

**SINGAPORE FEMINIST VOICES: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY BETWEEN TWO GENERATIONS OF WOMEN
WRITERS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of women and feminist ideas in Singapore literature in English, focusing on thematic elements in the fiction of four Singaporean women writers, namely, Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Hwee Hwee Tan and Wena Poon. These four women writers are of different generations; Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim are among the established and pioneer writers of their generations, whereas Hwee Hwee Tan and Wena Poon are emergent writers. This study traces a general development of fiction by Singaporean women writers, charts the growth of fiction by the four writers, analyses how women are presented in the short stories and novels of the selected four writers and, finally, compares and contrasts the changes affecting women as depicted by the writers. The research method applies the Third World feminist perspective as its main theoretical framework in exploring and analysing the four writers' women characters. In addition, this study examines themes related to marriage, motherhood, sexuality and women's education. The data for this qualitative study is based on the writers' collections of short stories and novels. They are: Catherine Lim's *The Song of Silver Frond* (2003) and *Miss Seetoh in the World* (2010); Suchen Christine Lim's *The Lies That Build a Marriage: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated* (2007); Hwee Hwee Tan's *Foreign Bodies* (1997) and *Mammon Inc.* (2001); and Wena Poon's *Lions in Winter* (2007) and *The Proper Care of Foxes* (2009). The first finding indicates that Singapore literary scene is flourishing, which has a great impact on Singaporean women's writing. The quality of Singapore fiction has improved over the years and will continue to improve in the future with the emergence of many aspiring young women writers. The second finding states that the world of fiction in Singapore is still ruled by the established women writers, namely Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim. As for the emergent writers, the prolific Wena Poon has contributed significantly to the corpus of Singapore literary works in English. However, for Hwee Hwee Tan, it seems that her creative works have become secondary. The third finding implies that the selected four writers write mainly about women. Their fiction seems to champion women's stories consciously and the articulation of their female voice in presenting women's issues can be considered their main vocation. The final finding points out that despite the generational gaps between the four writers, it can be said that they write similar issues, that is, issues that are personally important to them. They share more similarities than differences in terms of representation of women and related thematic elements.

خلاصة البحث

تطلع هذه الدراسة على ممثلات للمرأة والأفكار النسوية في الأدب السنغافوري الإنكليزية، والتي تركز على عناصر الموضوعية في الروايات والقصص الخيالية التي كتبتها أربع من أدبيات من سنغافورة؛ وهُنَّ: "كاترين ليم"، و"سوتشين كريستين ليم"، و"هوي هوي تان"، و"وينا بون"، وهن من جيلات مختلفة، "كاترين ليم" و"سوتشين كريستين ليم" من أدبيات المعروفة ورائدات في جيلهن، في حين "هوي هوي تان" و"وينا بون" من الكاتبات الناشئات. وتلتزم الدراسة على تطور العام للقصص والروايات الخيالية في أدبيات السنغافوريات. ورؤية مدى ارتفاع الإنتاج لدى الأدبيات الأربعة مع تحليل كيفية تصوير المرأة في القصص القصيرة والروايات المختارة، مع إبراز أوجه الاختلاف والمساواة في تغيرات انعكاسات في تصوير لصورة المرأة. ويُطبَّق منهج البحث على رؤية النسوية في العالم الثالث كإطار أساسي للنظرية في تحليل وكشف عن شخصيات المرأة للأدبيات الأربعة. إضافة إلى دراسة في مواضع المتعلقة بالزواج، والأمومية، والجنسية، وتعليم المرأة. وتعتمد الدراسة الكيفية في جمع بيانات على مجموعة من القصص القصيرة والروايات لهؤلاء الأدبيات وهي: لكاترين ليم: "أغنية المعدن الفضي" (2003)، و"السيدة سيتوه في العالم" (2010)، ولسوتشين كريستين ليم "أكاذيب الزواج: قصص مجهولة بدون أغنية ومقولة واحتفال." (2007)، ولهوي هوي تان: "الأجساد الغريبة" (1997)، و"شركة مامون" (2001)؛ ولوينا بون: "الأسد في الشتاء" (2007)، و"العناية الخاصة للثعالب" (2009)، ومن نتائج البحث التي توصلت إليها الباحثة، أولاً: ازدهار الأدب السنغافوري ازدهارا ملحوظا مما أثر تأثيرا بالغا في الأدبيات السنغافورية، وتستمر القصص والروايات الخيالية السنغافورية في تحسين أدائها على من السنين القادمة بظهور عدد من أدبيات الشباب الطامحات. ثانيا: استمرار السيطرة عالم القصص والروايات الخيالية في سنغافورة على الأدبيات المعروفة أمثال "كاترين ليم"، و"سوتشين كريستين ليم". أما بالنسبة للأدبيات الناشئات "وينا بون" فقد أسهمت بأعمالهن الأدبية داخل الأدب السنغافوري الإنكليزي إلا أن الإبداعات الأدبية للكاتبة "هوي هوي تان" كانت ثانوية. النتيجة الثالثة أن الأدبيات الأربعة يكتبن في أعمالهن الأدبية في مجملها عن النساء: تصوير المرأة وقضاياها بوعي صريح في أعمال الأدبية الخيالية للأدبيات الأربعة، حيث تكن معبرات ونائبات عن آراء المرأة في إبداعاتهن كإحدى الوسائل المقاومة. وأخيرا: على الرغم من الفوارق الأجيال بين هؤلاء الأربعة، إلا أن الاعمال الأدبية لديهم متشابهة، وهذه القضايا لها أهمية كبيرة في نفوسهن، حيث تجتمع المساواة هؤلاء الأدبيات في خصائص التمثيل للمرأة وعناصر الموضوعية مقارنة بالاختلافات والفوارق.

