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Local literati must tap into the country's soul

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THE noticeable absence of English-language writers from the list of Singapore's Cultural Medallion recipients — especially following Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk's Nobel literature prize win and India-born Kiran Desai's Man Booker Prize win — calls for some introspection into local literature.

The last English-language local writer to receive the Cultural Medallion was Ho Minfong in 1997, for her novel *Sing to the Dawn*. So, it seems almost facetious to ask if a Singaporean can one day win the Nobel or Man Booker prize, or even the Commonwealth Writers Prize.

First, let's ask if there is indeed a growing body of local literature of merit. Does there still exist a literary culture — like there was in the days of Professor Edwin Thumboo and Dr Goh Poh Seng — that can spawn Singaporean works of world standing?

It has long been a dream of our tiny island-state to create a vibrant regional literary hub for writers and their works. After all, Singapore in its early days had played host to renowned writers such as Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham.

To be fair, the National Arts Council has been more active in recent times in promoting local literature, through publication sponsorships and literary readings, forums and awards. The most encouraging sign to date is the Ministry of Education's confident inclusion of more local works in schools' literature curriculum.

What else can Singapore do? We cannot continue to harp on the usual complaints about the lack of support by local publishers and the community. While these hurdles are real, and critical, there is the danger of allowing them to retard our progress. We have to break the impasse.

But before we — in typical Singaporean manner — rush to start on a blueprint of production-line initiatives and targets, let's be mindful that this cannot be a completely objective-driven task.

What is important is the creation of space for writers to find their niche, grow and excel.

Asked what he thought would go into the making of that much-touted but still elusive Great Singapore Novel, a publisher answered with a question: What makes Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* a great American novel? Or John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, or J D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*?

Clearly, they all breathe America. In the same vein, the works of many great Irish writers, such as Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha! Ha! Ha!* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, are unmistakably Irish in soul.

Too many of our local works, though well written, do not exude the Singapore breath and breadth of life. They could be works produced of any place. Except for the names of the characters and a sprinkling of Singlish, they are almost un-identifiable in that respect.

Still, it would be unfair not to recognise some veritable works bearing the stamp of the Singapore identity, such as Daren Shiau's *Heartland*. And let's not forget some flashes in the international arena by writers such as Catherine Lim and the late Gopal Baratham.

It is with pride that I remember, etched in my childhood memories, British (later turned American) writer Leslie Charteris — creator of the popular Saint character — as being Singapore-born. Perhaps it is in this same way that India continues to lay claim to writers such as Nobel laureate V S Naipaul, a Trinidad-born Brahmin, and Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay but long a Briton.

But what, again, of that Singapore "soul"? According to the judges of this year's Man Booker Prize, it was the "great depth of humanity" in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* that raised it above the competition.

There are those critical of the lack of extremes of experience in Singapore's recent history that might serve as literary fodder. While we have our fair share of writing in the context of the Japanese Occupation by an older generation of scribes, today's generation of young writers are not necessarily worse off without that exposure.

After all, at 35, Desai is the second-youngest winner in the history of the Man Booker Prize. Another Indian winner, Arundhati Roy, was 36 when her novel, *The God of Small Things*, was conferred the award in 1997.

Our promising writers, such as Shiau, Colin Cheong and Claire Tham, who are not that much older, can continue to hone their skills — whatever the subject of their passion — at developing "the humane breadth" that makes Desai's novel such a magnificent piece of work.

That's good news for our young Singapore literary heritage. Our hope lies in growing and not standing still.

The writer, a management consultant, is a published author under the name David Leo.