Introduction[1]

> "There are three essential criteria for defining a classic: it must have endured a number of years; it must have intrinsic literary quality; but, most crucially, it must still be alive, to be able to connect with readers, thrilling them with flashes of recognition and revelation."
>
> – **Henry Eliot**, editor, *The Penguin Classics series*[2]

FROM ACROSS THE MILES, a world away, came a recent email. A lecturer in an American university had a query about Mencius in *If We Dream Too Long* which had puzzled him and his students (and probably, other readers). That query (more about which later) and his reasons for choosing the novel for his World Literature course and his students' responses, confirm how 'alive' the novel is still and what makes it a classic.

'*If We Dream Too Long* by Goh Poh Seng', he wrote, 'was by far the favorite of the semester … because it sparked great conversations about class, capitalism, colonialism, happiness, dreams, etc.' When I asked why he had selected it for study in the first place, he replied, 'I was planning this course last Fall as an upper-division World Literature course on the Bildungsroman across cultures. My colleague insisted that I would forever regret it if I did not [include] this "little gem

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[1] This appeared in the previous edition as 'Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long*: An Appreciation', April 2010. It has been revised, updated and re-titled for this new edition.

[2] 'Tales of the unexpected: 10 literary classics you may not have read', *The Guardian*, 26 Nov. 2018.

of a novel" in my course, and she was right. It proved to be very accessible to my undergrads, but deceptively complex. It inspired great conversations that lasted the entire week, and my students universally loved it. I only wish Poh Seng were alive to know how much they liked it.' (If only he were, indeed; for he notes in his Preface, 'What has made *Dream* worthwhile has been the response from individual readers.… It is responses like this that I treasure.')

When *If We Dream Too Long* (henceforth, *Dream*, for short) first appeared in 1972, 'the local press was unenthusiastic', the reviews being even harsh. Despite being a joint winner of the inaugural NBDCS (National Book Development Council of Singapore) Fiction Award in 1974, as he notes, too, in his Preface, the novel also failed to obtain recognition from 'the university' which was 'not supportive'. While book reviewers in 'the local press' had the power to recommend the novel to the reading public, the university's academics had the power to persuade their peers elsewhere and their students that the novel was worth reading and studying. Necessarily self-published, it also lacked the distribution channels and publicity that might have helped it extend its reach.

Nonetheless, the qualities that won it the NBDCS award gradually became appreciated by novelists who came after him, such as Philip Jeyaretnam and Simon Tay. Young literary journalists whose older predecessors had rejected the novel and dis-recommended it, have since discovered it for themselves. So have a new generation of literary scholars and their students at the universities. *Dream* began to feature in the curricula of not only Singaporean but also universities in Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia and the USA. Increasing numbers of articles about the novel began appearing in literary journals and books. Most recently, literary scholars, availing themselves of NUS Press's fresh edition of the novel are seeing new aspects of the novel — for instance, where the male protagonist was seen before as an 'anti-hero', he is now also perceived as a 'failed

man' because Kwang Meng resists 'the hegemonic masculinity promulgated by the [Singapore] state'.[3]

A Biographical Note

Let me start with an account of how I came to appreciate the novel and how the previous new edition, the third in 38 years since its first in 1972, came about, for which I wrote an introductory "Appreciation", now revised and updated as the Introduction to this new edition. In the early 1980s, I was probably then the only Singaporean literary critic to make a close study of *Dream* in an academic paper (by coincidence a chapter in a book published by Singapore University Press, the predecessor of NUS Press).[4] I had invited Dr Goh to give a talk to the English Honours class I was then teaching at the National University of Singapore, during which he mentioned that Paul Theroux (a former colleague of mine) had read *Dream* and recommended it for publication by his own then London publisher, André Deutsch, but Deutsch thought its appeal was 'too local'. Theroux must have thought well of the novel to take the trouble, and it struck me that Theroux's novel, *Saint Jack*,[5] was also set in Singapore, in the same period and could have been inspired by *Dream*. An attentive reading does indicate that it is virtually a rewriting of Goh's novel, but from the perspective of a Western expatriate protagonist who, in every way is Kwang Meng's antithesis. *Dream* is a representation of

[3] Angelia Poon, 'In Praise of Failed Men (and the Woman Writer): Gender Politics in the Singapore Novel', in *Singapore Literature and Culture: Current Directions in Local and Global Contexts*, ed. Angelia Poon and Angus Whitehead (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 217–36.

[4] Colin E. Nicholson and Ranjit Chatterjee, eds., *Tropic Crucible: Self and Theory in Language and Literature* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985).

[5] First published in 1973 by The Bodley Head (London). It was subsequently made into an award-winning film of the same title in 1979 by Peter Bogdanovich. The film was banned in Singapore till 2006.

1960s Singapore seen from the perspective of a Singaporean, a young clerk and a 'loser' despairing of his prospects, who fantasizes about escaping a country from which he feels alienated and unable to realize his dream of sailing away. *Saint Jack* is a representation of that same 1960s Singapore seen from the more sophisticated, worldly, experienced, and no less subjective perspective of the very much older metropolitan expatriate who jumps ship and lands in Singapore. He, too, is a 'loser' and a fantasist but is a 'survivor'. As his name suggests, the Italian American expatriate Jack Flowers fulfils his dreams in Singapore and flourishes until idealism, ironically, becomes his undoing.[6] Both novels are about dreams and dreamers (or fictions and fiction-makers); but where the idealistic Kwang Meng feels like an outsider and not at home in his own country, 'depersonalized' by its materialistic values, Jack the pragmatic expatriate entrepreneur sees the island as a hotel, 'with no natives, everyone a visitor',[7] and feels quite at home in a city defined by materialism, commerce and transactions. He sets up his own hotel/brothel, and cynically declares 'we all sell ourselves, don't we?'[8] While Kwang Meng at the end is forced to accept his lot and a bleak future, Jack, despite having lost his brothel business, refuses at the end to 'sell' himself, and hasn't lost hope, but optimistically trusts that luck might turn things round.

It also struck me at the time that the Singaporean novel in English had received little sympathetic critical attention compared to the Singaporean poetry in English.[9] Among

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[6] For a detailed comparative analysis of both novels, see my 'Intertextual Selves: Fiction-makers in Two "Singapore Novels"', in *Tropic Crucible: Self and Theory in Language and Literature*, ed. Nicholson and Chatterjee, pp.163–86.

[7] *Saint Jack* (Penguin Books, 1976), p. 103.

[8] Ibid., p. 166.

[9] See my article 'Self, Family and the State: Social Mythology in the Singapore Novel in English', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20, 2 (1989): 273–87.

the rarely appreciated novels were Goh's *Dream* and *The Immolation* (1977). I recalled Northrop Frye's conclusion that if we applied the same criteria to evaluate a new literature still at a comparatively early stage of development (in his case, Canadian literature) as we did to evaluate the established classics or canonical texts, then criticism of the former would become mainly a 'debunking project'.[10] This, it seemed to me, was what had happened to the early Singaporean prose fiction in English and specifically to Goh's first novel. Happily, with increasing recognition of Singaporean prose fiction and of Goh as a writer from the 1990s, my next engagement with his work was to provide entries on him in particular and on Singapore fiction in general for an encyclopaedia of post-colonial literatures in English.[11]

When I returned to teaching after 12 years in university administration, the issues raised in Goh's and Theroux's novels inspired me to offer a new course at the Nanyang Technological University in 2007. Called 'Imagining Singapore', it also included Philip Jeyaretnam's *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988), which seemed to me the 1980s' counterpart of *Dream*, films such as Peter Bogdanovich's *Saint Jack* (1979), Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen's *Singapore Dreaming* (2006) and representations of the island nation and city state in poems and memoirs 'about' Singapore, such as Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*.[12] To my dismay, I discovered that *Dream* had been long out of print.[13]

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[10] "Had evaluation been their guiding principle, this book would, if written at all, have been only a huge debunking project." 'Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada', in *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 298.