APPROVAL PAGE

The thesis of Mazni Binti Muslim has been approved by the following:



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DECLARATION

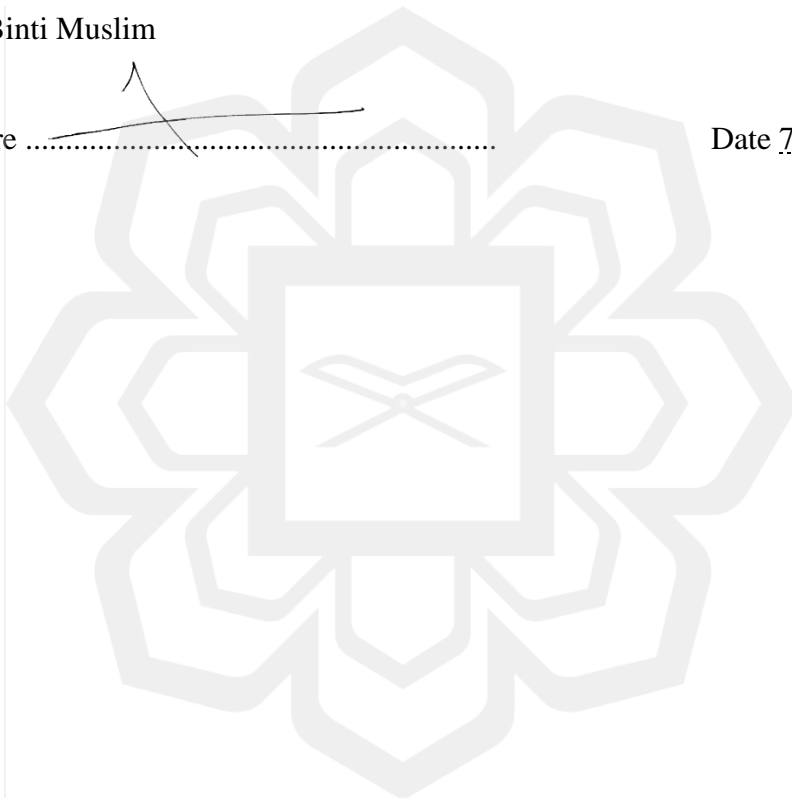
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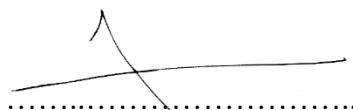
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For my parents:

Muslim bin Mohd Jaafar & Rugayah binti Yahya

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil are the four major languages in Singapore. Hence, its literary output comprises writings in all these languages. The literature of Singapore portrays “various aspects of Singaporean society and forms a significant part of the culture of the city-state” (Lim, 1989, p. 33). Singapore literature in English is more dominant than that of the other languages. It is the focus of this thesis to examine literary writing in English by Singaporean women writers. This thesis also traces the overall literary history to provide a background documentation of the literary development of Singapore.

