Re-envisioning a Discipline: Martin Wickramasinghe’s Contribution to Comparative Literature

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Re-envisioning a Discipline: Martin Wickramasinghe's Contribution to Comparative Literature

A Thesis Presented

By

CHAMILA SOMIRATHNA

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DEDICATION

To my teachers, friends, and loving family

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ABSTRACT

RE-ENVISIONING A DISCIPLINE: MARTIN WICKRAMASINGHE'S

CONTRIBUTION TO COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SEPTEMBER 2016

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This thesis, "Re-visioning a Discipline: Martin Wickramasinghe's Contribution to Comparative Literature," explores the comparative approach of Martin Wickramasinghe, the pioneering twentieth-century Sri Lankan novelist, literary-cultural critic, and journalist. Wickramasinghe drew on Sinhala folk and classical, Pali, Sanskrit, and Western literary traditions, especially those of England, and Russia. His comparative approach had two main principles: First, literary concepts do not belong to any literary culture on the basis of their origin. Second, any concept that exists in a given literary culture can be "remoulded" and incorporated by another culture. The rejection of the notion of origin-based ownership of literary concepts and the reformulation of literary concepts as phenomena that may be circulated among literary cultures create a hierarchy-less base for comparison. In creating his comparative approach, Wickramasinghe problematized the binaries of local and metropolitan, village and city, and national and international. I examine his comparative approach by analyzing, first, his re-interpretations of the concepts of reader and *grāmyatā* (vulgarity). For example,

Wickramasinghe challenged the elitism of Sanskrit literary theoretical conceptions of the reader and vulgarity. Second, I discuss how he “remoulded” different literary concepts in his theoretical writings and fiction. For example, he created a concept of realism that drew on classical Sinhala narratives as well as Western literature and theory.

In this thesis, I place Wickramasinghe’s comparative approach in conversation with postcolonial scholarship such as that of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Simon Gikandi, Revathi Krishnaswamy, Gayathri Spivak, and S. Subramaniam. Wickramasinghe’s comparative approach provides us new insights on how to compare different literary cultures without ascribing hierarchical values to these cultures. He rejected the binaries of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka and, instead, situated himself in a liminal position. His writings illumine how Pali, Sanskrit, and European metropolitan literary traditions all impacted Sinhala literary culture in different historical periods. Wickramasinghe focused on *how* Sinhala literary culture appropriates literary concepts from other literary traditions rather than on the *traditions* themselves.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The discipline of Comparative Literature has traditionally been concerned with the question of how to read texts against the backdrop of human differences across time, languages and cultures. The circulation of texts across linguistic and cultural borders and traditions, however, has historically constructed and sustained binary categories such as Europe/non-Europe, West/East, and local/metropole all of which originated in Europe as a means of asserting and maintaining its hegemony throughout the colonial period. Over the past several decades, Comparative Literature has scrutinized and contested its own underlying Eurocentrism and become more alert to the ways the established literary field and accompanying canonical texts remain embedded in these enduring structures of power.

Critics of Eurocentrism in present-day comparative literature look to the interpretive practices of the discipline as a means of decolonizing literary studies, reading practices, and knowledge production. Scholars such as Simon Gikandi, S. Shankar, Gayatri Spivak, and Revathi Krishnaswamy have each highlighted the types of disciplinary practices that have contributed to making Comparative Literature Eurocentric from its inception. Simon Gikandi problematizes the Eurocentric formation of Comparative Literature in the West, including himself within that paradigm. In “Contested Grammars: Comparative Literature, Translation, and the Challenge of Locality,” he suggests that the use of translation as a bridge for reaching local literary cultures is both inadequate and problematic. He criticizes the analysis of literatures from the global South through the theories and standards of Western academia. Gikandi points

out the importance of looking at a local literary culture through its own cultural specificity or literary theories. Similarly, S. Shankar, examining vernacular literatures from India and scholarly engagement in the West with vernacular literatures, emphasizes the need to "be attentive to the vernacular" (2012, xv). He argues that vernacular literatures should not be studied in a decontextualized way as somehow belonging nowhere, but must be understood within their own local context.

Revathi Krishnaswamy has drawn attention to the reluctance of Western academia to be open to *learning from* vernacular literary cultures in her essay "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization." By proposing the term "world literary knowledges," she demonstrates the need for vernacular literary theories and poetics to be included in the Western corpus of Comparative Literature (2010, 401). Instead of treating regional literatures as "subjects," she argues, they should be studied as literary knowledges that have current significance for how we read such texts. She suggests the applicability of non-European literary theories for evaluating European literature. In this manner, Krishnaswamy, echoing Wickramasinghe, problematizes the approach of Western academia towards literature, poetics, and the theory of non-European literary cultures.

In "World Modernisms, World Literature, and Comparativity" Susan Friedman suggests experimenting with "various modes of comparison" and examining "the nature and politics of comparison itself" (2012, 500). Her comparative methodology has four strategies: re-vision, recovery, circulation, and collage. At times her terminology in proposing new forms of comparison betrays her own positioning within the western-centric metropole however. For example, in explaining the strategy of "recovery" she

advises that “digging up modernisms in other parts of the globe is a critical first step toward an understanding of planetary modernism” (510). Her use of the words “digging up” suggests the colonial practice of archeological excavations. However, her invitation to comparatists to expose themselves to non-European literary modernisms is an important step toward making Comparative Literature more inclusive.

This thesis examines the pre- and post-colonial construction of the comparative literary field in Sri Lanka through a study of Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), the most prominent author, literary-cultural critic, and journalist in twentieth-century Sri Lanka. It argues that Wickramasinghe’s comparative approach adds an important dimension to understanding some of the problems discussed above that remain unresolved by comparatists. Wickramasinghe problematized the binary structures and power relations established by colonialism and adopted by the local Sri Lankan intelligentsia. His innovative comparative approach to literature was designed to work within these conventional dichotomies without fully submitting to them. He consistently argued that comparisons between world literatures must be viewed from the perspective of the local. His writings aimed to ensure that Europe was never the only metropolitan literary culture that Sinhala writers, critics, and readers acknowledged. His recognition of the relationships between multiple traditions instead of those between two dominant literary traditions was intended to complicate the act of reading and understanding a text.

Wickramasinghe has been studied before but mainly in relation to his contribution to Sinhala literature, language, and culture. For example, Ranjini Obeyesekere, in her Ph.D. dissertation “The Impact of English Criticism on Modern Sinhala Criticism” (University of Washington, 1968), does a historical analysis of Wickramasinghe’s role as

an author and a critic in modern Sinhala literature. Obeyesekere's thesis includes a thorough examination of the Western traces of Wickramasinghe's literary thought, however, she focuses solely on the influence of English literary criticism on Wickramasinghe. There is no analysis of the manner in which Wickramasinghe dealt with the Sanskrit, Pali, or Sinhala folk literary traditions. Obeyesekere frames Wickramasinghe through the literary figures F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot (70-71,94) which, at times, relegates him to a secondary status in relation to these English critics. Nevertheless, her thoughtful comparison of Wickramasinghe's ideas with their literary analytical concepts reveals his close association with the best of English literature and criticism.