[11] 'Novel and Short Fiction (Singapore)'; 'Goh Poh Seng', in *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, ed. E. Benson and L.W. Conolly (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 145–7, 593.

[12] Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, Times Editions, 1998); *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, Times Editions, 2000).

[13] A second edition was published by Heinemann in 1995.

It being unthinkable either to omit a novel so central to my theme or ask students to photocopy the novel, this seemed an opportune time to propose a new edition of the novel. Select Books (Singapore) that had published Goh's third novel, *A Dance of Moths* (1995) agreed to bring out a new edition of *Dream* in time for my course, if I would write an Introduction to the novel. I agreed, and through Datin Patricia Lim, Dr Goh's sister-in-law, I managed to contact him. He tentatively agreed to the plan, but expressed concerns regarding distribution, print-run and other issues (now understandable, considering his regret for self-publishing his first novel with the attendant disadvantages). Meanwhile, Datin Lim informed me that Dr Goh was returning to Singapore for a private family visit in 2008 and asked if I knew of any writer-in-residence programme or other applicable sponsorship. I thought that his return would be an ideal occasion to launch the new edition of the novel. It would be a valuable opportunity, too, for talks and readings by Dr Goh to introduce the work to a new audience. Although known by then as an Asian Canadian writer since his emigration to Canada in 1986, he remains one of four Singaporean writers in English honoured in the National Library's permanent exhibition, the Singapore Literary Pioneers Gallery.[14] In January 2007, I therefore wrote to the National Arts Council (NAC) and proposed a programme of readings and talks by 'literary pioneers' which would thus include Dr Goh. The new edition did not materialize, but Dr Goh kindly gave me permission to print the novel privately for my class that year. He subsequently informed me that the Singapore Writers' Festival organized by the NAC had invited him back as the first 'literary pioneer' to grace its opening in December 2007.

[14] http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/webarchives/wayback/20150923021029/http://www.nlb.gov.sg/exhibitions/literarypioneers/writers/english/gohpohseng/index.php [accessed 15 June 2019].

At the Festival's opening ceremony, Dr Goh's audience was riveted by accounts of his writing life. Such was his eloquence and wit that his subsequent 'Meet the Author' session attracted a capacity audience and ran overtime. The broadcast and print media carried at least six feature stories or interviews with him during his Singapore visit. A new generation had suddenly discovered a rare living national literary figure and 'cultural hero' from an era when modern Singapore was still in the turbulent throes of determining its postcolonial and post-independence identity and bearings. *The Straits Times* catered to the revived interest by starting a 'monthly column featuring ground-breaking works of local literature', significantly kicking off with *Dream*. The young literary journalist who wrote the review and was herself starting out as a fiction writer, discovered (probably to her own surprise) that 'the hope, uncertainty and disillusionment that comes with testing independence' are 'feelings that still feel fresh and relevant more than thirty years on'.[15] Singaporeans who didn't know Dr Goh's work or had forgotten him, felt nostalgia for the idealistic commitment, literary passion and cultural activism that he embodied, which had resulted in several historic literary and path-breaking personal cultural initiatives in the earlier years of Singapore's independence from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. They were reminded, too, that in recognition of his achievements, the NAC had conferred on him Singapore's highest literary and cultural accolade, the Cultural Medallion, in 1983. However, subsequently and sadly, he encountered censorship problems as a pioneering cultural entrepreneur that adversely affected his business ventures, leading to his emigration to Canada.

As he recalls in his Preface, Dr Goh's visit was 'a deeply emotional event', and he felt like 'a prodigal son returning after a long self-exile'. At a reception he hosted at the old-style SHA Villa Hotel off Orchard Road (where he characteristically chose to stay), he arranged a reading of his most successful play,

[15] Stephanie Yap, 'What Dreams May Come', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jan. 2008.

When Smiles are Done (retitled *Room with Paper Flowers*). This was the first Singaporean play to use 'local English' in dialogue featuring English-educated lower middle-class public housing (Housing and Development Board or HDB) dwellers, a growing segment of the population, and to tackle the then sensitive subject of inter-racial marriage. The poignancy that filled the room was palpable as we read our lines. The original actor reprised his old role of Wong Chong Kit (an early version of Kwang Meng), while I played with gusto the Singlish-speaking disapproving mother. If only there had been a new edition of *Dream* to coincide with his return, to read from and launch during what could be, and indeed sadly, turned out to be Dr Goh's final visit to Singapore!

Opportunely, however, during this visit Dr Goh entered into an agreement with NUS Press to bring out a long overdue third edition. Unlike the Heinemann (1994) edition, it would not be merely a reprint. Having closely studied the novel both for my various articles and university courses, I had discovered quite a few typographical and other errors, which Dr and Mrs Goh recognized. We edited the text together to produce this latest definitive edition. I was to write an 'Appreciation' of the novel while Dr Goh was to provide an Introduction.

I sent the historical and biographical part of my 'Appreciation' to Dr Goh for his comment but learned that he had meanwhile fallen seriously ill and might be unable to write his planned Introduction. He passed away, soon after, on 10 January 2010 at the age of 73. Fortunately, Mrs Goh discovered a forgotten 'Introduction' he had written in 2009 in anticipation of a new edition, and that essay appears as the Preface to this and the previous edition.

The Literary Pioneer and Singapore's First Novel in English

Goh Poh Seng has the unique distinction of being, to date, the only Singaporean writer productive in all the main literary

genres — plays, poetry, novels and short stories.[16] Although better known as a poet, he is besides, not only a pioneering playwright but also a pioneering novelist in English, *Dream* being generally regarded as the first Singaporean novel in English.

Returning in the early 1960s to practise medicine in Singapore after years of education abroad, Dr Goh found not a colonial 'backwater' (as he puts it in his Preface) but a country alive with 'social activism', a 'liberating energy' and the 'politics' of a 'heady era'. Like most of that first English-educated generation of pioneering writers (born in the 1930s or earlier) he was fired by a nationalist mission to create 'a literature of our own', even if he had to 'steal the language' of the former colonial masters.[17] Indeed, in the newly-independent Singapore of the 1960s, with its diverse immigrant communities and many tongues, pervaded still by its colonial past, the language of imperial power, English, remained an official and the working language. Furthermore, Dr Goh realized that all the books he enjoyed 'were about somewhere else, not my home town' and thought Singapore needed 'our own literature in order to know about ourselves'. He had the 'temerity' to attempt to fill that need.[18]

Able now to view his entire *oeuvre*, we are well-placed to discern that his early work, including this first novel, was indeed fuelled by an attempt to explore, express and make sense of contemporary political, economic, social and cultural urgencies and anxieties. The novel, to begin with, is distinctive for its setting — the new cityscape of public

[16] An autobiographical short story 'A Star-Lovely Art', posthumously appeared in *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* 10, no. 1 (2010): 162–70. It was subsequently published posthumously in a collection entitled *Tall Tales and Adventures of a Westernized Oriental Gentleman* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

[17] As quoted by Tan Yi Hui, 'Singapore Still Has a Place in his Heart', *The Straits Times*, 3 Dec. 2007.