Singapore literature in English began with the “establishment of University of Malaya in Singapore in 1949” (Lim, 1989, p. 30). In terms of the development of Singapore literature in English, it is “plentiful, vibrant and diverse, reflecting the central role of the English language in the public discourse of the city-state” (Wicks, 2003, p. 1). Since 1940s to the 1980s, Singapore literature in English has gone through a process of development (Lim, 1989, p. 30). This is similar to the growth of post-colonial literature, which went through three stages of development: literature in English before 1965, the period from 1965 to 1990 and the period from 1990 to the present day (Lim, 1989, p. 30; Poon, Holden & Lim, 2009, p. 2).

Writing in English in Singapore, just as in many Southeast Asian countries, was pioneered by male authors. Before independence, the literary tradition “started with the Straits-born Chinese community in the colonial era” (Poon, Holden & Lim, 2009, p. 5). The Straits Chinese British Association was founded by Tan Jiak Kim, Song Ong Siang, Lim Boon Keng and Seah Liang Seah to serve as a voice for English-educated Straits-born Chinese populace (Poon, Holden & Lim, 2009, p. 5). Koh (1981) believes that early local writings in English (literary works that are mainly poetry and criticism) were started by “Malayan” writers who resided, studied or worked in Singapore before 1965, while poetry and prose by Singaporean writers were published after 1965 (when Singapore separated from Malaysia). The establishment of University of Malaya in

1949 helped boost efforts in creative writing in English in Singapore. The publication of Wang Gungwu's poems in undergraduate magazines pioneered the publication of literary works in English (Lim, 1989, p. 30). Soon after, short stories in English were also published in student magazines, though it was minimal compared to poems. In 1978, Robert Yeo compiled and edited *Singapore Short Stories* Volumes 1 and 2, a selection of 30 stories in English written by Singaporean writers such as S. Rajaratnam, Arthur Yap, Stella Kon and Catherine Lim. Singapore novel in English arrived much later into the literary scene; Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) was widely recognised as a novel that is representatively Singaporean.

As for the tradition of women's writing in English in Singapore, it was initially hampered by problems of education and literacy in foreign language. Koh (1995) states that Singaporean women just as many other Asian women in the old days, rarely had formal education and the opportunities to acquire literacy in a foreign language, such as, English (p. 66). Basically, women's writing in English in the city-state started in the late 1940s. The establishment of University of Malaya in 1949 acted as a means for students, including the female undergraduates, to start publishing their literary works. In 1976, Geraldine Heng edited a collection of stories by five Singaporean women writers titled *The Sun in Her Eyes: Stories by Singapore Women*. In the 1970s, Catherine Lim Poh Imm's collection of short stories *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978) as well as other short stories were favourably received. Today, Catherine Lim remains the doyenne of Singapore writing in English with many collections of short story and novel. In 1975, a Singaporean expatriate woman, Minfong Ho published her first novel in English, *Sing to the Dawn*. More novels appeared in the 1980s and Christine Suchen Lim was among the female novelists with her first publication, *Rice Bowl*, in 1984.

This study seeks to examine the feminist ideas that permeate the writings of selected four Singaporean women writers, namely Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Hwee Hwee Tan and Wena Poon. The women writers discussed in this study are of different generations. Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim are the established voices while Hwee Hwee Tan and Wena Poon are the emergent voices of Singaporean women's writing in English.

The four women writers are selected for several reasons. Firstly, Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim are hailed as Singapore's icon female writers. They are prolific writers whose writings dominate the English literary scene in Singapore.

According to Ng Yi-Sheng (2010), “The world of Singapore fiction today is still pretty much ruled by Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim, authors who sprang up in the 1970s and 1980s” (p. 37). These two women writers are persistently writing and contributing to the growth of Singapore literature in English whereas several Singaporean male fiction writers such as Philip Jeyaretnam, Colin Cheong, Dave Chua and Damien Sin have “fallen mysteriously silent” (Ng, 2010, p. 37).

Secondly, the four Singaporean women writers’ books have been published internationally. Since 1997, stories from Singapore have been making a modest appearance overseas when Hwee Hwee Tan and Catherine Lim’s books were published by Britain’s Penguin imprint Michael Joseph as well as Orion Books respectively (Nanda, 2015). When asked if he sees a Singaporean writer achieving the same level of success as twice Man Booker longlisted Malaysian writer, Tash Aw, Paul Tan who helms the Singapore Writers Festival from 2011 to 2014 responded: “Absolutely. Why not? ... It is just a matter of time. We already have writers who have been internationally distributed, such as Suchen Christine Lim, Catherine Lim and Tan Hwee Hwee. There can be more” (Ong, 2014).

