middle East. By 1824, just five years after the founding of modern Singapore, the population had grown from a mere 150 to 10,000. In 1832, Singapore became the centre of government for the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the advent of telegraph and steamship increased Singapore's importance as a centre for the expanding trade between East and West. Singapore had been the site of military action in the 14th century when it became embroiled in the struggle for the Malay Peninsula between Siam (now Thailand), and the Java-based Majapahit Empire. Five centuries later, it was again the scene of significant fighting during World War II. Singapore was considered an impregnable fortress, but the Japanese overran the island in 1942. After the war, Singapore became a Crown Colony.

The growth of nationalism led to self-government in 1959 and on 9 August 1965, Singapore became an independent republic. The history of Singapore dates to the 11th century. The island rose in importance during the 14th century under the rule of Srivijayan prince Parameswara and became a port until it was destroyed by Acehnese raiders in 1613. The modern history of <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-singaporean-literature-essay-sample/>

Singapore began in 1819 when Englishman Sir Stamford Raffles established a British port on the island. Under British colonial rule, it grew in importance as a center for both the India-China trade and the entrepot trade in Southeast Asia, rapidly becoming a major port city. During World War II, Singapore was conquered and occupied by the Japanese Empire from 1942 to 1945. When the war ended, Singapore reverted to British control, with increasing levels of self-government being granted, culminating in Singapore's Merger with the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963.

However, social unrest and disputes between Singapore's ruling People's Action Party and Malaysia's Alliance Party resulted in Singapore's separation from Malaysia. Singapore became an independent republic on 9 August 1965. Facing severe unemployment and a housing crisis, Singapore embarked on a modernization programme that focused on establishing a manufacturing industry, developing large public housing estates and investing heavily on public education. Since independence, Singapore's economy has grown by an average of nine percent each year. By the 1990s, the country had become one of the world's most prosperous nations, with a highly developed free market economy, strong international trading links, and the highest per capita gross domestic product in Asia outside of Japan.

Culture of Singapore

The culture of Singapore is best described as a melting pot of mainly Chinese, Indian, British, and Malay cultures, a reflection of its immigrant history. Singapore was a part of British Malaya for many centuries. It was ruled by the Sultanate of Johor. In 1819, the British came to the Island and set up a port and colony. During British rule, the port of Singapore flourished

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and attracted many migrants. Singapore became part of the Malaysian Federation in 1962 for two years, and in 1965 it became an independent nation and a republic, which it remains today. Singapore has a diverse populace of nearly 5 million people[1] which is made up of Chinese, Malays, Indians, Caucasians and Eurasians (plus other mixed groups) and Asians of different origins, which is in line with the nation's history as a crossroads for various ethnic and racial groups. In addition, 42% of Singapore's populace are foreigners, which makes it the country with the sixth highest proportion of foreigners worldwide. Singapore is also the third most densely populated in the world after Macau and Monaco. Languages

Many Singaporeans though not all, are bilingual. Most speak English and another language, most commonly Chinese, Malay, Tamil or Singapore Colloquial English (Singlish). All the children study English as their first language in school, under the compulsory local education system, and their mother-tongue language as their second language. Thus, most Singaporeans are effectively bilingual, especially the youths in today's society. English is the first language of Singapore. The standard form of English spoken in Singapore is Singapore Standard English, which uses British spelling and grammar. However, there is also a local dialect of English, Singlish, that is unique to Singapore, though it has close affinities with the Malaysian dialect known as Manglish. Singapore is a multi-lingual nation and Singaporeans speak different languages as their first language. In 2005, 50% of Singaporeans speak Mandarin at home.