It is worth emphasizing that Wickramasinghe's comparative approach and its contribution to Comparative Literature have not been given any significant attention within or outside Sri Lanka. This thesis is intended to serve as a first step towards presenting this aspect of his work to a wider audience.

The intersection of Wickramasinghe's location, his language, and his non-academic formation have played a role in his marginalized status outside of Sri Lanka and in relation to his contribution to knowledge production and dissemination within the field of Comparative Literature. In this thesis, I deliberately avoid using Western theories to analyze Wickramasinghe and his writings. Instead, I have chosen to frame my analysis with the sole focus on his fictional and theoretical work throughout the thesis. This approach allows the distinct political message of Wickramasinghe's comparative approach to be understood through his terms alone, and reveals the innovativeness of his writings. In much the same way that Wickramasinghe advocated the study of authors and

their work within the history of their own literary traditions, I attempt to understand and present Wickramasinghe's work in the context of the long history of the Sinhala literary tradition in Sri Lanka in which he played an important part. Wickramasinghe, however, also understood modern Sinhala literature to be in dialogue with two metropolitan literary cultures, Sanskrit and Western. His writings, both fictional and analytical, highlight the fact that to choose to focus on *either* the local or non-local, however, is insufficient for understanding the development of a single national literature.

In writing this thesis, I examine Wickramasinghe's fictive, critical, autobiographical, and journalistic writings to bring to light and to explore his comparative approach. In this way, I try to avoid a compartmentalizing frame when evaluating his vision. This approach led me to conclude that his writings are interdependent on one another. For example, his analysis of the evolution of Sinhala literary tradition is informed by his writings on Darwin's theory of evolution and the concept of "rebirth" in Buddhism. At the same time, a close observation of Wickramasinghe's texts indicate that he fused different areas and genres in his writings. For example, one of his most important works, *Apē Gama* (1940), has generic features of autobiography, fiction, literary criticism and cultural criticism and a feature article in a newspaper.

Viewing Wickramasinghe not only as a novelist and a literary critic but also as a journalist prompts additional insights about his approach to the Sinhala literary discourse of the twentieth century. Closer attention to his newspaper writings and less studied monographs reveals how his ideas on literature were shaped in conversation with the social-political changes being written about by journalists, including himself. From the

1920s, newspaper debates were also a major medium where ideas about Sinhala literary discourses over the novel, poetry, and literature as an academic discipline were developed, discussed, and contested. Especially after the political decolonization of Sri Lanka in 1948, these debates show how the construction of the Sinhala literary field shifted from the colonial to the postcolonial period. For example, in the colonial period, non-academic critics dominated the discussions in the newspapers whereas in the postcolonial period the dominance shifted to the academic critics. Nevertheless, Wickramasinghe remained a major participant in these debates throughout his life. Although a dichotomy emerged in the post-colonial period between academic critics and non-academic critics, the newspapers were always an important medium where dialogue between these two groups could emerge and evolve. Therefore, the national newspapers are an important source for studying Wickramasinghe and other literary scholars' contributions to the debates over the study of literature in Sri Lanka in the twentieth century.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter Two, "Martin Wickramasinghe: Self-fashioning of a Comparatist," demonstrates the manner in which Wickramasinghe shaped himself into a public intellectual by reaching the public through newspapers, creative writing, and his books on literary criticism. This chapter provides the background to the structural politics of Wickramasinghe's comparative approach by demonstrating how he worked through the binaries of East/West, University/Other centers of learning, and local/metropolitan in twentieth-century Sri Lanka. I pay special attention to Wickramasinghe's interest in comparative forms of (historical) iconoclasm which allowed him to interpret multiple

“traditions” in terms of cultural parity—and to transcend historical forms of cultural hierarchy between Sanskrit and Sinhala.

Chapter three, “The Village and the Villager: Uprooting Hegemonic Literary Discourses,” closely explores Wickramasinghe’s depiction of the village in relation to the city in his creative writing and literary theory. It discusses the manner through which he developed a local version of the concept of the reader and contested the idea of vulgarity which was associated with village life in Sanskrit literary theory.

Chapter four, “The National and the International: Coexistence of ‘Contradictions’” provides a close study of the manner in which Wickramasinghe attempted to join the “contradictory” concepts of the “national” and the “international.” The chapter discusses how Wickramasinghe theorized and exemplified his comparative approach. It illustrates Wickramasinghe’s interpretation of realism, which builds on a complex reinterpretation of Buddhist *Jātaka* story narrative conventions (and their local reception/translation), the Sanskrit concept of *atiśayōkti* (exaggeration), and the Western notion of realism. Then it demonstrates the manner in which he “remoulded” formal and ideological elements of the West, Sanskrit, Pali, and the “local” traditions in his novels *Virāgaya* (1956) and *Bava Taraṇaya* (1973). Wickramasinghe fused the Western notion of socialism with the Buddhist concept of *jīva bhakti vāda* (“love of life”) in the novel *Bava Taraṇaya*.

CHAPTER 2

MARTIN WICKRAMASINGHE: THE SELF-FASHIONING OF A COMPARATIST

The task of a comparatist in the context of colonialism is particularly important given its influence on the historization of diverse literary cultures and the hierarchically different values assigned to each. The literary cultures of Europe created a canon for the discipline of Comparative Literature which was exclusionary, compelling literary cultures such as Sanskrit, Arabic, and Chinese literary cultures from the non-European metropole to form a counter-canon. However, within the latter canonical formation, regional literatures were not particularly welcome. Both canons have tended to be studied as static objects within the discipline rather than as evolving literary traditions. Additionally, as Revathi Krishnaswamy notes, the fact that although modern Comparative Literature studies the *literature* of non-European literary cultures, it avoids studying their literary theories or poetics as sources of current significance. She further argues that modern comparative literary studies, "despite the good intentions of many scholars, continue to be Eurocentric pedagogical projects that reproduce colonial stereotypes and perpetuate a neocolonial division of labor between the knowing West and known Rest" (2010, 401).[1] Krishnaswamy reminds us that comparatists must converse with the historical formation of the discipline, of literary cultures, and of their own educational experiences when comparing two literary cultures in order to refrain from reproducing politically inaccurate discursive structures that emerged out of colonial power relations.

[1] In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayathri Spivak similarly argued that the languages of the Southern hemisphere should be studied "as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study" (2003, 9).