[18] As quoted by Stephanie Yap, 'A Pioneer Returns Home', *The Straits Times*, 18 Nov. 2007.

housing blocks, multi-storey offices downtown alongside still existing imperial buildings, exclusive colonial-era clubs and Chinatown slums — and its alertness to a historical shift, the old giving way to the new in Singapore. Kwang Meng's reflections and memories, moreover, palpably take readers both through the near past and the 1960s landscape and social environment, recalling the experience of families like his, living initially in cramped old Chinatown shop houses and then being relocated to slab blocks of public housing flats.[19] He and his friends patronize both the fashionable downtown hangouts of the time and seedy bars in less salubrious districts; and he idles his time away on beaches, within view of land being reclaimed from the sea in the East. Meanwhile, in the West, the Jurong hills are being flattened for factories as part of Singapore's industrialization. Many of the descriptive passages, including references to contemporary regional and national politics, make the novel at times seem like a documentary of the era. Goh was thus, indeed, the 'writer as historical witness'.[20] But, as seen from the perspective of an unlikely protagonist, a normally voiceless 'nobody' of a lower middle-class clerk, more anti-hero than hero, a non-achiever

[19] The cover of the first edition is a judiciously chosen reproduction of a painting by Khor Seow Hooi that reflects the novel's consciousness of history, place and national development. It depicts the historical Chinese immigrant enclave of colourful, cramped old Chinatown shophouses alongside narrow lanes. In the background loom colonial public edifices such as Victoria Memorial Hall and St Andrew's Cathedral built by the British and a post-independence modern cityscape of multi-storey office blocks or blocks of public housing flats where a multi-ethnic population now works and lives, over-looked, significantly, by the dominant modern telecommunications pylon on historic Fort Canning Hill, formerly Bukit Larangan (Forbidden Hill, in Malay, site of an ancient pre-colonial settlement) but re-named by the British after the Governor-General and first Viceroy of India.

[20] Although his work, symptomatic of its lack of literary-critical recognition then, did not feature in the volume from which this phrase was borrowed, *The Writer as Historical Witness: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*, ed. Edwin Thumboo and Thiru Kandiah (Singapore: UniPress, 1995).

('there must be thousands and thousands like me.… All over the city') it is also a post-independent Singapore collectively on the make in ways that, at the same time, marginalized individuals and disadvantaged certain groups.

Kwang Meng's relatives, friends and neighbours comprise, too, a multi-racial, multi-cultural cross section of the population and various social classes typical still of Singapore today. Their individual stations in life, aspirations and world views function both as illuminating foils to his character and representations of the then available life-choices (or lack of them) in this brave new pragmatic, high-achieving, striving Singaporean world, where to idly 'dream too long' (or to have different dreams from the commonly accepted materialistic kind) is to be an outsider and a nobody. Kwang Meng's situation mirrors that of many young English-educated students fresh out of school — with 'O' or 'A' levels — who find themselves unable to move up the educational ladder to achieve better prospects in life, while the next stage may be a frustrating step down to a low-level job.[21] In the 1960s many young Singaporeans found (like Kwang Meng in the novel) that an English-medium education at best prepared school leavers for dead-end desk jobs, the fate of Kwang Meng's father, who was a clerk his whole life. But while his father had only 'O' level, Kwang Meng has a Cambridge Higher School Certificate (HSC, known now as 'A' level) yet is also a clerk. This education had, as I've pointed out elsewhere, 'deculturized' him, a reflection of Goh's own feeling that after years of study abroad he could have lost his 'cultural values' and become 'depersonalized', 'deculturalized and a cultural pariah'. This is a fear often expressed, too, by Singapore government ministers and supporters of bilingualism in education with regard to the English-educated, that they have

[21] A fictional parallel is Jeyaretnam's Ah Leong, who similarly 'loved beaches' and gazed out at the sea at night, lived in public housing, and was given to 'speculations', while his educational level fitted him at most for the job of 'office boy' or supermarket assistant. [Philip Jeyaretnam, *First Loves* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1987).]

lost their 'cultural ballast'. Psychically, Kwang Meng feels 'as if he were inhabiting two different worlds, or as if he were two different people'. On the one hand, he had been exposed in his English-medium school to fragments of Western culture, from classics like a Shakespeare play to popular adventure tales such as *Treasure Island*, and the stories of 'Sir Walter Scott, etc., etc.' and the "Tarzan" stories. Like the Hollywood movies he frequented, they fuelled escapist fantasies or dreams such as running away to sea or to other climes and reinforced his sense of being a non-entity or misfit in Singapore. For instance, his reading furnishes him with the despairing metaphor of being only a bit player on life's stage, a Balthazar (a role he had once played in a performance of a standard school literature text, *The Merchant of Venice*), a servant whose sole line before making his exit was the subservient 'Madam, I go with all convenient speed.'[22] On the other hand, he describes his 'daylight' Chinese Singaporean self in Confucian terms such as 'when he observed the rites' of going through the motions of being dutiful worker and son, and visualizes the cargo junks on the Singapore River bobbing up and down 'as people bowing to each other in olden days. Kowtowing, kowtowing', — apt metaphor for Kwang Meng's refusal, unlike other people, to bow to conventional expectations and values. It is at this juncture that Kwang Meng's 'deculturalization' (and perhaps that of his creator) and consequent tenuous familiarity with Chinese classics is exemplified when he muses that his two worlds and how he feels about them, remind him of 'the Chinese philosopher, Mencius … whether indeed he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or that he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man'. Although the analogy is apt, Kwang Meng's attribution is mistaken, of course: it was not the

[22] For an analysis of Kwang Meng's 'colonized self', see my 'Intertextual Selves: Fiction-makers in Two "Singapore Novels"', p. 182.

Confucian Mencius but the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (or Chuang-tzu) who had thus meditated.[23]

More controversial, perhaps, was Goh's ground-breaking attempt to reproduce the local variety of English in the speech of his characters as an expression of their Singaporean identity and to reflect the indigenization of an inherited colonial language. However (as will be discussed later), his execution did not always match his laudable creative intention and his efforts met with reader resistance at the time.

In various ways, therefore, *Dream* is indeed a valuable contribution to the literature that we 'need in order to know about ourselves' and thus to the collective memory of the past and understanding of the present. Kwang Meng's experiences and his family memories remind Singaporeans of their immigrant and colonial past (even as the 1960s now forms part of their collective past). Today they evoke nostalgia amidst ongoing frantic economic and urban development that has in turn demolished and transformed much of the cityscape of the 1960s depicted in the novel.

As one critical survey of 'Singaporean fiction' finds, the socio-political, economic and cultural concerns Goh highlights and the felt ubiquity of an active controlling presence of the state remain central for the 'post-1965 generation of writers': these writers grapple still with 'the exigencies of state, society and culture',[24] testifying to the originality of Goh's first novel.

Compared to other works published around the same time, it is for good reason recognized as the first post-independence Singaporean novel in English. These other works include Lim

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[23] See page 82. My students, too, had been puzzled by this misattribution and wondered if it is the author's or Kwang Meng's error. I thank Dr Barry Devine and his attentive students at Heidelberg University, USA, for alerting me to a need for this to be noted and explicated.