32% speak English at home and 12% speak Malay while 3% speak Tamil at home. Singaporeans who do not speak English as their home language
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normally speak it as their second language. As part of the multi-cultural ethos of the nation, one language was also chosen to represent each of the four major ethnic or 'racial' groups. The 'national' language of Singapore is Bahasa Melayu. This is in recognition of the Malay people as the indigenous community in Singapore. 85% of Singaporeans do not speak Malay. Malay is used in the national anthem, national motto and military parade drill commands. Tamil is an official language as a majority of South Asians in Singapore are ethnic Tamils from India and Sri Lanka. While most Chinese Singaporeans are descendants of southern Chinese migrants who spoke a variety of regional languages, it is the northern Chinese language of Mandarin that is official in Singapore. Language most frequently spoken at home (%)|

Language| 1990| 2000| 2005|

English| 18. 8| 23. 0| 29. 4|

Mandarin Chinese| 23. 7| 35. 0| 36. 0|

Other Chinese Languages| 39. 6| 23. 8| 18. 2|

Malay| 14. 3| 14. 1| 13. 2|

Tamil| 2. 9| 3. 2| 3. 1|

Attitudes and Beliefs

Meritocracy

" The system of meritocracy in Singapore ensures that the best and brightest, regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background are encouraged to develop to their fullest potential. Everyone has access to education, which equips them with skills and knowledge to earn a better

living."[5] Indeed, the Education in Singapore ensures that primary
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education is compulsory for all children of age 7 to 12. Parents have to apply for exemptions from the Ministry of Education in Singapore in order to exempt their children under this compulsory rule with valid reasonings.

Social and Religious Harmony

Singapore is a secular immigrant country. The main religions in Singapore are Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Respect for different religions and personal beliefs are heavily emphasized by the government.[6] To demonstrate the importance of imparting racial harmony knowledge to the youths, schools in Singapore celebrate Racial Harmony Day on 21 July annually. Students come to school dressed in different ethnic costumes, and some classes prepare performances regarding racial harmony. Democracy, Peace, Progress, Justice and Equality

The concepts of democracy, peace, progress, justice and equality are enshrined as stars in the Singapore national flag. Freedom in the World 2006 ranked Singapore 5 out of 7 for political freedom, and 4 out of 7 for civil liberties (where 1 is the most free), with an overall ranking of “partly free”. Reporters without Borders ranked Singapore 135th out of 179 countries in their Press Freedom Index for 2011 to 2012.[7] Religion

Singapore is a multi-religious country, the roots of which can be traced to its strategic location; after its declaration as a port, a wide variety of nationalities and ethnicities from places as far as Arabia immigrated to Singapore. 33% of Singaporeans adhere to Buddhism, the main faith of the Chinese population of Singapore. Other Chinese are followers of Taoism (11%), Confucianism, and Christianity. Christians constitute about 18% of the

population of Singapore. Most Malays are Muslims, who constitute about 15% of the population, while most Indians are Hindus, constituting 5%. There is also a sizable number of Muslims and Sikhs in the Indian population. As a result of this diversity, there are a large number of religious buildings including Hindu temples, churches and mosques, some of which have great historical significance. There are also some Sikh temples and Jewish synagogues. These interesting buildings often became prominent architectural landmarks in cosmopolitan Singapore. In addition, about 17% of Singaporeans do not belong to any religion and consider themselves as free-thinkers.

Performing Arts

Singapore is emerging as a cultural centre for arts and culture, including theatre and music. As a cosmopolitan and multi-racial society, Singapore is often identified with the “ gateway between the East and West”. In the past decade, there is an emergence of several performing arts groups in Singapore, especially in theatrical arts. A number of productions were staged successfully and several groups, such as TheatreWorks, have performed overseas. The Singapore government encourages a product-oriented arts scene within its master plan to include arts as a commodity for its economy, true explorations and innovation exist but at a level that is not well funded. However, the local scene of constructive arts critics is still much under developed and often subjective in tone. Most prominent events and venues are government operated and normally with an international focus. For indigenous artistic works, it's best to explore and find out about local private arts companies. Another festival that is going strong is the Singapore Youth Festival organized by the Ministry of Education.

In fact, it has become a magnet that provides funding for local performing artists to work at most local schools and compete for the gold! Funding for these arts companies are divided into different class, some are government initiated companies and may receive direct funding from the government (e. g. Singapore Symphony Orchestra) while others will need to apply for funding through the National Arts Council. At the moment, major grants are given to mainly western and ethnic cultural companies to signify them as the flagship companies of Singapore. Due to the limited physical space of Singapore, arts groups and companies are also relatively dependent on housing arrangement and provision by the government.