In the colonial Sri Lankan literary dialogue, there are parallels of this structure with regard to the canon/counter-canon hegemonic relationship. British colonialism made its colonial subjects into comparatists. Throughout the twentieth century, Sri Lankan authors and literary critics compared English, Sanskrit, and Sinhala literary traditions in their writing. The English and Sanskrit traditions, being metropolitan, were privileged over the local Sinhala literary tradition. Because English was the language of the colonizer's tradition, it was accepted as "modern" and given a higher value than the Sinhala tradition. The Sanskrit tradition became the counter tradition which local intellects with anti-colonial sentiments found commensurable with the English tradition. Under the hegemony of the English and Sanskrit traditions the diverse Sinhala literary traditions, especially the folk Sinhala tradition among others, were suppressed. Thus, authors, readers, and critics in the first half of the twentieth century were shaped by and also participated in colonialist and anti-colonialist discourses in the education systems, reinforcing the different values given to different literary traditions.

This thesis explores these issues, and particularly the question of the suppression of the local traditions, through the writings of Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), the most prominent Sri Lankan author and literary-cultural critic of the twentieth century, and a comparatist from "a peripheral" literary tradition. In his professional life as a reader/critic and an author, Wickramasinghe responded to the sociopolitical conditions that were not of his making by both challenging his contemporaries within Sri Lanka and creating a new literary critical discourse that emerged from Sri Lankan culture and tradition. His insights regarding the politics of the canon, the counter-canon, and the exclusion of regional literatures can serve as a valuable starting point for consideration of

the contemporary formation of the Comparative Literature discipline and of the idea of "world" literature.

Wickramasinghe also used the newspaper as a medium for such conversations about literature. He worked as a journalist throughout his life, serving as editor for four newspapers: *Dinamiṇa*, *Lakväsiyā*, *Lakmiṇa*, and *Silumiṇa* between 1921 and 1944. Being a journalist influenced Wickramasinghe's formation as a public intellectual, and his confidence in speaking to and for the general public.[2] His approach to fiction – with its focused connection to the ordinary reader - was shaped by the institutional politics of the newspaper industry. Likewise, he shaped the newspaper into a mass friendly institution.

Socio-cultural, Political, and Literary Discourses in Twentieth-Century Sri Lanka

Much like the twentieth-century colonial discourses that promoted representative politics in Sri Lanka based on race and caste, the dominant discourses pertaining to the country's educational system served the British Empire's efforts to manipulate and control its subjects. As famously put forth in Lord Macaulay's Educational Minutes regarding India,[3] the British deliberately planned an educational system in Sri Lanka that would create an urban middle class who would be, to borrow a term from Wickramasinghe, "black Englishmen."[4] English education was a means to receive

[2] Sumudu Senevirathna argues that journalism is one reason which made Wickramasinghe a "people friendly person" (*podu jana hitavādī*) (2013, 125).

[3] "Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835." *University of Columbia*. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html.

[4] From the newspaper article "Ingirisikārayangē Sthānaya Kalu Ingirisikārayanṭa Yāma Svarājyaya Novē." ("The Replacement of Englishmen with Black Englishmen is not Self-Governance") *Lakmiṇa*, January 4, 1930. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Sinhala are my own. I thank Crystal Banes and Gihan de Chikera for helping me translate from Sinhala to English. Please note that Wickramasinghe's Sinhala writings are listed in the bibliography with their titles in the original Sinhala. His English writings

government jobs and upper class states while vernacular education was denied those privileges and, as such, commonly regarded as "lower."

Kumaratunga Munidasa, a major twentieth-century literary-cultural critic, author, and journalist argued that the assisted schools (*upakrta pāṭhaśālā*) (vernacular schools) were the only places in which "national pride" (*jātikābhimānaya*) could be instilled in pupils. The students of government schools (English schools), he argued, are "lost for the country" (*raṭaṭa näti vūveki*) (2006, 173-4), as being financially supported by the government had a negative influence on the content and objective of their education (176-7). A dichotomy between the English educated and the vernacular educated intelligentsia in terms of language and literature did in fact emerge as the former were completely cut off from the national languages and literatures and the latter were cut off from or chose not to engage with the languages and literatures of the West (Obeyesekere 1968, 57-8). As English education was mostly predominant in missionary schools, the British denied these native students the right to learn their national literatures, which were largely religious literatures. For example, almost all the Sinhala literary texts produced up to the fifteenth century (until the colonial encounter) were Buddhist in content. Denied access to local literatures and languages, the students of English schools were assigned Latin and English writers such as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats (60). In contrast, the Sinhala schools and monastic educational institutions taught the Sanskrit language and literature alongside classical Sinhala literature influenced by Sanskrit aesthetics of the

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are listed with the appropriate English titles. Published translations from Sinhala to English of Wickramasinghe's Sinhala writings are listed in the bibliography under Wickramasinghe's name, rather than the translator's name, although, of course, the complete reference to the published translation is provided.

twelfth to fifteenth centuries. Sinhala folk literature was not deemed worthy of being taught in any school system.

Wickramasinghe, who belonged to the village middle class, was not a product of extensive formal education system. His education was limited to about six years. His formal education was comprised of two years at the village temple, two years at an English school, one year of Pali, Sanskrit, and Sinhala instruction under the Rev. Koggala Dheerananda, and two years at a Sinhala school *(Koggala Mahā Prāgnyayā* 1975, 21). Upon his father's untimely death, financial difficulties forced Wickramasinghe to abandon schooling altogether. As a result, he started reading independently, effectively educating himself. No longer bound by formal academic standards that compartmentalized knowledge and dictated his reading selections, Wickramasinghe could explore different areas of knowledge such as literature, anthropology, and science. This freedom would ultimately play a significant role in his later thinking as a comparatist. As a self-learned intellectual, he did not belong to any specific academic institution. He embraced the fact that he was not trained in any formal academic institution. In the preface to *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture*, he stated, "I must confess, that lacking in any kind of formal training at a great seat of organized learning, I acquired the bad habit of the omnivorous reader, of pouncing upon information from any reliable source …" ([1952] 1997, v). Here, he satirically criticizes the practice of canonization of academic institutions regarding what is knowledge and what is not.

From the beginning of his writing career in 1914, Wickramasinghe was a different kind of comparatist in contrast to his contemporaries such as Piyadasa Sirisena, Munidasa Kumaratunga, and E. R. Sarachchandra who were trained in more or less the same

educational and socio-political discourses. Societal appreciation for Western (mainly English) literature was propagated within the formal educational system, Western-owned publishing companies, and through the translation of English canonical texts. Sinhala, Pali, and Sanskrit texts were also circulated and institutionalized among the masses through monastic and vernacular education systems. As a result, when someone is writing or criticizing literature, conscious or unconscious comparison was inevitable.