[24] Eddie Tay, 'Singaporean Fiction After 1965: A Critical Survey', in *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature II*, ed. Gwee Li Sui (Singapore: National Library Board and National Arts Council, 2009), p. 213.

Thean Soo's *Southward Lies the Fortress (the siege of Singapore)* published in 1971; Tan Kok Seng's *Son of Singapore: The autobiography of a coolie* and the late lawyer Kirpal Singh's *China Affair*, both published in 1972. But only Goh's book is constructed as a novel with literary intentions as revealed in conscious literary craft, structure and representation. Besides, it is the only book that sets out to be deliberately "Singaporean" (as described above). *Southward Lies the Fortress* — like the Malayan Chin Kee Onn's *Ma-rai-ee* (1952) — is a straightforward semi-fictional historical account of the Japanese defeat of British forces and occupation during World War II in which the background is factual but 'the characters and their names are fictitious'. *Son of Singapore* — although for many years a lower secondary school literature text in Singapore — is basically an autobiography that was 'rendered into English by the [Chinese-educated] author in collaboration with Austin Coates'. *China Affair*, the late lawyer Kirpal Singh's sole published fictional work and technically a novel, is a thriller, 'an exciting tale of international intrigue' (as the blurb has it) set partly in Singapore but mainly in Taiwan, written purely for entertainment without any literary pretensions. Before sociological and cultural studies rendered such 'genre fiction' of academic interest, the other works therefore did not, at the time, invite the kind of close literary-critical scrutiny that *Dream* received and still receives in Singapore and abroad.

(Mis)Reading or Not Reading Goh's First Novel

As mentioned before, Goh recalls sadly that upon publication, *Dream* 'received very little publicity.… The local press was unenthusiastic and the university was not supportive.' (By 'the university' Goh meant academia.) This then is a good opportunity to look not only at the historical but also sociological causes and reasons for the disregard the novel suffered for too long. The lessons to be learned are quite salutary. To begin with, it was the victim of its own pioneering status. Singaporean

English-educated readers then simply had no 'local' precedents for approaching and responding to a serious 'local' novel such as *Dream*. It therefore met with a mixed reception in the national English press, from academic reviewers and other contemporary readers. On the one hand, the novel was judged tacitly or unconsciously according to literary-aesthetic criteria derived from the evaluation of either canonical literature or popular 'pulp' fiction from Britain and America that reviewers and readers then were familiar with and had enjoyed: this was fiction (as Goh has described it) 'about somewhere else', not their own 'home town'. On the other hand, middle-class readers, accustomed to exotic Western romances, adventure tales and the English classics such as Shakespeare (as Kwang Meng was) or literary works within 'the Great Tradition' extending from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence then, had no taste for a novel set locally with local characters. They found the descriptions of a familiar landscape banal, the reflections of the central character (an intellectually and philosophically inclined young clerk with a juvenile albeit sometimes witty sense of humour) improbable or jejune and his 'existentialist angst' uncongenial. Goh's description of local manners seemed intended as exotica for the non-native reader, and the pace of the novel seemed bogged down by explanatory detail. Ironically, the abundant authenticating detail, familiar to and unappreciated by contemporary readers, furnishes readers today with a historical record and sense of the spirit of a crucial era, filtered either through the illuminating poetic sensibility of the author or the subjectivity of the young clerk, Kwang Meng. The young journalist and short fiction writer who did a new review of *Dream* now appreciates its 'lyrical, frequently stunning prose' and concludes that it is 'the first Singaporean novel to capture the *zeitgeist* of our young nation' and 'a strong answer' to the question, 'what makes a Great Singaporean Novel'.[25]

[25] Stephanie Yap, 'What Dreams May Come', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jan. 2008.

Having studied overseas for a decade, Goh was perhaps unaware of local sensitivities and prejudices. After a long absence in Europe, the local *patois* to his ears seemed to be the authentic language of the street although he himself did not speak it and had to acquire it somewhat artificially.[26] While he is generally hailed today for his pioneering attempts to provide authentic dialogue in the local variety of English (and for featuring local characters, themes and content) in his plays, he was as much faulted by contemporary reviewers for the many instances of his apparently inadequate representation of local speech and idiom in his novel. Local colloquial expression might appear authentic on stage when spoken by Singaporean characters in his plays but could make for awkward reading on the page. The English-educated middle class who would read a 'serious' novel like his, were unlikely to be comfortable (and this proved to be the case) with his reproduction of an 'inelegant' 'non-standard' local variety of 'broken' English. Goh's creative attempts at 'authenticity' and his rendering of Chinese dialect and distinctive Indian patterns of speech literally into English to reflect the ethnicity or class of his characters were therefore not appreciated. While sympathetic to his desire to use a language 'that conveys a recognizably local sense and sensibility' and 'depicts life here authentically', I too, found that his attempts were 'inconsistent' and thus 'unconvincing'. But it being the early 1990s, I was by then able to appreciate as well that 'Singaporean English had not in the 1960s … established many of the recognizably standard and distinctive features captured in the speech of [say] Catherine

[26] He mentions in his Preface that he 'eavesdropped shamelessly'. In his talk to my English Honours class, he told us he had to frequent 'sarabat' (roadside drinks) stalls to familiarize himself with the local variety of English speech.

Lim's characters'[27] in the 1970s. He was simply ahead of his time as even linguists had yet then to recognize and formalize Singapore English as a distinctive local variety.[28]

But his uneven attempts, unfortunately, put off reviewers, literary critics and readers of his time, who complained that the use of non-standard English disrupted the flow of the narrative, which thus prejudiced them against the entire novel. A review of *Dream* in *The Straits Times* by the then journalist Cheah Boon Kheng (later, a distinguished university historian) complained, among other things, 'The style is loose and inelegant, the prose putrid and flat, the jokes puerile and the dialogue chitty chitty bang bang.' That his attempts still elicit unease is evident when a more recent book on 'the Singaporean/Malaysian novel', despite *Dream*'s 'linguistic salience' to its subject, omits such a path-breaking novel from its select list on the doubtful grounds that its 'inaccurate' representation of local English speech is intrinsic evidence of a lack of 'artistic ability'.[29] At the same time, readers from the ethnic community concerned are likely to be sensitive to perceived racial stereotyping through speech, particularly if

[27] See Koh Tai Ann, 'Goh Poh Seng', *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English,* p. 593. Catherine Lim went on to complete a PhD thesis (1988) on Singapore English. By the 1980s, the distinctive features and 'grammar' of Singlish (as it had become known by) were widely mapped by linguists.

[28] Ray Tongue's pioneering book, *The English of Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press) which brought to linguists' attention the existence of a local variety of English (since called Singlish or Singapore Colloquial English) and described its distinctive linguistic characteristics, only appeared in 1974.