So far, the issue on space is still one of the major factors that influence performing arts making in Singapore. A much more vibrant local scene may evolve if this issue can be carefully resolved. Singapore hosts an annual Singapore when international and local artists gather in the country to perform in a wide variety of events including music, dance and theatre. The Singapore Arts Festival has become an event for Singapore to showcase its ability to buy international renowned performing arts products. In 2003, the Esplanade - " Theatres on the Bay", a center for performing arts, was opened. The Esplanade is also known as " The Durian", due to its resemblance to the fruit. The Arts House at Old Parliament Lane has also been supportive of local performing arts in recent years. Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and LASALLE College of the Arts are the two main arts institutions offering full-time programmes for the performing arts in Singapore. Institutions including government schools nowadays receive good funding for their arts programmes. Cultural Policy

Singapore maintains tight restrictions on arts and cultural performances. Most artistic works have to be vetted by the government in advance, and topics that breach so-called out of bounds markers (OB markers) are not permitted. While the OB markers are not publicly defined, they are generally assumed to include sensitive topics such as race, religion, and allegations of corruption or nepotism in government. Nudity and other forms of loosely-defined " obscenity" are also banned. Singaporean film director Royston Tan has produced movies which challenge these policies, including a movie called Cut in reference to censorship of the arts.[13]

The country's first pre-tertiary arts school, School Of The Arts, is now completed and stands along the country's prominent Orchard Road. Commenced in 2008, the school aims to provide an environment for nurturing young artists aged between 13 and 18 years old. There has been much public rhetoric about liberalization and its association with the development of a creative economy in Singapore. The response from artists, academics, public intellectuals, and civil society activists has ranged from strongly optimistic to deeply pessimistic, as reflected in the chapters written for edited book Renaissance Singapore: Economy, Culture, and Politics. The difference between what is " culture" and what makes up " the arts" has been a matter of some debate in Singapore. For an attempt at defining what is artistic, see, for example, the Report of the Censorship Review Committee 1992. Creative Writing

Singapore has a rich heritage in Creative Writing in the Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English Languages. While there is more emphasis on social and patriotic themes in Malay, Chinese and Tamil, the writer in English finds himself (or <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-singaporean-literature-essay-sample/>

herself) more comfortable in the analysis of the individual and his motivations. For the writer in Tamil, Chinese and Malay, a healthy concern with the particulars of everyday life (one could say the minutiae of living) and the interweaving of these into the fabric of larger nationalistic, patriotic social events is in no way an offensive experience—in fact it is expected. The writer in English seems more concerned with discovering an image of the individual self, or extrapolating human experience. The social milieu of the English educated is a middle class one and they have middle class pretensions. The middle class preoccupation with the self has over the years pervaded the consciousness of the modern Chinese and Malay writers and is what made it possible for their identification with writers using the English Language.

The writer in the English language was a comparatively later phenomenon. Creative writing in English is traced to the establishment in Singapore of an institution of higher education in the arts and sciences, Raffles College, which subsequently became the University of Malaya in Singapore together with the King Edward VII Medical College. One of the high points in writing in English was the early and mid-fifties when a rising anti-colonial nationalism was at play and contributed to the desire to be identified as “Malayan”. The poems of Wang Gungwu, Lim Thean Soo and Augustine Goh Sin Tub from this period are in a category by themselves. Except for Wang who managed to move into some detached social poems, the rest are mostly personal and experimental in their use of language. The imagery is for most part forcedly local with rubber trees, durians, laterite etc. appearing again and again as do words and phrases from Malay and Chinese. This led to the coining of the

word “ Engmalchin” to explain the highly rarefied, nationalistic application of such languages in poems in English.