The differences among the twentieth-century Sinhala literati rested not only in whether or not they were comparative in approach, but also in the methodology of comparison that they pursued. Unlike Wickramasinghe, most of these comparatists did not set out to challenge the binary structures that emerged from colonial politics. Indeed, even when they tried to dissolve such distinctions, their comparisons tended to reproduce the binaries. For example, in Sarachchandra's attempts to combine Sanskrit literary tradition and Western literary tradition to create a modern Sinhala literary theory, he merely used terminology from the Sanskrit Theory of Suggestion (*dhvanivāda*) to refer to the ideas of I. A. Richard's theory of Practical Criticism.[5] Thus, the manner in which the two theories were combined maintained the hierarchical division between East and West.[6] By contrast, while Wickramasinghe did not deny the existence of these binaries, he chose to work through them by adopting a standpoint that extended beyond the dichotomy. In what follows, I analyze how in both his fiction and non-fiction he

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[5] In the preface of the second edition of *Sāhitya Vidyāva*, Sarachchandra says that "I see no reason to disregard my conviction that the use of Western practical criticism and the vocabulary of Sanskrit literary criticism paves an excellent way to a new form of Sinhala poetry criticism" ([1965] 1968).
[6] Nevertheless, I should note that Sarachchandra "remoulded" different theatrical traditions such as Tamil, Sanskrit, Western, Chinese, Japanese and Sinhala folk drama in his groundbreaking theatre productions *Manamē* (1956) and *Sinhabhāhu* (1961).

attempted to erode the boundaries between a) West and East; b) university and other forms of education; and c) local and metropole.

West vs. East

By the beginning of the twentieth century within the Sinhala (and Tamil) communities in Sri Lanka two groups had emerged, one pro-Western and the other pro-Eastern. For the pro-Western group with respect to social norms and customs, the West was viewed as "modern" and "progressive" while the East was "traditional" and "conservative." The earliest formations of the Sinhala novel reproduced this East-West binary for native readers. The first text that can be considered a novel,[7] *Vāsanāvanta Paula hā kālakaṇṇi Paula,* was written by Isack de Silva and was initially published as a series in the journal *Ruvan Maladama* between 1866 and 1883. The Christian Literary Society subsequently published it as a book. It included descriptions of two families: a fortunate Christian family and a miserable Buddhist family. It was thus written to disseminate pro-Western ideologies such as the value of Christianity and Western civilization among natives and to denigrate Buddhism and local values. This text inaugurated a tradition of fiction that centered on the East-West dichotomy.

Pro-Eastern writers who were interested in reviving the pre-colonial history and tradition of the local also began writing novels at around the same time. Piyadasa Sirisena was the most popular author in this group. In his first novel *Jayatissa saha Rosalind* (1906), Jayatissa, the protagonist of the novel, visits Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the ancient capitals of Sri Lanka before the eleventh century, and sees the ruins of large

[7] But, no one calls this as the first novel. Sarachchandra calls this as a "prose romance" and acknowledges as the first phase of Sinhala novel ([1951] 1968, 39).

tanks, pagodas, and castles built by ancient kings. By sending Jayatissa, a twentieth-century colonial subject, to see the once magnificent and now lost past, Sirisena wishes to make a connection between the European encounter and the vanishing of the "great" past of Sinhala culture: "Seeing the glorious past of the Sinhalese from 1700 years ago, Jayatissa thought, 'Alas! What happened to us!'" ([1906] 2013, 166-7).

Like these other authors, Wickramasinghe used the novel genre as a tool of social reform, but he also tried to convince his readers that binary-based judgments and depictions were unhelpful. Responding to the anti-Western ideology prominent at the time, his readership was comprised largely of the village intelligentsia, the urban working class, and the general public, publishing only in Sinhala until 1949. In his novel *Leela* (1914), for example, he discouraged the uncritical embrace of both traditional and Western beliefs. Although most of the ideas in *Leela* were based on Western thinkers, he tried to promote an "unbiased" reading of national and international knowledges among the Sinhala community. In one scene, Albert advises his girlfriend on how to read histories: "[You] should not be content reading only the history of Sri Lankans. Learn the histories of other nations too. When reading our history, read it critically without being subjective, thinking "this is our ancestors' history" ([1914] 2014, 44).[8]

One of Wickramasinghe's earliest newspaper articles titled "Vartamāna Sinhala Janayā saha Jāti Mamatvaya" ("The Present Day Sinhalese and Patriotism"), published in the newspaper *Rivikiraṇa* in 1912, argues that the complaint of some Sinhalese that

[8] In the preface to *Leela* Wickramasinge mentions that after reading the manuscript, a "patriotic" friend of his commented that he, Wickramasinghe, was the biggest fool in the country ([1914] 2014, 7). Due to his attempt to displace the popular West-East binary, the sale of *Leela* was poor. In *Upan dā Siṭa* Wickramasinghe mentions that after publishing *Miringuva* in 1925, he thought of quitting writing novels because he could not make a decent income by writing quality novels ([1961] 2015, 262-3).

Sinhala people who learn and embrace European knowledge are not patriotic is inaccurate. He suggests that one should not embrace any idea or belief simply for the reason that it is old and derived from one's own tradition. For progress to take place, he argues, one needs to know and understand whatever comes new to a culture from the outside. In rejecting the then interpretation of the term "patriotism," Wickramasinghe refuses its attachment to the West-East binary. In the preface to *Śāstrīya Lēkhana (Scholarly Essays)* (1919), his first book of essays, he further problematizes the notion of patriotism:

> Most of the ideas included here are against some ideas which are accepted as theories by the majority. But, I believe that expressing such ideas won't do harm but good. In our old civilization, there are good things that we should protect in our lives as well as bad things which dirty even the good things in it. Therefore, the duty of the patriotic is not to protect all of it but to remove the bad things. (1919, preface)

In arguing for an approach that has both elements of preservation and elimination of any tradition, Wickramasinghe positioned himself outside of the West and East dichotomy. In doing so, he insisted that the approach was more important than the tradition itself.

The Language of Modern Writing

In Sri Lanka, the East-West binary was also evident in the language of modern literary and nonliterary writing. The decision of what kind of Sinhala language should be used in contemporary writings was a response to pro-Western ideologies. In both fiction and in newspapers, the majority of Sinhala writers followed a highly Sanskritized form of Sinhala which they thought to be more comparable to the status of English and far different from colloquial Sinhala at the time. Writers like W.A. Silva followed the vocabulary and also sometimes the style of classical Sinhala texts such as *Butsaraṇa*

written in the twelfth century AD. Another common practice, led by the writer, poet, and journalist, Kumaratunaga Munidasa, focused on the old Sinhala literary tradition in the belief that the language of modern Sinhala literature should be pure Sinhala, an idea which led him to remove all the loan words of Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil, and European languages from the Sinhala language. The language this group endeavored to revive was based on the twelfth century classical Sinhala text *Amāvatura*. Both these Sanskritized and pure Sinhala trends were launched by the village intelligentsia who received their education at monastic institutions and vernacular schools. They argued for a national literature that reflected the identity and greatness of Sinhalese. Paradoxically, these writers did not consider the colloquial Sinhala idiom used by the villagers to be suitable for modern literature or newspapers. This point of view, though led by anti-colonialist sentiments, was nevertheless elitist.