[29] See Rosaly Puthucheary, *Different Voices: The Singaporean/Malaysian Novel* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), pp. 30–1. Significantly, in the Foreword to the book, the sociolinguist Ismail Talib commented that 'it could be argued that Goh's *If We Dream Too Long*… [is] of some relevance, even if one might want to quarrel with the accuracy of [its] linguistic representations', p. xii.

they felt the mimicry in English was inaccurate and thus an offensive caricature.[30]

Cheah's harsh review elicited a spirited rebuttal from a more appreciative and percipient reader, Nallama [Winslow] Jenstad. What she noted goes to the heart of such reviews and much subsequent criticism of the novel: 'the reviewer does not seem to have understood Goh Poh Seng's novel'. She quoted from an earlier sympathetic review in 'another Singapore daily, subtitled "Touch of poetic grace in novelist's style"'. Anticipating that readers' responses would be skewed by what was (for its time) an unusually frank description of sex (moreover, sex between an 18-year-old boy just out of school and an older woman and bar hostess), the reviewer carefully differentiated Goh's novel from pulp fiction by noting that Goh 'is humane to his finger tips and his poetic sensitivity' meant that his novel did not take 'the Harold Robbins route' and 'exploit the bedroom scenes in the style of the more lurid bestsellers'. Jenstad did not identify the reviewer, but I discovered it was Maurice Baker, then Head of the English Department at the University of Singapore, reviewing for the *New Nation*, an afternoon tabloid which for a time carried literary reviews. But it didn't carry any weight with Cheah, who responded acidly by quoting approvingly another reader's opinion that was characteristic of the prevalent literary-critical climate — a warning against the 'fallacy that local writing should always be suckled and cuddled and hailed by all without a critical look being given to their work'.

Jenstad's review appeared in *Singapore Book World*, 'the official organ' of the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS). Her defence of *Dream* was based on a close reading of the novel, and she was a trained reader, a First Class Honours graduate with a Master's in English Literature from the University of Singapore. Jenstad confidently concluded that

[30] As seems to be the case in Puthucheary's negative response in her *Different Voices: The Singaporean/Malaysian Novel*, p. 30.

the novel 'rates high not only as a "Singaporean Novel", but simply as a novel, regardless of place or time'.[31] The fact that she felt it necessary to rate it highly 'not only as a "Singaporean Novel" but quite simply a novel regardless of place and time', in order to claim a 'universal' standing for it, suggests her sensitivity to the ingrained 'colonial cringe' and the ghost of empire hovering over each evaluation such that the local work in English must be inherently comparable to the 'best' Western works. An expert panel of judges seems to have independently agreed with her positive evaluation, seeing that the novel went on to be a joint winner of the NBDCS's top national award for fiction in 1976. But that recognition was not enough to move the novel off the shelves, given the nature of the 'critical look' it had received in the national press (and perhaps, because the prize was an inaugural local award that had yet to establish itself — as it was to by the end of the decade).

While other critics objected to or were put off by the 'prose style' (loosely perceived), Jenstad distinguished between the writer's own narrative prose ('enjoying' his 'naturalness of style') and his sometimes experimentally awkward rendering of the speech of his working class characters. Using illustrative quotations, she focused on the occasions when he had succeeded. She even remarked upon his improvement as a writer in rendering local speech — saying that in the novel it was 'much more real' than his experimental attempts in his earlier play, *When Smiles are Done*, which she characterized as 'unauthentic Singaporeanese'. (This was before coinage of the term 'Singlish', and before its recognition and formalization by linguists as Singapore Colloquial English.) She also appreciated *Dream*'s carefully structured 'portrayal of Singapore today' (that is, in the late sixties), which she saw as a poignant

[31] Maurice Baker, review in *New Nation*, 2 Sept. 1972; Cheah Boon Keng, review in *The Straits Times*, 4 Dec. 1972; Nallama Jenstad's letter, *The Straits Times*, 14 Dec. 1972; Cheah's response to Jenstad and agreement with another reader, 'L.P', *The Straits Times*, 15 Dec. 1972; Nallama Jenstad, review, *Singapore Book World* 3 (Nov. 1972): 58–9.

capturing of both a past and a present that were already rapidly being demolished or disappearing in development-oriented Singapore. Goh, she astutely noted, had detected the constricting realities of class, politics, the effects of capitalism, and a pragmatism that was a defining characteristic of the Singaporean state and society (well before political scientists called attention to them).[32] As one of the characters who flourishes in the new Singapore, the aptly named Hock Lai, whose name means 'Fortune Come(s)' pragmatically declares to the idealistic and maladjusted Kwang Meng (whose name, significantly or perhaps, ironically, means Brightness, or Clarity of Understanding) 'You must remember, we didn't make the world, we must accept its terms.'

Jenstad's review, sympathetic as it was in identifying the strengths and achievements of the novel through detailed and lengthy illustrative quotation, somehow overlooked *Dream*'s historic importance as an unprecedented *first* Singaporean novel in English. She therefore did not identify the challenges inherent in such an enterprise and recognize Goh's achievements (along with his inevitable failures) in this light. More crucially, where critical notice by academic literary critics at 'the university' might appear in prestigious international journals or conferences, her excellent review appeared in a new local publication yet to establish itself and thus languished in obscurity.

Supportive evaluations by the poet Edwin Thumboo, considered the leading local literary critic and Head of the English Department of Singapore's sole university at the time, and by his colleague, Kirpal Singh, would be more influential, as Goh Poh Seng understood too well. In his comment on fiction in Singapore and Goh's *Dream*, Thumboo rightly observed that much of Singapore's previous literary output had taken the form of poetry. He suggested that 'it is in this area

[32] See Chan Heng-Chee, 'Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the Politics Gone?', in *Trends in Singapore*, ed. Seah Chee Meow (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1975).

[fiction] that perhaps the writing in English ought to develop', and perceptively noted that 'some of the difficulties that Goh Poh Seng had to resolve … arose from the fact that he was providing a first frame for the experience of a Singaporean in fiction'. Thumboo then spelled out dicta for the development of a body of fiction — that while novelists 'organize their material by identifying and elaborating a theme or themes through characters, each with an individual identity and all that that involves', the novelist 'must locate and construct his types before he can invest his characters with a personal individuating power'. He concluded that the 'types are doubtless forming and will emerge in due course'.[33]

However, he did not identify the 'difficulties' or indicate whether he thought Goh had resolved them. Rather, by speculating that such 'characters' and 'types' 'will emerge in due course' (that is, in the future) he more than suggests *Dream* did not conform to his dicta. Yet *Dream* does have a recognizably Singaporean main character in Kwang Meng, with an 'individual identity and all that that involves', and Kwang Meng does embody the novel's main themes. Significantly, too, his 'angst' and doubts are counter-pointed by the certainties of another substantial character, Boon Teik (whose name means 'Culture and Refinement'). He is the friendly neighbour, an 'earnest', cultured and conscientious teacher who is conventionally the sort of adult male figure one would expect to be the young Kwang Meng's role model. Boon Teik obviously serves as a foil: a 'well-adjusted' modern Singaporean, high-minded and idealistic in his own way, distinguished by his respected profession, his positive 'Singaporean' Asian values,

[33] "Singapore Writing in English: A Need for Commitment", in *Persidangan Penulis ASEAN 1977: Conference of ASEAN Writers 1977* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1978), p. 356. In the context of this nationalist discourse, Goh's second novel, *The Immolation*, set in a Southeast Asian country and already then published (1977) would not have counted as a 'Singaporean' novel in terms of setting or characters.