In the mid-fifties and early sixties there rose a group of writers in English, only a few of whom are alive today—Ee Tiang Hong, Edwin Thumboo, Lloyd Fernando and Oliver Seet. A “ younger” group among whom Wong Phui Nam was most outstanding arose a few years later and moved away from the conscious Malayaness of their immediate predecessors, but found themselves unsure of direction; though convinced of their interest in writing. During this period (1950–1963), prose writing was almost negligible. Herman Hochstadt’s “ The Compact and Other Stories” is about the only collection. Lloyd Fernando, then a short story writer, published his first novel after 20 years. Of the other writers, Awang Kedu (Wang Gung Wu, again) had surest control of language and development of theme. It was however, poetry and not prose that surged forward in the sixties beginning with Robert Yeo, Dudely de Souza, Arthur Yap (died in 2006) and Wong May.

The achievements of these writers were consolidated and enlarged by the establishment of “ FOCUS”, the journal of the Literary Society of the University of Singapore, so much so that when the next group of writers, Lee Tzu Pheng, Mohd Hj Salleh, Yeo Bock Cheng, Pang Khye Guan, Syed Alwi Shahab and Chandran Nair (now living in Paris) arrived at the University in 1965, there was already in existence within the confines of the University, a micro-tradition of writing and publishing in English. The arrival of Edwin Thumboo to the English Department from the Civil Service was an added impetus. At around this time too, Goh Poh Seng (now living in Canada), who had actually taken a year off to do nothing but write in Dublin and London <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-singaporean-literature-essay-sample/>

(and almost starved as a result), arrived to begin work as a Medical Officer at the General Hospital. He started "TUMASEK" a journal for the publication of Singapore/Malayan writing; the fourth such attempt—the first being "WRITE" begun by Herman Hochstadt and others in the late 1950s; the second, "MONSOON" edited by Lim Siew Wai in the early sixties; the third, the aforementioned "FOCUS". "TUMASEK" however followed "MONSOON" into death after a few issues but Goh pushed forward undaunted and founded together with Lim Kok Ann, CENTRE 65 which presented the first ever "Poetry and Folk Music Festival" to Singaporeans at the Cultural Centre in 1966.

The Centre provided Goh with the framework to develop as a playwright beginning with his "Moon is Less Bright" and going on to "When Smiles are Done". Goh later decided that his particular field was prose; "The Immolation" being his first novel. The poets of the mid-sixties extended their style and techniques in the seventies and published in local and international journals and also in individual collections—Robert Yeo's "Coming Home Baby" and Arthur Yap's "Only Lines" in 1971, Chandran Nair's "Once the Horsemen and Other Poems" in 1972, and "After the Hard Hours, This Rain" in 1975.

The impetus of the sixties was carried over into the seventies and among the names that emerged in poetry were Chung Yee Chong, Sng Boh Kim, Ernest Lim, and Geraldine Heng, who achieved a remarkable fluency of style in a single volume work, "White Dreams". Today the younger poets writing in English, Leong Liew Geok, Angeline Yap, Boey Kim Cheng, Heng Siok Tian, Paul Tan, Yong Shu Hoong, Aaron Lee, Cyril Wong and Felix Cheong, show a

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more “diffusive” sensibility: rather than treating the self as linked to a core or primal place or time (Singapore before independence, a childhood haunt), their poems are conscious of the change and flux, the dispersions and returns which are appropriate to contemporary Singapore society.

Singaporean Literature

The literature of Singapore comprises a collection of literary works by Singaporeans in any of the country’s four main languages: English, Tamil, Chinese, and Malay. While Singaporean literary works may be considered as also belonging to the literature of their specific languages, the literature of Singapore is viewed as a distinct body of literature portraying various aspects of Singapore society and forms a significant part of the culture of Singapore. Literature in all four official languages has been translated and showcased in publications such as the literary journal *Singa*, that was published in the 1980s and 1990s with editors including Edwin Thumboo and Koh Buck Song, as well as in multilingual anthologies such as *Rhythms: A Singaporean Millennial Anthology Of Poetry* (2000), in which the poems were all translated three times each into the three languages. A number of Singaporean writers such as Tan Swie Hian and Kuo Pao Kun have contributed work in more than one language. However, such cross-linguistic fertilisation is becoming increasingly rare and it is now increasingly thought that Singapore has four sub-literatures instead of one. Poetry