Thirdly, the selected women writers are known internationally because their literary writings have been translated into foreign languages. Catherine Lim’s *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978) has been translated into Mandarin while her novel, *The Bondmaid* (1995) has been translated into 10 languages. Hwee Hwee Tan’s *Foreign Bodies* (1997) has been translated into German as *Drachenkinder: Roman* while Wena Poon’s writings have been translated into Italian and Norwegian.

Fourthly, the four women writers chosen for this study have earned literary achievements both locally and internationally. Suchen Christine Lim’s *Fistful of Colours* (1992) was awarded the Singapore Literature Prize in 1993. In 2012, she received the S.E.A Write Award or Southeast Asian Writers Award in Bangkok, Thailand (Huang, 2012). She was selected on the strength of her body of work and contributions in promoting the literary scene in Singapore (Huang, 2012). Hwee Hwee Tan’s *Foreign Bodies* was on the cover page of *The Wall Street Journal* for being the first novel by a Singaporean writer “to receive critical acclaim in the UK and US” (Toh, 2001). As for Wena Poon, her short story collection, *Lions in Winter*, “was shortlisted for the 2008 Singapore Literature Prize” and longlisted for the 2008 Frank O’Connor

International Short Story Award (Tay, 2008). Being the only listed collection from Southeast Asia was a great achievement for a debut work.

All four women writers discussed in this study employ prose fiction as their genre because “fiction is a passionate pleasure in many women’s lives, far more so than it appears to be for men” (Coward, 1989, p. 35; Mazni, 2001, p. 2). However, fiction in Singapore ranks second after poetry. As a city of poets, most published creative works in English have been in poetry form. Fiction gets little critical attention despite the accomplishment and international success of Singaporean women writers. Poon (2011) laments that very few people actually are aware that Suchen Christine Lim is globally recognised and even fewer people in Singapore ever knew about Meira Chand’s international success as it was not reported in Singapore media.

Nevertheless, it seems as though women are drawn to fiction. Novelist Rachel Billington states the following: “Women read fiction. Women need fiction. Men do too but only the discerning. They read good novels. Women, even those with brain like razors, never lose that longing for the Big One, the emotional high” (Mazni, 2001, p. 2). In addition, fiction actually “plays an important role in the society in which it is written” (Kintanar, 1988, p. 9; Mazni, 2001, p. 3). It affects people who read novel and short story genres for entertainment as “the effects can be more profound than mere escapism” (Kintanar, 1988, p. 9; Mazni, 2001, p. 3). Reading fiction affects our mind as it gives us insight into human character, motivation and perception.

In writing fiction in English, Singaporean women writers in general tend to adopt the popular genre of short story as their means of literary expression. Davidson and Cordell (1982) describe the short story genre as being an ideal form “for the modern age because Southeast Asian societies are ... in transition, events move and change very quickly ... the short story presents itself as the most suitable form for this type of situation” (Sercombe, 1997, pp. 69-70). In addition, it has been argued that some women write short fiction due to material and practical conditions of their lives; for example, they do not have access to long hours of quality time to write a lengthy work (Boddy, 1996, p. 80; Mazni, 2001, p. 19). Nevertheless, the length of women’s short stories is not necessarily an indicator of either their quality or importance.

Singapore is Malaysia’s neighbour; it is a Southeast Asian city-state that is south of the Malaysian state of Johor. The port of “Temasek” or “Singapura” was founded by

a Srivijayan prince named Sang Nila Utama in the 13th century (“Singapore”, n.d.). *Singa* is Sanskrit for lion and *pura* for city. Singapore’s population in 1821 was approximately 5874 people (Manley, 2010, p. 13). In 2020, the total population of Singapore has increased to about 5.85 million people (“Singapore population 2020”, 2020). In his 2007 speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that as an island city-state, Singapore is “a tiny, multicultural, multi-religious, one little red dot out of so many little dots, in the middle of Southeast Asia” and in addition, Singapore “lacks land, airspace, sea space, water” (Lily Zubaidah, 2010, p. 6). However, despite lacking in resources, land and even sand and granite, Singapore’s rapid ascent from Third World to First World status has been widely applauded.