focused sense of direction, happy marriage and even what he has made of his public housing or HDB flat. Although his HDB flat is identical to Kwang Meng and his family's in type and locality, Boon Teik's contrastingly has an 'attractive and pleasant' décor that is local yet cosmopolitan, with batik paintings by local artists on the walls alongside prints of paintings by Van Gogh and Cézanne, a Japanese paper lampshade and an Ikebana floral arrangement. These along with the books he reads and the classical music he enjoys are redolent of an emerging cosmopolitan Singaporean English-educated middle class. Moreover, Kwang Meng interacts quite naturally with a gallery of recognizable Singaporean 'types' — his former classmates, the Chinese Hock Lai, businessman manqué and would-be politician; the Indian Nadarajah, a future lawyer with a garrulous extended family; Aziz the Malay driver or 'syce', an 'average scholar' whose father is a fisherman and who both, like Kwang Meng and his family, represent the working- and lower middle-class. Kwang Meng's father is a retired clerk who has typically worked for the same company all his life; one uncle, Cheong, is a successful Chinese businessman and entrepreneur but his other uncle, Chye, is a gambler and a failure. The female characters are typically Kwang Meng's long-suffering uneducated housewife mother; Boon Teik's supportive home-maker and educated wife Mei-I; the bar hostess Lucy (the proverbial 'whore with a heart of gold' who initiates Kwang Meng into sex); the rich girl, Cecilia, whom the social-climbing Hock Lai 'fortunately' marries; and Anne, the sweet teacher-trainee and girl-next-door who is interested in Kwang Meng but with whom he is reluctant to have a relationship and settle down in the manner of Boon Teik and Mei-I because, defying convention, he loves and wants to marry Lucy. Even the history of Kwang Meng's own extended immigrant family living in Chinatown before they moved into public housing is typical and features types such as the old matriarch and bond maid who have since become familiar to readers of Catherine Lim's instantly popular short

stories.[34] The above list suggests, then, that Goh succeeded in creating Singaporean characters and types. Today, to read the fiction of Philip Jeyaretnam (particularly, *First Loves* and *Raffles Place Ragtime*) and other Singaporean novelists who followed in Goh's footsteps writing a socially 'engaged' fiction that explores political, economic and cultural forces, is to encounter many similar figures in various manifestations. The HDB or public housing setting of flats and estates (now constituted as 'heartland') has become familiar 'fictional' territory (Daren Shiau's 1999 novel is even entitled *Heartland*) as have the themes of alienation, and the exploration of alternative values and life styles. In retrospect, *Dream* emerges as the prototype of today's 'Singapore' novel. Even films such as Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen's *Singapore Dreaming* cover territory and themes first explored in *Dream*.

If the character of Kwang Meng is convincing and the novel's themes resonate with readers, that has much to do with a remarkable literary quality as well as craft that Thumboo and Singh who are also poets, surprisingly failed to recognize in the writing of a fellow poet, which Goh was, too. As quoted earlier, this quality had not gone un-noticed by their peers, albeit in almost forgotten publications: his 'lyrical, frequently stunning' prose (Nallama Jenstad), his 'poetic sensitivity' and 'a touch of grace in the novelist's style' (Maurice Baker). More specifically, his settings and observations also evince symbolic power. This is evident from the very first chapter. The novel opens atmospherically and poetically, 'Here in the tropics, the evening light goes away so abruptly you notice it as you would a person who leaves your presence suddenly and without a word. Here, and then gone. But a slight trace, a small memory remains, for a while and then too is gone.' This description is not merely poetic scene-setting but is also metonymic of the

[34] *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978); *Or Else, the Lightning God and Other Stories* (1980).

hero's condition. For at the close of the novel, like the brief tropical twilight, Kwang Meng (in Chinese, 光明, literally bright light) leaves an 'old English lady tourist' abruptly, too, walks away into obscurity, a 'vanishing figure': 'Here, and then gone', a bit player on life's stage, soon forgotten.

The narrative in the opening chapter also skilfully establishes the main theme of home and belonging through Kwang Meng's sense of the city, his 'home town', as he walks through it, making his way back after escaping from his work place to have a characteristically illicit happy time at the beach on a 'bright and hot afternoon', envisaging his family sitting down to dinner while the ominous sound of thunder and 'a prospect of rain' make him feel 'it's safer home'. By the end of the novel, escape from his condition is no longer possible and 'home' has taken on a different meaning, as safe and inescapable as a dead-end job. There is no 'elsewhere'. The sea was 'no longer beckoning' as a possible means of escape: 'He shall not go. He shall only go home.'

The lack of critical appreciation of Goh's novels at 'the university' to the extent of it not been included in university curricula even after he had published a second novel, *The Immolation* in 1977, therefore seems surprising today when a first novel like Daren Shiau's *Heartland* could become a prescribed university or school literature text within a few years of publication. But at the time, the contemporary literary scene was quite monolithic. Firstly, poetry in English garnered most of the attention (as therefore did the poets — who also happened to be both the 'Eng. Lit.' academics and major literary critics of the day) and was promoted in nationalist discourse as the form that best expressed and fostered a Singaporean national identity. Poet and literary critic Kirpal Singh could even confidently predict that poetry would be the first genre to produce a 'Singapore Classic'.[35] Secondly, as I surmised at the

[35] Kirpal Singh, 'Towards a Singapore Classic: Edwin Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion"', *The Literary Criterion* 15, 2 (1980): 74–87.

time, accustomed as they were to evaluating local poetry in English, contemporary literary critics seemed to lack a usable critical theory beyond the strictly aesthetic criteria learned from reading the Western canonical English literary texts to approach what we now know as the postcolonial novel. It was a period before postcolonial literary theory reached these shores, offering ways of reading (particularly of fiction) that were more culturally-oriented, more historically embedded, interrogatory and politically conscious in the broadest sense of the term.

Kirpal Singh, known for his 'critical surveys' of Singapore writing in English, produced for the benefit of local and overseas audiences, regularly dismissed Goh's novel most authoritatively in his survey of prose fiction up to the mid-eighties for Singapore's first national critical survey of the Humanities and Social Sciences written by National University of Singapore academics where he observes that 'Kwang Meng's mental acrobatics finds in Goh's prose a very clumsy expression'.[36] By 1986, in his *fourth* dismissal of the novel, Singh granted that *Dream* was 'a very conscious attempt to create a novel which very seriously sets out to portray the life of a Singaporean in a contemplative philosophical manner', but saw this as a limitation 'because the social commentary imbedded in the novel … becomes topical and out of date as the Singaporean scene changes….' In contrast, he opined, the late lawyer Singh's novel [*China Affair*] 'remains a good read' because it is 'good entertainment'.[37] Apart from the

[36] Kirpal Singh, 'Singapore Literature in English: Prose Fiction', in *Singapore Studies: Critical Surveys of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Basant Kapur (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1986), p. 482. See also my 'Self, Family and the State: Social Mythology in the Singapore Novel in English' (1989), pp. 273–5, where I first analyzed this phenomenon.

[37] Kirpal Singh, "The Writer and his Audience in Singapore", *Solidarity* (1986); reprinted in *Singapore Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002), p. 68.

unsupported suggestion that 'social commentary imbedded' in Goh's novel (even if that was indeed its only remarkable feature) necessarily 'becomes out of date' when the times change, 'a good read' is reduced to merely being 'good entertainment'. Yet Nallama Jenstad, a careful, trained reader who went on to become a professional literary editor, had said of Goh's novel that 'on the level of … story' 'it makes for some really beautiful reading', adding that 'Goh Poh Seng writes here with a lucidity and a delicacy never before found in his earlier writing.'