Singaporean literature in English started with the Straits-born Chinese community in the colonial era; it is unclear which was the first work of literature in English published in Singapore, but there is evidence of

Singapore literature published as early as the 1830s. The first notable
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Singaporean work of poetry in English is possibly F. M. S. R., a pastiche of T. S. Eliot by Francis P. Ng, published in London in 1935. This was followed by Wang Gungwu's *Pulse* in 1950. With the independence of Singapore in 1965, a new wave of Singapore writing emerged, led by Edwin Thumboo, Arthur Yap, Robert Yeo, Goh Poh Seng, Lee Tzu Pheng and Chandran Nair. It is telling that many critical essays on Singapore literature name Thumboo's generation, rightly or wrongly, as the first generation of Singapore writers. Poetry is the predominant mode of expression; it has a small but respectable following since independence, and most published works of Singapore writing in English have been in poetry.

There were varying levels of activity in succeeding decades, with poets in the late 1980s and early 1990s including Simon Tay, Leong Liew Geok, Koh Buck Song, Heng Siok Tian and Ho Poh Fun. In the late 1990s, poetry in English in Singapore found a new momentum with a whole new generation of poets born around or after 1965 now actively writing and publishing, not only in Singapore but also internationally. Since the late-1990s, local small presses such as Firstfruits and Ethos Books have been actively promoting the works of this new wave of poets. Some of the more notable include Boey Kim Cheng, Yong Shu Hoong, Alvin Pang, Cyril Wong, Felix Cheong, Toh Hsien Min, Grace Chia and Alfian bin Sa'at (also a playwright). The poetry of this younger generation is often politically aware, transnational and cosmopolitan, yet frequently presents their intensely focused, self-questioning and highly individualised perspectives of Singaporean life, society and culture.

Some poets have been labeled Confessional for their personalised writing, often dealing with intimate issues such as sexuality. Verse anthologies have collected and captured various aspects of life in Singapore, from the 1970s onwards. For example, the coffee-table book *Singapore: Places, Poems, Paintings* (1993, edited by Koh Buck Song) featured poems, paintings and reminiscences about 30 significant places ranging from Chinatown to Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, and had an exhibition at the National Museum along with paintings from the book. *From Boys To Men: A Literary Anthology Of National Service In Singapore* (2002, edited by Koh Buck Song and Umej Bhatia) examined the meaning of military duty. *Reflecting On The Merlion* (2009, edited by Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai) brought together about 40 poems about the national tourism symbol. The most authoritative anthology to date is, arguably, *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology Of Singapore Literature* (2009) edited by Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and published by the National University of Singapore Press.

Drama

Drama in English found expression in Goh Poh Seng, who was also a notable poet and novelist, in Robert Yeo, author of 6 plays, and in Kuo Pao Kun, who also wrote in Chinese, sometimes translating his works into English. The late Kuo was a vital force in the local theatre renaissance in the 1980s and 1990s. He was the artistic director of The Substation for many years. Some of his plays, like *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1984) and *Lao Jiu* (1990), have been now considered classics. Stella Kon gained international fame with her now-famous play *Emily of Emerald Hill: a monologue*. About an ageing Peranakan matriarch, it has been produced in Scotland, Malaysia and

Australia. The sole character has been played by men as well as women. More recent plays have tended to revolve mostly around social issues, especially causes such as gay rights. A few plays by writers such as Tan Tarn How have ventured successfully into the realm of political satire, but their audiences and critical reception remain limited. Fiction

Fiction writing in English did not start in earnest until after independence. Short stories flourished as a literary form, the novel arrived much later. Goh Poh Seng remains a pioneer in writing novels well before many of the later generation, with titles like *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) – widely recognised as the first true Singaporean novel – and *A Dance of Moths* (1995). Beginning as a short story writer, Penang-born Catherine Lim has been Singapore's most widely read author, thanks partly to her first two books of short stories, *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978) and *Or Else, The Lightning God and Other Stories* (1980). These two books were incorporated as texts for the GCE 'O' Levels. Lim's themes of Asian male chauvinistic gender-dominance mark her as a distant cousin to Asian-American writers such as Amy Tan. She has also been writing novels, such as *The Bondmaid* (1998) and *Following the Wrong God Home* (2001), and publishing them to an international audience since the late 1990s.