Historically, Singapore belonged to the Federation of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965. Unfortunately, due to political differences, the federation separated. On August 9, 1965, the short-lived federation ended with the expulsion of Singapore (Manley, 2010, p. 10). A sombre Tunku Abdul Rahman told the Malaysian Federal Parliament that “there could only be one Prime Minister for the nation” (Wicks, 1998, p. 2). Thus, the best solution Malaysia took was “to allow Lee Kuan Yew to be the Prime Minister of an independent Singapore” (Wicks, 1998, p. 2). Tunku Abdul Rahman said that he “was hoping to make Singapore the New York of Malaysia ... my dream is shattered and so now we come to the parting of the ways” (Ho et al., 2011, p. 117). Lee received the news with tears, but declared the full independence of Singapore (Manley, 2010, p. 10).

The separation of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 was indeed a sad episode in the history of both nations. In his memoir, Lee Kuan Yew (2000) narrates the following: “Some countries are born independent. Some achieve independence. Singapore had independence thrust upon it” (Vadaketh, 2012, p. 31). The split was basically “due to the product of a single, fundamental dispute as the nationalistic Malay leaders in Malaysia wanted to create a pro-Malay state while Chinese leaders in Singapore wanted to create a race-neutral state” (Vadaketh, 2012, p. 30). Commenting on this issue in his blog, *Chedet*, former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad stated in an article titled “Sharing” that Malaysians did not vote for the People’s Action Party (PAP) in the 1964 elections, thus demonstrating their belief in the concept of sharing espoused by the Alliance. “By only winning one seat, PAP and its Singaporean chauvinist meritocrats had to leave Malaysia” (Mahathir,

2013). Since its divorce from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore's wealth has increased steadily. Today, it has been known as one of the Four Asian Tigers alongside Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan. Philip Jeyaretnam (2004) offers the following opinion regarding Singapore's progress and development since independence:

How has Singapore changed since independence? We have progressed from *teh tarik* to cappuccino, from colonial style to skyscrapers that would not look out of place in Chicago or Manhattan, from lighters plying a noisy, dirty trade between godown, chandlers' shops and moored vessels to the smooth hydraulics of container ports where shipment is processed electronically. No more barefoot kids in dusty *kampong* compounds whiling away the hours with fighting spiders and fisticuffs. Instead, they throng the air-conditioned bowling alleys and arcades, honing their skills in close-quarter electronic combat. (pp. 392-393)

Economically, Singapore is better than its Southeast Asian neighbours. Even Tun Mahathir Mohamad has acknowledged Singapore's economic growth and importance in his 1970's seminal work, *The Malay Dilemma* (Lily Zubaidah, 2010, p. 121). Singapore is "ranked as one of the freest and most globalised economies" (Lily Zubaidah, 2010, p. 3). Besides its strategic location and entrepot function as claimed by Tun Mahathir, the island nation's economic growth could be the result of its workaholic culture. According to the International Labour Organization's Global Wage Report Update 2009, Singaporeans work the longest hours in the world (Ho et al, 2011, p. 6). At the time of independence in 1965, Singapore's GDP per capita was USD512 and, by 2011, that had grown to USD35,163 (Vadaketh, 2012, p. 127). Presently, it has one of the world's highest GDP (PPP) per capita of USD58,247.90, making the people of the tiny island "enjoy one of the highest average incomes in the world", ahead of other developed countries such as Germany, France and Japan ("Why Singapore is so rich", 2019). Economically and developmentally, "Singapore had planted itself firmly in the rich man's club" (Vadaketh, 2012, p. 127).

Due to Singapore's rapid development in economy, there has been a tremendous positive change in women's development in the island nation. It is believed that things have changed for the better for Singaporean women. They have experienced great improvement in economic status. As of 2016, the level of literacy and education among women constitute 95.45% ("Statistics Singapore – Key annual indicators", 2016). According to Tai (2017), "Female participation in Singapore's labour force has risen significantly over the years." As of 2019, women have constituted 42.13% of Singapore's workforce ("Women in Singapore labour force", 2019). In terms of

participation and representation of women in Singapore's politics, since the 1990s, the number has progressively increased. Currently, there are "20 elected women parliamentarians out of 88 elected members; 19 from the ruling PAP and one from the Workers' Party" ("Women in Singapore politics", 2020).

Due to the positive changes in women's development in Singapore, it is believed that Singaporean women are equally represented in fiction too. This study would like to explore this phenomenon by looking at how women are treated in the selected fiction of the four women writers. Through fiction writing, women writers unearth their female experience. They make visible their experience which has been excluded or misinterpreted in male writing. This visibility provides women with a means of self-recognition and a shared voice of identity. In the words of Morris (1993), writing by women can "help us live and dream as women" and it "can tell the story of the aspects of women's lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealised in the majority of traditional texts" (Mazni, 2001, p. 3). Women writers have never been considered a serious part of the established literary circles that are dominated by males. Women are criticised as only being good at producing "little love stories" but we may discover that some women's writing deserve a place in the literary establishment. Nor Faridah and Quayum (2001) believe that "a woman writer must not be made to feel inadequate or feel she is less a writer if her work is judged as typically womanish or feminine" (p. 416). They quote Virginia Woolf (1974) who states that "a woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine" (2001, p. 416).