In contrast, Wickramasinghe argued that writers should reform colloquial Sinhala with the help of written Sinhala in their creative writing ([1957] 2015, 98). Further, he suggested that the language of newspapers should also be based on colloquial Sinhala. In an essay entitled "Sinhala Bhasha Rītivādaya hā Martin Wickrmasinghe," P. B. Meegaskumbura argues that the move of Wickramasinhe toward a language style built upon colloquial Sinhala was rooted in the idea that "literature is not an inheritance of a few educated elites but of everybody who reads books" (1975, 128). Wickramasinghe's reasons for the appropriateness of the colloquial Sinhala for modern Sinhala fiction are expressed in *Sampradāya hā Vicāraya*:

> In the three hundred years of colonization, only villagers, monks, city based laborers, and some of urban lower middle class used our language in mundane life. It is mundane colloquialisms that provide the language with the necessary rhetoric which evokes various emotions. ([1971] 1992, 586)

Although Wickramasinghe used both Sanskritized and colloquial Sinhala in his early fictions, by the time he wrote *Gamperaliya* (1944) he had gradually moved to a language based on the village idiom. Sumudu Senevirathna argues that his journalism and practice of writing in different fields within the period from *Miringuava* (1925) to *Gamperaliya* (1944) led Wickramasinghe to create a language that was closer to that used by the general public (2013, 130). For example, in his novel *Viragaya* (1956) when the newly married Sarojini (the protagonist's love interest who is now married to another man) is asked to come and sit in the porch of her home to see the fireworks display prepared by the workers of her husband, Siridasa's estate to celebrate their wedding, she replies:

> " I will watch from the living room. I can't sit in the porch like an *āturayā*"
> "I [Siridasa] will also join you"
> "Then it will be a *kōlama*" laughed Sarojini. "Then there will be two *āturayā*," she said looking at me [Aravinda]. ([1956] 2015, 112)

All the words Wickramasinghe uses here are colloquial Sinhala terms mainly used by villagers. Words like *āturayā* and *kōlama* have acquired social meanings and feelings that are attached to folk rituals. An *āturaya* is a patient who participates in an exorcism (*tovil*), a ritual held in villages for certain illnesses. The patient is dressed in white for the occasion and becomes the center of attraction at the ceremony. A *kōlama* is a type of religious folk drama which is satirical. This term has acquired a negative connotation in the usage among the villagers; if something is done which can be laughed at and lampooned, it is called *kōlama*. When Sarojini likens herself to an *āturaya* it gives a sarcastic sense to the marriage and the celebration of the marriage. Also present at this occasion is her former lover Aravinda, the narrator of the story whose views on love and attachment are at odds with those of conventional society. These terms are thus also

intended to reflect Sarojini's continued preference for Aravinda's attitudes toward life. This is but one example of how Wickramasinghe proved the suitability of the colloquial Sinhala through his fiction.

Literary Criticism

The East-West binary that appeared in the use of language in modern literary and nonliterary writing was also prevalent in the distinct embrace of the appropriate tools for literary criticism. The East-oriented group advocated the revival of Sanskrit aesthetics,[9] while the other group advocated Western aesthetics as the model to follow. The first group, predominantly made up of a monastically educated village intelligentsia, wanted to bring back the classical Sinhala literature produced between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries which was heavily influenced by Sanskrit aesthetics. They admired Sanskrit literary theories such as *alamkāravāda*[10] and used them to critique both classical and modern Sinhala literature. Regarding the discourse of Sinhala literature, the East-oriented group had more power than the Western-oriented group in the first half of the twentieth century due to the prominance of anticolonial sentiments within the society. Most of Wickramasinghe's major books including *Vicāra Lipi, Guttila Gītaya, Apē Gama, Sinhala Sahityaye Nägīma*, and *Tēri Gī* were written during this time. He tried to destabilize their position by offering a different approach to reading classical literature (as well as literature in general). He advocated resorting to multiple literary theories, multiple critical practices, and multiple aesthetic values to appreciate classical Sinhala

[9] The ideas on literary composition which come in classical theories such as *alamkāravāda* (theory of ornaments), *rasavāda* (theory of flavor), *dhvanivāda* (theory of suggestion) etc.
[10] *Alamkāra* School maintains that *alamkāra*, which means the poetic devices they categorized along the development of *alamkāra* tradition such as metaphor, simile, and pun are the soul of poetry.

literature like *The Book of the Jātaka Stories*, *Saddharma Ratnāvaliya*, and *Guttila Kāvyaya* all of which were criticized as weak accoriding to *alamkāra* theory.

The Western-oriented trend in the discourse of modern Sinhala literature received its biggest boost at the University of Ceylon (later University of Peradeniya) established in 1942. The major proponent of this trend was E. R. Sarachchandra who became a professor of Sinhala at the University of Peradeniya and worked at the university for nearly fifty years. Sarachchandra was knowledgeable in both Sanskrit and Pali languages and literatures as well as in Sinhala and Western literatures. In creating a literary theory for modern Sinhala literature, he gave emphasis to Western rather than Eastern literary theories. He claimed that modern fiction was a borrowed element from the West ([1951] 1968, 93), hence Western modes of criticism were needed to critically analyze the Sinhala novel. In *Sinhalese Novel* (1943), published in English, Sarachchandra evaluated Sinhala fiction using Western standards, calling the earliest novels, which he did not see as having the qualities of a novel, "prose romance." He introduced his students in the Sinhala Department of Peradeniya University to the practical criticism of I. A. Richards to use in analyzing Sinhala poetry and fiction.[11] Wickramasinghe was highly critical of Sarachchandra's claim that the novel was a borrowed genre from the West. He demonstrated that the modern Sinhala novel was in fact an evolution of old Sinhala literature.[12] Sinhala critics, he suggested, needed to develop a new mode of criticism to evaluate Sinhala fiction.

[11] Sarachchandra was a strong proponent of the head of the English Department at Peradeniya University, Professor Ludowyk, who was a former student of the influential English critic, F. R. Leavis. Leavis visited the English Department as an external examiner during that time (Obeyesekere 1968, 67).
[12] I discuss this claim at length in chapter three.

