

General Paper – Essay Model

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Topic: Arts & Culture

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Do the arts, such as music and literature, really play a significant role in Singaporean Society?

The underdeveloped nature of the arts scene in Singapore that encompasses music and literature masks the really significant role that they play in our society. Subtly, but undoubtedly, the arts have helped built the software of what it really means to be a Singaporean and it is perhaps the acquaintance with these works and the ability to identify with these music and literature that truly defines one's identity as a Singaporean. The local work of music and literature, are therefore cultural markers for our society.

The government rhetoric on the importance of economic growth and tangibles do seem to have overwhelmed the standing of the arts in our perception. We are often thought to imagine the arts as nothing but a luxury for those who can afford. Even the education system, the only possible driver of the arts in a modernizing society, places its focus on the sciences, marginalizing subjects such as arts, music and literature as disposable peripherals detached from the goals of growth and prosperity. We have to acknowledge that these fields of endeavour do contribute little directly, in producing anything tangible for the economy. Nonetheless, the significance in the role of the arts in our Singaporean society lies in the molding of a software on which our growth and prosperity rests upon.

After more than 40 years of nationhood, our pursuit of economic growth has left our leaders' still puzzled about what actually defines our nation culturally. Our Prime Ministers' have brought this issue up now and then but rarely with any proper conclusion. Unbeknownst to our political leaders, we do have a national identity and like all other cultural variables, it is perhaps too hard to quantify. Nevertheless, we are fully aware that we are bounded by certain cultural forces that only manifest themselves within the arts. The countless national day songs used to laud our achievements and express our love of the nation are sang to the tunes we are so familiar with. Music transcends the role of a tool for self-expression or entertainment and helps ignite that sense of belonging that already exist in our people. That is not the 'official' role of music but it has, without doubt, performed this unintended role particularly well every time when we observe how our people's voices synchronize to the tunes during National Day Parades.

Works of literature builds up another component of national identity, less overt than the display of love for the nation through songs like that of music. Literature serves as a storehouse of memories of the country's past and present and preserves our acquaintance with the intangibles that attaches us to the nation. Suchen Christine Lim's Novels like *Fistful of Colours* brings up a sense of nostalgia in the older Singaporeans with her vivid description of the places and activities of Singapore in post-War days. Stella Kon's *'Emily of Emerald Hill'* captures the essence of Singaporean behavior and attitudes towards simple day-to-day issues with just a single character and such introspection is probably common amongst the readers of these literatures. Singapore literature unites the memories of our people and preserves them as part of our national identity. The young also learns more about Singapore's history from a commoner's perspective as opposed to that of a historian or the government, which often evokes less emotion.

Moving away from the role of the arts on the entire nation, at the individual level, music and literature have also played a significant part. As a subject, literature motivates students to critique and analyze, the very skills that are lacking in science students, whose have been trained to believe in the doctrine of a single, correct answers to questions and discouraged from questioning the authority. The education system of Singapore, which churns out a science-stream majority have been blamed for the lack of creativity in Singaporeans. Therefore, the recent years of 'arts' education that made literature compulsory in secondary education have been implemented to counter this problem. The subject of literature thus helps to train the minds of young and encourage critical thinking, previously lacking in the Singapore society.

Knowledge in the arts, including mastery in background of important genres of music and adequate ideas of major works of literature makes an individual a more functional global citizen. Cultural quotient is often cited as an increasingly important variable for the globalizing world. Singapore, which hopes to be a society of

global citizens, would very much need to ensure that individuals in the society are able to relate to not only global affairs but multiple foreign cultures that can only be gleaned from works of the arts besides a visit to the different countries. Music and literature thus plays the role of developing individuals of the Singapore society into global citizens capable of communicating and working with the rest of the world.

Detractors of my thesis would probably be pragmatist, widespread in the Singapore society, citing figures of how investments into the art yielded little or no returns. I believe a close study of the development of the arts in other civilizations and the prosperity they experienced would lead to a very surprising conclusion for these pragmatists. Although mechanism by which the development of the arts has helped brought about the tangible improvements of the society, there's no doubt that the social advancement brought about by music and literature provides favourable conditions for take-off of the economy.

Moreover, even the Singapore government, lauded as rational and pragmatic leaders, have more than once emphasized on the need to develop the art scene and develop talents in fields of music and literature. They have seen the significant role music and literature have played in the society, uniting the nation from bottom-up, connecting the hearts and minds of every member of the society. It is such unity, and feeling of familiarity that holds the society together and paves the way for economic prosperity. At the same time, in developing players in the global economy who practices critical thinking and are creative, music and literature contributes indirectly to growth and development of the economy. The arts, such as music and literature do indeed have a significant role in the Singapore society.