In the context of Singaporean women writers' writing in English, their presence contributes an important impact to Singapore literature, helps to highlight women's issues and put them at the centre stage. Women's writing about women, as it emerges in literature, involves a network of issues. By writing about women and their lives, women writers are participating in the way women are represented in literary discourse.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Singaporean women's writing in English is often studied in silo. There has been no comparative study on writings in English by Singaporean most established women writers since the city-state's independence to the present day. This comparative study is needed to gauge the changes and achievements that Singaporean women writers have gone through where writing in English is concerned. It is important to have a comprehensive study of the historical development of Singaporean women's writing in English as they have significantly contributed to the growth of Singapore literary scene.

The other observation is that the writings of young women writers of Singapore are under-researched. It is the older generation and more established women writers who are usually studied. Thus, this study seeks to examine the writings of the emergent voices as well as the latest fiction of the established ones. It is important to have an in-depth study of the young writers' fiction in order to understand their concerns, themes and subject matters as they may be different from that of their seniors due to generational gaps. This study contributes to the literary growth of Singapore and enriches the research conducted on contemporary Singaporean women writers.

The third concern is that there is no study that identifies the similarities and differences in terms of issues affecting women in the writings of the selected four Singaporean women writers. The four writers chosen for this study belong to different eras and generations. Thus, due to this generational gap, it is believed that they have different approaches in projecting women's issues and handling social and emotional problems faced by their women characters. This comparative study is important to discover the similarities as well as diversities of the issues affecting women in Singapore fiction in English.

1.3 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study analyses the selected short stories and novels of the four Singaporean women writers. It examines Catherine Lim's novels titled *The Song of Silver Frond* (2003) and *Miss Seetoh in the World* (2010), Suchen Christine Lim's collection of short stories titled *The Lies that Build a Marriage: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in Singapore* (2007), Hwee Hwee Tan's novels titled *Foreign Bodies* (1997) and *Mammon Inc.* (2001) and Wena Poon's collections of short story titled *Lions in Winter*

(2007) and *The Proper Care of Foxes* (2009). The thesis of this study examines how women are treated in the selected fiction. It is believed that women are equally represented in the fiction by taking into consideration that Singapore is one of the Four Asian Tigers in its economic success story.

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the aims of this study:

- 1- To trace a general development of fiction by Singaporean women writers.
- 2- To chart the development of fiction by the selected four women writers in the context of Singapore writing in English.
- 3- To analyse how women are presented in the fiction (short stories and novels) of the selected Singaporean women writers of two generations.
- 4- To compare and contrast changes affecting women as represented in the short stories and novels written by the four Singaporean women writers' writing in English.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1- How did women's fiction writing in English in Singapore develop?
- 2- How did the fiction writing of the four women writers develop in the context of Singapore writing in English?
- 3- How are women presented in the fiction (short stories and novels) of these selected Singaporean writers of two generations?
- 4- What are the similarities and differences in terms of issues affecting women as depicted in the fiction of the four Singaporean women writers?

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of this study is primarily to update the information of critical studies on Singaporean women's writings. Singaporean women writers, especially the emergent voices, are not widely known. Their writings help project Singapore to the world but

knowledge of them is limited to specific groups of audience: academics, literary critics, students majoring in literary studies and a small percentage of local and international readers. So important is women's writing in literary tradition that Olsen (1978) states the following: "Read, listen to, living women writer; our new as well as our established, often neglected ones. Not to have audience is a kind of death" (Nor Faridah, 1998, p. 2; Mazni, 2001, p. 3). These women writers' presence continues the legacy of Singaporean women writers' creativity and their female preoccupation agenda seems to correspond with Helene Cixous' (1976) ideals whereby she points out that "women must write about woman and bring woman into writing ... woman must put herself into text – as into the world and into the history" (Mazni, 2001, p. 22). However, there are insufficient studies done to analyse their writings. Thus, this thesis contributes significantly to the literary tradition of Singaporean women's writing in English.