Wickramasinghe saw both Western and Sanskrit aesthetics as metropolitan literary cultures that negatively impacted the local literary tradition in different periods. During the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, for example, authors imitated Sanskrit aesthetics which they treated as "the highest" (*paramēśvara*) tradition in the same way that contemporary authors "enamored" (*man mat*) of Western civilization imitated Western aesthetics. Wickramasinghe argued that the obsession with these two aesthetic traditions resulted in the neglect of the local literary tradition and the life of local people which consequently harmed "national pride" (1934, "Sāhitya Vicāraya: Sinhala Bhāśāvagē Yathābhivrddhiya Pilibanda Aḍupāḍuvak," *Silumiṇa*, Sept. 30). Instead of imitating metropolitan traditions, he advocated reading the quality literature of any literary culture regardless of whether it was considered local or metropolitan. He recommended what he referred to as "remoulding" the literary concepts of other cultures, forging it with the creative writing and literary criticism of the local tradition:

> English critical concepts also should be revised according to the Sinhala tradition giving them the appearance of new concepts. Only someone knowledgeable in ancient and contemporary literature and the culture of the Sinhalese can accomplish this. His mind, constituted by that knowledge, is like a blacksmith's furnace. When an English critical concept enters his mind's furnace, it fires ablaze. It is only then that it is forged into a new concept of Sinhala literary tradition. ([1971] 1992, 614)

Once elements taken from other literatures are "melted" with local literary traditions, Wickramasinghe argued, the particularities of these other literatures take on a more local shape. When those elements are used in local literature there is no place for "imitation" or hierachical values.

University vs. Other Centers of Learning

Since the inception of the University of Ceylon in Sri Lanka knowledge production related to literature and other areas became the privilege of academia. The university system was started in 1921 with the establishment of University College in Colombo. In 1942, this college, which had been operated under the administration of the British government and affiliated to London University, was renamed the University of Ceylon (and, later, the University of Peradeniya). Until that time, South and East Asian languages were treated as secondary and assigned a lower status (Sarachchandra [1985] 2003, 34). Until 1959, the University of Peradeniya was the only university in Sri Lanka. In 1959, Vidyōdaya and Vidyālankāra monastic education institutions were re-established as universities following the European model. From the 1940s onward, Sinhala language and literature was established as a separate department. Among the faculty in Sinhala, Sarachchandra became the center of attraction and used his power and influence to shape the Sinhala literary tradition on a large scale. In fact, most of the later university lecturers were his students. At the beginning of his career Sarachchandra admired Wickramasinghe and followed him to a certain extent. Although later they had major disagreements about literature and criticism, they were counterparts in the creation of a modern Sinhala literary discourse.

In many ways, his position in academia granted Sarachchandra the authority to be the voice of modern Sinhala literature. The university had enormous discursive power within Sri Lankan society which enabled it to create both the Sinhala literary canon and approach to criticism. Academic mechanisms such as professorships and the abiding influence of the teacher-student relationship encourage the maintenance, dissemination,

and reproduction of certain ideologies. The various qualifications bestowed (B.A., M.A., Ph.D.) grant legitimacy to certain holders of ideas and create different levels of authority with respect to the "truth." In Sri Lanka, the responsibility for tasks such as the preparation of dictionaries, glossaries, and encyclopedias on Sinhala were accorded the university without question.[13]

In 1965, writing in the newspaper *Ceylon Daily News* about the teachings of the Sinhala Department of Peradeniya and its influence on Sinhala literature, Wickramasinghe critiqued the syllabi and critical methods taught at the University of Peradeniya. He argued that modern literature should be measured in terms of its acquaintance with the "language, life, and culture of the Sinhalese" something not encouraged in the Sinhala department (1965, "New Writing and the Sinhalese Section of the University," Dec. 7). Sarachchandra replied that if the Sinhala Department followed the method of critiquing literature "with an understanding of the culture of the people," W. A. Silva, and not Wickramasinghe, would have been "the greatest writer of his age." He asks "has he [Wickramasinghe] forgotten that the place he occupies at present in Sinhala literature is largely, if not *solely* due to the teaching done by the Sinhalese department and the critical methods introduced by them for the appraisal of creative writing?" (1965, "The Future of Sinhala Writing: 'Sinhalese Section' of the University?" Dec. 14. Emphasis is in the original).

In this statement, Sarachchandra actually admits to the hegemony of academia in creating the standards of literature and critical methods, as well as the manner by which

[13] The institutional support for the university in dictionary preparation is criticized by W. Sorata in the introduction of (Sinhala-Sinhala etymological) *Sri Sumangala Dictionary* edited by him in 1952 (xvi). He was a teacher of Vidyōdaya Monastic institution at the time.

authors and nonacademic writers are structurally positioned through the authority of the academy. His statement also reveals his belief that there is a hierarchical difference between the academic reader and the ordinary reader. He has elsewhere argued that a literary critic is an advanced person who can "uplift" the literary appreciation of the ordinary reader: "In every civilization, art and literature were developed according to the taste of a knowledgeable minority. Democracy is irrelevant in literature. The value of a literary creation does not depend on the opinion of the mass majority" ([1958] 1987, 12).[14]

Unlike Sarachchandra, Wickramasinghe wanted the general public to participate in the national critical discourse on language and literature. Even in his last novel, *Bava Taraṇaya*, he requested the ordinary reader to comment on his novel so that he might revise the novel in a subsequent edition (1973, preface). Wickramasinghe's preference was for Sri Lanka to create a multiplicity of diverse sites for education. While he did not reject the existence of the university system, he envisioned the emergence of several universities which would he believed would allow a better dialogue, even controversy, between different ideas, resulting in new forms of knowledge ([1964] 1992, 293). Emphasizing a comparative approach to knowledge production regarding literature and criticism, Wickramasinghe wrote:

> Among the English or Sinhala Department university graduates, people who have carefully read world literature and understood the depth and complexities of life through artistic insights are rare. Shouldn't the literary criticism of such critics be considered as an uncritical repetition of things they learned at the university? ([1964] 1992, 291).

[14] Siri Gunasinghe also states more or less the same idea in *Cirantana Sampradāya saha Pragatiya* (1986, 88-9).

He also argued that language and literature do not necessarily belong to academic institutions, but to everybody. The fact that Wickramasinghe used newspaper as one major medium for discussing literature and criticism reflects his view that access to the study of literature and criticism is the right of the general public.

Local vs. Metropolitan

Wickramasinghe believed that the quality of a literary text should be evaluated in accordance with the social, economic, political, and geographical contexts in which it was written, including attention to the author's origins as well. This view was a fundamental motivation behind his challenge to the existing hierarchy between local and metropolitan literary cultures. A central tenet of Wickramasinghe's comparative approach was to acknowledge the differences between these two cultures, but not to judge all authors and texts on one set of criteria alone, that of the metropole. This principle is elaborated below by way of illustration. I focus on Wickramasinghe's comparisons of the sixth century metropolitan Sanskrit poet Kalidasa and the fourteenth century Sinhala poet Vetteve and on his stated admiration of Vetteve by way of Kuntaka, the tenth century Sanskrit *Alamkāra* theorist in terms of their iconoclastic approach to conventions of their literary traditions. In comparing Vetteve and Kalidasa, while Wickramasinghe acknowledged the differences in their backgrounds, he deemed their literary work to be of equal validity and quality. With regard to Vetteve and Kuntaka, Wickramasinghe viewed their significance in the fact that both were independently minded *individuals* working within two different traditions. Furthermore, all three figures contributed to Wickramasinghe's view that the importance of a received literary element does not lie in

the *place* it is drawn from but rather in the *manner* in which it is drawn upon. They influenced another idea that is repeated in his work and will be discussed in later chapters, that of "remoulding," which necessitates working out the difference between "being the model" and "following the model" through a process of reappropriation.