Han May is the pseudonym of Joan Hon who is better known for her non-fiction books. Her science-fiction romance *Star Sapphire* (1985) won a High Commendation Award from the Book Development Council of Singapore in 1986, the same year when she was also awarded a Commendation prize for her better-known book *Relatively Speaking* on her family and childhood memories. Rex Shelley hails from an earlier colonial generation, although he <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-singaporean-literature-essay-sample/>

began publishing only in the early 1990s. A Eurasian, his first novel *The Shrimp People* (1991) examines the regional Eurasian community and their experience in Singapore. The book won a National Book Prize. His three other novels, *People of the Pear Tree* (1993), *Island in the Centre* (1995) and *River of Roses* (1998) all examine similar themes of the Eurasian community in the Southeast Asia region.

He has won the S. E. A. Write Award in 2007. Haresh Sharma is a playwright who has written more than fifty plays that have been staged all over the world, including Singapore, Melbourne, Glasgow, Birmingham, Cairo and London.[1] In May 2010, his highly acclaimed play *Those Who Can't, Teach* was published in book form by the independent publisher Epigram Books. Su-Chen Christine Lim's works consider varied themes surrounding issues of gender, immigration and orthodoxy. In 1993, her novel, *Fistful of Colours*, was awarded the first Singapore Literature Prize. Her other novels take up the relationship between the Malays and Chinese immigrants in colonial Malaya, and the issue of land (*A Bit of Earth*). Gopal Baratham, a neurosurgeon, started as a short story writer and later wrote politically charged works like *A Candle or the Sun* (1991) and *Sayang* (1991), which courted some controversy when they were first published. Jean Tay is an economist-turned-playwright. Her play *Everything but the Brain* won the Best Original Script at The Straits Times' Life! Theatre Awards in 2006. Two of her plays, *Everything but the Brain* and *Boom*, were published in book form by the Singapore-based independent publisher Epigram Books.

Augustine Goh Sin Tub who began his writing career writing in Malay, burst on the literary scene after his retirement with more than a dozen books of
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short stories, most of which were founded on his own personal history, thus making them part fiction and part non-fiction. Works like *One Singapore* and its two sequels *One Singapore 2* and *One Singapore 3* have found fans among the different strata of Singapore society and well acclaimed by all. Around this time, younger writers emerged. Claire Tham and Ovidia Yu wrote short stories, while playwright Stella Kon put forth her lesser-known science-fiction novel, *Eston* (1995). Of the younger generation, Philip Jeyaretnam has shown promise but has not published a new novel since *Abraham's Promise* (1995). His first two books, *First Loves* (1987) and *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988), were bestsellers in Singapore. Kelvin Tan, a musician and playwright, has been sporadically in sight, publishing the works *All Broken Up* and *Dancing* (1992) and *theNethe(r); R* (2001).

Colin Cheong can perhaps lay claim to being one of Singapore's most prolific contemporary authors, releasing three novels, one novella, two short story collections, and dozens of non-fictional works thus far. He won the Singapore Literature Prize in 1996 for his travel diary-like novel *Tangerine*. Daren Shiau's *Heartland* (1999) traces an eighteen-year-old's rites of passage from junior college through to enlistment and thereafter. The novel has been selected to be a set text at secondary school level. Hwee Hwee Tan graduated with a First Class Honours from the University of East Anglia, and a Masters from Oxford University. She grew up in Singapore and in the Netherlands, and her cosmopolitan experience can be readily seen in her novels. Her snazzy, humorous prose can be read in *Foreign Bodies* (1997) and *Mammon Inc.* (2001), both published by Penguin Books. Simon Tay, currently the chairperson of Singapore Institute of International Affairs and a

former nominated Member of Parliament, has a short story collection and a novel under his belt. These are *Stand Alone* (1991) and *City of Small Blessings* (2009).