Next, this undertaken study is to examine writings across two generations of Singaporean women writers and provide a thorough analysis on predominant women-related themes in the fiction of the selected four writers. It is important to study writings by women in general and these selected four Singaporean women writers in particular because "what women are thinking and writing today may provide valuable insights into the issues which affect us all in our lives. There are of interest and significance not just to women, but men as well" (Leong, 1998, p. 1). Hence, this study is significant in discussing the two generational gaps and tracing the thematic changes occurring in their fiction.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the Third World feminism as its major theoretical framework in exploring and analysing the four writers' women characters. As a feminist criticism that revolves around women's issues, trials and tribulations, it is believed that this theoretical framework will give "a better understanding of women's experiences because it does not generalise the experiences of Third World women as being universal" (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991, as cited in Norzie Diana, 2007, p. 2).

Third World feminism refers to "feminist theories developed by feminists who acquired their views and participated in feminist politics in so-called Third World countries" ("Postcolonial feminism", n.d.). It is important to note that the term "Third

World feminism” is interchangeable with “Postcolonial feminism”. The two strands of feminism share some common grounds as “much postcolonial writing overlaps with transnational feminism and Third-world feminism” (Norzie Diana, 2007, p. 1). Ashcroft et al. (1989) “acknowledge the striking parallel between both postcolonial and feminism as issues such as suppression, subordination, identity, silence, voice and representation are similar in both theories” (as cited in Syazliyati et al., 2009, pp. 28-29). Interestingly, Third World feminism has “a number of current usages” (Narayan, 2007, p. 4). One of them is related to feminists from communities of colour in the West. According to Narayan (2007):

Some feminists from communities of colours in Western contexts have also applied the term “Third World” to themselves, their communities, and their politics, to call a political attention to similarities in the locations of, and problems faced by, their communities and communities in the Third World countries. (p. 4)

Third World feminism was initiated by Rosario Castellanos in her 1973 essay titled “Mujer que sabe latin” (“A Woman who Knows Latin”) (Humm, 1994, p. 272; Norzie Diana, 2007, p. 1). In a chapter titled “Third World Feminist Criticism: Third Wave and Fifth Gear”, Humm discusses that Third World feminist criticism has evolved through the years in the hands of its more contemporary critics and writers of colour, namely, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldua, Rey Chow, Trin Minh-ha, Gayatri Spivak, Chela Sandoval and others (1994, p. 252; Norzie Diana, 2007, p. 2).

As a feminist criticism, Third World feminism forms a new way of looking at, examining and representing the Third World community, particularly women, and also cultures that have been misunderstood, scorned and unfairly projected by the West. The Western world has been biased in portraying Third World people as “uneducated” “undeveloped” and “badly oppressed”. Mohanty argues in her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” that “the ‘average Third World woman’ is commonly portrayed as being ‘sexually constrained’ and a tendency to be ‘ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented and victimised” (Tay, 2008, p. 6). On the other hand, “Western women are depicted as ‘educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decision” (Tay, 2008, p. 6). The West also has erred in judging Third World people as homogeneous and deserved the same treatment and perception. The

factor that the West does not understand the dynamics in the Eastern society causes the misconception to occur (Syazliyati et al., 2009, p. 30).

Through Third World feminism, writers and critics have been paving a new path and creating a better understanding among women of different colours and cultures. “Third World feminist criticism focuses on three major issues: the politics of universalism, cultural controls and misrepresentations and the homogeneity of the canon” (Humm, 1994, pp. 252-253). They criticise Western feminism for being “ethnocentric and not take into account the unique experiences of women from Third World countries or the existence of other strands of feminism indigenous to Third World nations” (Shahrul Annuar, 2009, p. 14).

Third World feminist writers want to correct Western biased conceptions, misunderstandings and misrepresentations through the portrayal of their culture, the truth of their women and some other collective issues best known to them in their own writing (Norzie Diana, 2007, p. 4). Third World feminists do not want to be patronised. They do not think all women aspire to be like the Western women. They feel that Western “women practice “moral imperialism” when judging cultural practices such as the headscarf or female genital mutilation” (Kimball, 2012).

Thus, in order to analyse the different characterisations of women in the fiction of the selected four Singaporean women writers and to avoid cultural misrepresentation, this present study incorporates Third World feminist perspective. For example, Mansoor (2016, pp. 1-16) reevaluated the position of the Third World feminism as she reconfigures the position of the ‘marginalised’ by suggesting that voices of the Third World feminist may occupy the ‘limitrophic’ space – a condition in which Third World feminist characters negotiate their places, the ones that are not conforming or subject to the First World feminist boundaries. The ‘limitrophic’ positioning of the Third World feminist voices will be examined against women characters in the selected fiction of the four Singaporean women writers.