Vetteve and Kalidasa: A Contextual Comparison

Rev. Vetteve is the author of *Guttila Kāvyaya* written in the fourteenth century. *Guttila Kāvyaya* was a rewriting of "Guttlila Jātakaya," a previous birth story of Buddha in which the theme of the teacher-student relationship is developed for explicitly religious purposes. In *Guttila Kāvyaya*, Vetteve made subtle changes to the plot representing both the characters of teacher and student with full complexity. Breaking with contemporary poetic conventions, he amalgamated Sanskrit and classical Sinhala literary traditions with the Sinhala folk tradition in *Guttila Kāvyaya*. In Wickramasinghe's *Guttila Gītaya*, he demonstrates his admiration for Vetteve for not imitating the Sanskrit *alamkāra* tradition uncritically and for incorporating the folk tradition. Kalidasa, who lived in the fourth to fifth century CE, is considered the greatest poet and dramatist in Sanskrit literature. *Kumāra Sambhava*, *Raghuvamsa*, and *Mēgha Dūta* are his most well-known poems. The fact that Wickramasinghe chose to compare Kalidasa with Vetteve is significant given that, at the time, Vetteve was not regarded as a good poet by contemporary critics because he did not submit to the Sanskrit influenced classical tradition. By focusing on Wickramasinghe's comparison of the local poet Vetteve and the metropolitan poet Kalidasa, I wish to emphasize the politics underlying his comparative approach:

> Kalidasa, whose intellect was nourished by the great Sanskrit literatures, saw the beauty and horror of the natural world through his mind and eyes. Kalidasa learnt from the glory, prestige, and luxury of the kings; the life and conspiracy of the harem; corruption; the state of the numerous poor who had fallen into the cesspit of life; and the hermits who had retired into the forests having renounced fame and fortune to pursue transcendental truth. Therefore, is it surprising that he cannot be equalized to the author of *Guttila Kāvyaya,* who lived in palm-sized Sri Lanka. Although he cannot be equalized to Kalidasa in terms of erudition and experience, in terms of poetic genius, he undoubtedly is in the same league as Kalidasa. Their innate creative strengths allowed them to follow the same style as poets. ([1943] 2012, 19)

Wickramasinghe makes clear in this passage that the experience of living in metropolitan India is rather different from the experience of living in Sri Lanka. The circumstances of the local poet are such that he has to struggle with the influence of the metropole over his tradition and the existing local tradition when he makes choices in the process of writing.

Vetteve and Kuntaka: Individuals in Long Traditions

Wickramasinghe viewed Vetteve as an iconoclastic figure in Sinhala literary tradition. His views of Vetteve are consistent with his view of himself as an author from a local literary tradition. Like Vetteve, Wickramasinghe wanted to combine different literary cultures while being attached to the local. Wickramasinghe called Vetteve*'s Guttila Kāvyaya* the poem that best elevated the folk tradition ([1943] 2012, 29). Vetteve's decision to stop imitating Sanskrit rules in writing *Guttila Kāvyaya* was considered counter-cultural at the time because almost all the classical poems written up to that point had followed Sanskrit aesthetics as a norm. Thus, the poem stood as a critique of the social habit of imitating metropolitan impositions. Kuntaka, an *alamkāra* theorist himself, was an iconoclastic figure who dared to challenge the traditional

classifications and conventions of the *alamkāra* tradition.[15] Wickramasinghe viewed himself as a freethinker similar to Kuntaka. In this sense, Kuntaka was an important part of his self-understanding. From the beginning of his writing career, Wickramasinghe was aware that he was breaking through the received structures of knowledge of his time (1929, "Kāvya Rasāsvādanaya," *Svadēśa Mitrayā*, May 26). His writings about Kuntaka suggest that he understood Kuntaka as a person who challenged and changed tradition while working from within it. Wickramasinghe did not merely examine the ideas of Kuntaka, he observed the larger patterns of Sanskrit literary history and of the role that Kuntaka played therein. Kuntaka was an individual theorist who argued against the established rules of Sanskrit *alamkāra* theory.

In Wickramasinghe's *Guttila Gītaya* (1943), he celebrated the spirit of Vetteve and Kuntaka. He admired the radical roles they played in the long histories of Sanskrit *alamkāra* tradition and Sinhala literary tradition, respectively. In his literary approach, Wickramasinghe can thus be viewed as a combination of Vetteve and Kuntaka. Like Vetteve, he learned from and "remoulded" the different literary cultures of Sanskrit, Pali, English, Russian, Sinhala classical, and Sinhala folk traditions. In his role as a critic, he challenged long held conventional attitudes just as Kuntaka had as a theorist.

Wickramasinghe focused on the innovative power of individual authors and critics within the context of the literary tradition from which they originated. He encouraged the comparatist to interpret the qualities of an author or critical theorist beyond well-established evaluative criteria, and to consider their ability or potential to

[15]Kuntaka is recognized as an iconoclast by contemporary scholars such as Sheldon Pollock and David Shulman. Pollock calls Kuntaka as "a thinker of very original bent" (2009, 215) and Shulman calls him an "unconventional master" (2012, 81) and admires his "splendid isolation within the *alamkāra* tradition" (89).

radically challenge particular conventions of existing traditions. His approach paved the way for contemporary voices calling for a wider range of authors and critics to play a part in the contemporary definitions of "world" literatures and its evolving canon. In Wickramasinghe, we find a voice from a "peripheral," "less studied" literary culture; a voice of a person whose sole purpose was, in its widest meaning, to empower a regional literature which existed under metropolitan literary practices; most significantly, a voice which was not trained in any form of formal education system.

Simon Gikandi demonstrates the tension between the historical formation of Comparative Literature as a Eurocentric discipline and the constant efforts of scholars to challenge the Eurocentrism of the field (Gikandi 2014, 257-9). Gikandi encourages us to avoid reading the literature of the global south "through the authorized theories of comparative literature or any disciplinary formation" because that leads to a confirmation of the existing order of knowledge.[16] A comparison achieved through an "unauthorized" approach can more effectively challenge the established structural relationships between compartmentalized fields of studies. Gikandi puts into words what Wickramasinghe did as a comparatist more than fifty years ago. Wickramasinghe did not follow the conventional history of Sinhala literature. Rather he questioned the compartmentalized disciplinary practices of universities and other academic institutions. In making his claims on literature and culture, he drew ideas from every source he thought reliable, regardless of the discursive value or academic conventions with which they were associated. The most important implication of Wickramasinghe's comparative approach

[16] Gikandi stated these ideas in the roundtable discussion "Translating Literary Political Worlds: Longue Durée Perspectives and African/Asian Spheres" organized by the World Studies Interdisciplinary Project at University of Massachusetts Amherst, Oct. 22, 2015.

for modern comparative studies is the ethical practice of avoiding the values certain literary cultures have accumulated through the discourses of colonial power relations, historiography, and academic canonization. This thesis, therefore, provides an example of the possibility of the existence of alternative thinkers in generally unstudied literary cultures, including Sinhalese, often hidden under the shadows of literary cultures such as Western, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, etc. It emphasizes the importance of learning and assimilating from different literary cultures regardless of their discursively produced values.