Thirdly, and in a way related to the above, the neglect of the novel by 'the university' had a sociological origin. Dr Goh once modestly or perhaps, wryly observed to an interviewer that he had 'always been bad at moving in the writing world of Singapore', and that while 'many of the island's writers are academically oriented … he himself was an "uneducated writer"'.[38] As a medical practitioner functioning outside academia with primary education in what was then Malaya, followed by studies abroad for about a decade after 1953, first in a boarding school and then in medical school, his literary education self-acquired, Goh was an anomaly in Singapore at the time. Consequently, his literary sensibility and influences differed from those of his contemporaries and their juniors, almost all of whom had majored in English Literature in the English-medium colonial University of Malaya or its successor, the University of Singapore. This could have made him seem 'uneducated', and resulted in their inability to 'read' the unfamiliar literary ploys he used to fashion his novel and comprehend its kind of creative intertextuality.

Furthermore, when Goh completed his novel in the late sixties, he had already authored three plays, two of which had been staged — an unconventional start to a literary career. Poetry and short fiction rather than drama or the novel were

[38] As quoted by David Phair, 'Living in Exile, but the Dance Never Ends', *The Straits Times*, 19 May 2001.

the literary forms of choice and fashion;[39] contemporary drama from any source hardly featured in the standard English Literature curriculum of the time, while drama in English in Singapore had yet to achieve the vibrancy and excitement it was to display in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, at the time, local drama carried more than a whiff of political dissent and was very much associated with Mandarin Chinese drama staged by Chinese-educated left-wing activists and performing groups. Upon his return home, Goh seems to have been inspired as much by their passionate theatre of active social engagement and political dissent to influence public opinion and bring about change[40] as by the socially radical and engaged plays, novels and writings of the 'Angry Young Men' of the 1950s English theatre he had encountered in London (about which, more below). In a 1966 speech on theatre, he spoke of the function of art and the need for drama in a newly-independent nation to be socially engaged, and declared a 'strong conviction that drama should be an instrument of social change' and 'pertinent to our present social and cultural needs'.[41] This conviction seems to have impelled his first novel, too, with its attempt to give a voice and face to a social underclass or the alienated, non-conforming, marginalized individual who finds himself and those like him (including his family members) constricted by limited life choices, over-taken by or caught willy-nilly in fast-changing social and economic circumstances

[39] Goh's first volume of poems, *Eyewitness* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books) only appeared in 1976.

[40] See Quah Sy Ren, 'Representing Idealism and Activism: Kuo Pao Kun's Theatre in the 1960s and the 1970s', *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transscultural Writings* 10, no. 1 (2010): 148–61. Aptly, Goh's play centring on a struggling vegetable farmer, *The Moon is Less Bright*, was re-staged as part of a Theatreworks 'Retrospective' in 1990 along with Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole*. See <http://www.theatreworks.org.sg/archive/the_retrospective/moon_is_less_bright.htm> [accessed 6 Dec. 2009].

[41] As quoted by Hannah Pandian, 'Theatre Works', *The Straits Times*, 11 Dec. 1990.

which doomed them to failure. Through Kwang Meng and the other characters, Goh explored what were then radical themes, including existential issues such as personal autonomy and the freedom to choose and find meaning in individual existence, to realize (or not) dreams and find happiness, particularly when citizens (as in Singapore) were expected to put family, society and nation, and thus duty before self.

At the same time, he faced similar 'difficulties' and challenges as the poets did as a pioneering writer in English. Just as the early apprentice poets had struggled to 'domesticate' and 'nativize' the English language (for instance, by attempting to create — albeit unsuccessfully, a version of local English they called 'EngMalChin') in their search for a style and an idiom suited to 'Malayan' or local themes,[42] so Goh, too, had his own fictionist's strategy of 'stealing the language' and reproducing the local variety of English. Then just as they had looked to the canonical poets of English Literature such as the eighteenth-century poet, Thomas Gray, the Victorian Tennyson and then modern and modernist poets such as Auden, Yeats and Eliot[43] in their search for idioms and forms that would articulate their own 'sense of the contemporary' (as the Malaysian novelist and literary critic Lloyd Fernando had put it), so Goh borrowed forms and aspects of the novel from the literary tradition then most accessible to the postcolonial writer in

[42] Edwin Thumboo, 'The Search for Style and Theme: A Personal Account', in *The Writers' Sense of the Contemporary: Papers in Southeast Asian and Australian Literature*, ed. Bruce Bennet, Ee Tiang Hong and Ron Shepherd (Nedlands: The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, 1982), pp. 1–7.

[43] For a discussion of the origins of the term EngMalChin, its failure to take root, and literary influences on the early poets, see my 'Singapore Writing in English: The Literary Tradition and Cultural Identity", in *Literature in Southeast Asia: Sociological and Political Perspectives*, ed. Tham Seong Chee (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981), pp. 160–86. Reprinted in *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002), pp. 12–32.

English in order to write a novel 'pertinent to our present social and cultural needs'. But unlike the Singapore poets' major literary influences, Goh's were 'Waugh, Maugham, Joyce', and 'other writers like Dostoevsky, Beckett, Camus, Kafka, and Kierkegaard' mentioned in his Preface that he had read and favoured when studying abroad. He was also impressed by the plays, novels and writings of the 'Angry Young Men' of 'stage and screen' in 1950s Britain, influenced by existentialism, especially Colin Wilson whose *The Outsider* was one of the celebrated works of contemporary England. These were not the standard reading of literary critics nurtured by the then canonical English Literature curriculum.[44]

Goh found in their work and world view inspiration for his own young 'anti-hero', the 'depersonalized' outsider, Kwang Meng. His 'complicated clerk' is obviously modelled on the working-class heroes of contemporary writers in England, discontented and conflicted, living through a troubled post-imperial change of mood in an England undergoing major historical, political and material change. Goh cannily signposts Kwang Meng's awareness of existentialism by having him borrow from the serious-minded teacher, Boon Teik, books by Hemingway and Dostoevsky, and indicating he was 'beginning to read Sartre' — later revealed to be *The Reprieve*. Indeed, the engaged writings of the post-war generation of 'Angry Young Men' such as Wain, Osborne, Braine, Amis, Sillitoe, not only inspired but also left traces on Goh's similarly engaged plays, and on *Dream*, set during Singapore's own post-independence and postcolonial era of upheaval and change. If one reads the novel attentively, one will find, for instance, that like the hero of Wain's novel, *Hurry on Down* (1953), Kwang Meng is restless and reluctant to settle down and adjust to his environment, and

[44] In fact, Dr. Goh and I once participated in an 'English Language and Literature in Singapore' forum and exchanged views on this very issue. He believed 'European writers are more exciting … because they are more intellectual, more philosophical'. See *Commentary* 4, no. 2 (January 1978): 7.

like Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), who thought 'There aren't any good brave causes left', Hock Lai observes: 'We come too late on the scene, our generation, after the action is over. Now no one wants us. We are only digits' (a reference to a statement by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in which he used the term 'digits' to describe Singaporeans).[45] There is similarly a sense of there being no more 'room at the top':[46] 'True', thought Kwang Meng. There are no real dramatic causes left for our generation and giving this observation a Singaporean relevance, tartly adds, 'and what is worse, the ones in power are still young.' Just as the 'Angry Young Men' were deliberately anti-Establishment and reproduced working class speech in their works, Goh's working-class characters speak non-standard English in local accents, while Kwang Meng with his friends (and when alone) spends much time in bars, a parallel to the pubs patronized by characters in the 'Angry Young Men's' novels. Like some of these anti-heroes, Kwang Meng rejects materialism and 'getting on', refusing his uncle Cheong's offer to join his business venture in Sabah, rejecting the complacent, comfortable life of the bourgeoisie as represented by the happily settled and married Lim Boon Teik and his wife, Mei-I, and refusing to start the expected relationship with nice 'girl next door', Anne, defying social propriety by seeking out instead the worldly, 'experienced' bar girl, Lucy — a name that echoes 'Juicy Lucy' in Leslie Thomas's *Virgin Soldiers* (1966) who similarly inducts the 'virgin clerk' into sex. As in their works, Goh opts for sexual honesty in his unusually frank portrayal of sex in his novel, where Kwang Meng rebelliously seeks 'authentic' passion in preference to conventional middle-class romance.