1.7.1 Theoretical Framework: Third World Feminism in Singaporean Women's Writing

This study will utilise Third World feminist approach in analysing women characters in the fiction of Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Hwee Hwee Tan and Wena Poon. Third World feminism is applied because Singapore is situated in Asia and Asia is geographically included in the Third World (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991, as cited in Norzie Diana, 2007, p. 2). Singaporean women belong to this Third World group because of these two reasons: geographical and historical backgrounds. In addition, due to geographical and historical backgrounds, Singaporean women can be considered as women of colour.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1994) states that “Women, passive, long-suffering, complicit, have been colonised for centuries.” Therefore, it is one of the reasons why women's stories and experiences should be put centre stage. According to Syazliyati et al. (2009):

Many issues concerning women have been studied since the 19th century so that more women are given agency about their subjugated positions. The colonisation of women by the patriarchal beliefs governing the societies results in their inability to act and speak in the way they truly desire. Women's voices are silenced and they are denied existence, consequently, they are marginalised. Hence, women's experiences should be explained to set the agenda for liberating them from this oppressive silence. (p. 27)

Third World feminism is adopted to analyse the fiction of the selected four Singaporean women writers because if we delve deeper into some of socio-political issues faced in Singapore, they actually reflect the city-state's Third World characteristics. Singaporeans live in an oppressive culture. The city-state is “modern and the nation is democratic in theory but the very practice is different” (Rideout, 2013, p. 119). For example, “speaking ill of the government can get you arrested for sedition or locked up in a mental institution” (Rideout, 2013, p. 119). Additionally, “writing about politics even in weblogs is criminal at certain times of the year (no matter what your view) and the government controls all media outlets” (Rideout, 2013, p. 119).

Singapore practices politics of fear. Singaporeans, in general, are a fearful people (Tan, 2009). After years of being literally ruled by Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP-led government, freedom of expression and human rights are still issues raised in the

city-state. The common portrayals of Singaporeans are they fear to take any risk or face the consequences and everything has been decided for them. Thus, as a result of living in fear for years, they learn to withdraw from society. They do not wish to publicly voice out any opinion though they will vent out their anger in coffee shops or anonymously in internet forums. Thus, the practice of politics of fear and lack of freedom of speech in Singapore makes it a city-state with a totalitarian government.

Besides that, Singapore is uneasy with public debate on politics. Thus, through the decision made by its regulator, the Media Development Authority (MDA), “Singapore has banned a film on political exiles who have lived abroad for decades, stating that the film undermines national security” (“Singapore bans documentary on political exiles”, 2014, p. 38). The 70-minute film titled *To Singapore, with Love* “features interviews with nine Singaporeans who left the city-state between the 1960s and 1980s to escape possible prosecution by British colonial authorities and later, by the Singapore government” (“Singapore bans documentary on political exiles”, 2014, p. 38). Some Singaporeans have become frustrated by the “government’s approach to policing the media” (“Singapore bans documentary on political exiles”, 2014, p. 38). These are some of their outbursts: “It’s time MDA stops babysitting us” and “Singapore may be 50 years old, but MDA still thinks we are toddlers. Let us grow up and make our own choice” (“Singapore bans documentary on political exiles”, 2014, p. 38).

One of the political exiles is the former Solicitor General of Singapore, Francis T. Seow who was detained for 72 days “without trial under Singapore’s Internal Security Act in the late 1980s” (Seow, 2010). He wrote a book in exile titled *To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew’s Prison* which looks “into the darker side of Singapore’s politics” (Seow, 2010). In his foreword for Seow’s other book, *Confucius Confounded: The Analects of Lee Kuan Yew*, Mahathir Mohamad states that Seow “apparently fears returning to Singapore; in itself a commentary on the situation prevailing there” (Seow, 2010, p. xix).

In the same foreword, Mahathir Mohamad also condemns Singapore’s one-party rule system since independence and Lee Kuan Yew’s “hardly veiled insistence on continuing to be in power” after stepping down from office on November 28, 1990 (Seow, 2010, p. xix). Very often, there would not be a single opposition member in the Singapore Parliament. Should they be elected, there would be measures taken to prevent them from taking their seats. According to Derek Gwyn Davies, the former general