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[45] I had made a similar observation at the 'English Language and Literature in Singapore' forum with Goh Poh Seng, Ilsa Sharp and Jan Gordon, chaired by Devan Janadas in 1978. See 'Dr Koh Tai Ann's Reply to Mr Devan Nair', *Commentary* (New Issue) 4, no. 3 (August 1980): 6–7.

[46] *Room at the Top* (1957), a novel by John Braine made into a film of the same title in 1959.

But while it was accepted that local poets could 'borrow' and learn from the great poets of the past and present, a first-time novelist like Goh who found his influences among other novelists outside the then British canon was criticized for being 'derivative', his literary influences and even the form in which he cast his novel confidently dismissed as 'drawbacks'. The academic Ban Kah Choon, then Head of the English Language and Literature Department at the National University of Singapore pointed out in a lecture on Singapore fiction to his students (published online) that

> [t]here are certainly many things that we can fault the novel on — it is clearly derivative of the *bildungsroman* form, and owes a lot to works like Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, as well as to the fashionable theories of existential angst (i.e. agony) … drawbacks, which have made some critics dismiss the novel as a young man's work.[47]

Yet, without any sense of irony, he prefaced these critical remarks with the observation that 'Surprisingly this achievement [for authoring Singapore's first novel in English] has not been given enough credit and insufficient attention is paid to Poh Seng.' This last and Ban's next observation confirms the literary-critical climate of the time that I have noted before elsewhere, and above: 'Poetry, in a way, reflective of the then colonial literary ideology, was seen as the test of creativity; and the best works of literature, it was often felt, should be in that medium. Fiction writers did not set out to be writers in the way that poets who felt that they had a calling sought to be.'

Citing Catherine Lim as an instance of the accidental fiction writer, Ban (like most critics of the time) failed to appreciate that Goh was no accidental fiction writer who, like Lim, was

[47] < http://www.postcolonialweb.org/singapore/literature/fiction/fiction2.html > [accessed 6 Dec. 2009].

simply 'discovered'. The evidence amply shows that he, like the more esteemed poets, had felt a 'calling' as a writer and had consciously adopted literary strategies in the writing of his novel.

One of Thumboo's favourite reiterated quotes from T.S. Eliot is that 'immature poets imitate; mature poets steal',[48] which might explain the many borrowings of 'style and theme', form, phrase and imagery in his poems. However, unlike the non-academic Goh at the time, Thumboo has frankly pointed to his borrowings, particularly when he was a novice poet, and has defended his continued 'stealing' as the practice of Eliot's 'mature poet', and as far as I am aware, no one has accused his poetry of being 'derivative'.[49] It seems therefore unjust to 'fault' Goh, the first-time novelist, for owing 'a lot to works like Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, as well as to the fashionable theories of existential angst', and quite beside the point to criticize *Dream* for being derivative of the *bildungsroman* ('formation novel'), commonly defined as a 'coming of age' novel about the development and education of its main character. In the latter case, it's like faulting a poet for writing a sonnet: a literary form exists to be used and many other novelists have written *bildungsroman* including Singaporean novelists following in his footsteps such as Philip Jeyaretnam and Daren Shiau. The critical issue is whether the form is appropriate and whether Goh used it successfully for the aims he had in mind. An attentive reading of the novel suggests that Goh's choice of the *bildungsroman*, is canny and does suit his purposes. As is evident from my analysis of the novel so far, he also attempted to do more with the form than

[48] T.S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 1922.

[49] Edwin Thumboo, 'The Search for Style and Theme: A Personal Account', p. 3. This practice includes the 'stealing' of phrase and line in his poems, best exemplified in his 'classic' 'Ulysses by the Merlion'. Eliot had gone on to say that 'good poets make it into something better, or at least something different'.

merely focus — as readers such as Ban seem to think — on the internal life, the 'agony' and development of his protagonist, Kwang Meng who exemplified, as Ban puts it, 'how quietly desperate life must have been in the sixties'.

In its sophisticated classical form, the *bildungsroman* goes beyond mere concern with the psyche and development of the individual and the search for meaning in life; it also engages and educates the audience by depicting the forces of national history, contemporary intellectual currents and 'the morals of our time through its hero, its scenery and environment'.[50] This function of the *bildungsroman* is consonant with Goh's motivation for writing — that 'we need our own literature in order to know about ourselves'. *Dream* is about Kwang Meng and the existential question of choice and meaning in his life; but it is also an attempt to depict and interpret for readers the contemporary environment of Singapore affecting him, the other characters and their choices or, lack of choice. The 18-year-old clerk, Kwang Meng with his undesired future mapped out by his circumstances, finally and bleakly accepts his 'fate' in society. Procrastinating and vacillating, hovering between dream and reality, he lacks the will to achieve his dreams and leave for 'elsewhere'. He is eventually forced by circumstances to accept the reality of his condition, a non-entity 'who shall only go home'.

While there is considerable poetic vision and craft in the structuring of the novel and creation of the main character, one still feels, nonetheless, it is a bit too brief and underdeveloped to achieve fully its admirable ambitions. One could wish its characters had been fully fleshed out. Its hero (or anti-hero) Kwang Meng, while an interestingly 'complicated' 18-year-old clerk, does not always adequately carry the weight of the novel's themes. He is mature and self-aware in his observations

[50] As defined by Karl Morgenstern (who coined the term), see Tobias Boes, Introduction, *On the Nature of the Bildungsroman*, by Karl Morgenstern, trans. Tobias Boes, *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (March 2009): 649.

and reflections, yet sometimes is too whimsical and 'jokey' to function as the novelist's *doppelganger*. Some characters, such as his parents and siblings appear incidentally and could have been developed to explain his apparent alienation from them, too. Ultimately, 'home' also means his family. Most of the other characters could have been more rounded such that they rise above being flat 'types' and in some cases, stereotypes. Hock Lai, a potential antagonist to Kwang Meng's protagonist, with Boon Teik positioned somewhere between, is too easily dismissed and fades out too quickly. While Kwang Meng's former classmates and friends, Aziz the Malay syce and the Indian Nadarajah who's going overseas to study law seem introduced to reflect Singapore's multiracial society, they merely play token ethnic and class roles. Perhaps, reflecting the obviously patriarchal, male-dominant world of their times, female characters of potential complexity such as Lucy and Anne similarly do not step outside their respective assigned gendered roles and are not shown to have inner lives. Lucy, however, sometimes philosophises in terms and language that are more sophisticated than what one might expect of a lowly-educated bar hostess of the time when she veers from speaking the local variety of English to standard English. But then this was, as the novel's critics have said, 'a young man's work': seen in that light, there is much to admire in the fact that, given the times, it was written at all and accomplished as much as it has as a first novel. While a full assessment of Goh Poh Seng's achievement as a novelist remains to be written, considering the other three novels he went on to publish, *Dream* is a worthy first novel and an exemplary first step in the development of the modern Singaporean novel in English. It is deservedly a classic.

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