CHAPTER 3

THE VILLAGE AND THE VILLAGER: UPROOTING HEGEMONIC LITERARY DISCOURSES

In this chapter, I study the manner in which Wickramasinghe handled the concept of the village in relation to the concept of the city in his effort to understand and recreate national culture, Sinhala literature, and literary criticism. Wickramasinghe's aim was to destabilize the village as a static and ahistorical space where rigid categories of nation and tradition resided and turned it into an ideological space where constant changes, negotiations, and contestations can take place. Through his analysis of the village in relation to the city—explored mainly in his literary writings—Wickramasinghe offered a comparative literary model that challenged the hierarchical relationships found in the discourse of world literatures at the time.

The way in which Wickramasinghe handled the concept of the village was significantly different from his contemporaries such as Piyadasa Sirisena and Anagarika Dharmapala who were social and political critics and nationalists and the former a novelist as well. They, along with many nationalist thinkers at the time, depicted an image of a timeless village prior to European colonialism where "pure Sinhalaness" and uncontaminated tradition resided, and where economic self-sufficiency and social equality were maintained (Amarasekara 1988, 11-2). This popular nationalist view of the precolonial Sinhala village in the first half of the twentieth century was the most celebrated as attempts were made to revive these unbroken tradition and values as part of the national culture. Ironically, however, although most of these authors and social critics

idealized the village in their talks and fiction, the language they used was a highly Sanskritized form of Sinhala, which was distant from the colloquial Sinhala used by the villagers. When it came to literature and literary criticism, they turned to classical Sinhala literature, which was significantly shaped by Sanskrit literary traditions instead of village folklore and art. Hence, there was a contradiction between the idealization of the village and the way this idealized representation was expressed in the creation of national identity.

In contrast to his contemporaries, Wickramasinghe set out to re-conceptualize the village from an idealized place to an ideological space. Although he shared the same mission of searching for national identity within village life, he did not see the village as a monolithic idealized place but as a heterogeneous one comprised of complex social relationships, including negative social elements like exploitation and inequality. Most importantly, he believed that village life was in a constant state of change mirroring in many ways the transforming social-political circumstances in the country as a whole, transformations that included but were not limited to colonialism. For Wickramasinghe, there was no monolithic ahistorical "village" to be retrieved. His concept of identity, tradition, nation, literature, and literary criticism were far more flexible and open to change. Throughout his writings, he did not prescribe a shape which the national culture should take, but suggested a methodology that could be adopted to help to shape the national culture.

Despite these views, in most of the anthropological and some literary scholarship on Wickramasinghe, he is mistakenly, characterized as a promoter of a utopian village.[17]

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[17] For example, the scholarship of Anupama Mohan (2012) and Jonathan Spenser (1990).

He has been represented by Sinhala nationalists of a later period such as Gunadasa Amarasekara as one of the forefathers who viewed the Sinhala Buddhist village as the place where "Sinhalaness" and the traditions of Sinhala culture survived (1988, 13-4). I would argue, however, that a close reading of Wickramasinghe's writings in literature and literary criticism provides strong evidence that, in placing village life in the center of his literature and literary criticism and discussing its relationship with the city, Wickramasinghe introduced an alternative method of making sense of the local in relation to the metropolitan.

In Wickramasinghe's literary writings, the city was affiliated on the one hand with the Sanskrit literary tradition and on the other hand with the uncritical Westernization of the urban middle class of Sri Lanka. When he described the village in his literature and literary criticism during the 1940s, that depiction was mostly in conversation with the Sanskrit literary tradition that contemporary critics borrowed rather *uncritically* in order to criticize Sinhala literature. Armed with their concept of "*grāmyatā*" (vulgarity), advocates of the Sanskrit literary tradition generally considered any literary element of the village to be vulgar. Their construction of literature rendered it an elite discourse and the act of interpreting literature an act of the educated class which required special training to accomplish. The *alamkāra* tradition, a production of Indian court culture, promoted the concept of "*atiśayōkti"* (exaggeration)[18] over the preference given to the realistic representation by the village folk tradition.

[18] When an experience is recreated into a literary text in an indirect manner transgressing the verisimilitude it is called "*atiśayōkti"* in the *alamkāra* tradition. Dandin, a seventh-century *alamkāra* theorist, described this quality as the most important concept of the *alamkāra* tradition.

Wickramasinghe's approach challenged any type of hierarchy between the two; he proposed to view different concepts as mutually constructive. Based on the idea that every literature in the world has "a fundamental unity in spite of their cultural differences" (Wickramasinghe, "A Standard for Assesment of Sinhala Literature," May 12, 1952), he demonstrated that the local and metropolitan sometimes shared the same phenomena but applied them in unique ways. Thus, he saw no impediment to cross-fertilization between literary and cultural elements associated with village life and similar elements generated from the city. In this sense, Wickramasinghe's early attention to this dichotomy in the Sri Lankan context has much in common with current attempts to strengthen the dialogue between historically hierarchical conceptual relationships such as local/metropolitan, East/West, center/periphery, and oral/written that persist in the discourse of comparative literary studies.

Village in the Eyes of Wickramasinghe

The early writings of Wickramasinghe demonstrated a tension between village values and the villagers who suffered because of those values. "Gähäniyak" ("A Woman"), a short story in the first short story collection he published in 1924 under the same name, is a good example for this. In this story, Wickramasinghe compared two village women who reacted to the village norms of marriage, sexuality, and gender in opposite ways in order to highlight how such norms caused people (in this case, women) to suffer. In "Gähäniyak," one woman's family's financial problems prevented her from being matched with her ideal marriage partner and she was forced to marry a man who already had a child. After he cheated on her, she went to work as a servant for a rich

family. There, she was sexually harassed by the men of the house. She came back to the village and, ignoring the village values of marriage, began to live with a man who was already married but separated from his wife. She used birth control techniques, which was considered a modern immoral act for a village woman at that time. The other woman in the story was abandoned by her husband, leaving her with four children and suffering financial hardship. Yet she did not go to the court, even to ask for an allowance from the husband, because she submitted to the village norms of gender and marriage, namely, that it was her fate to suffer. Wickramasinghe wrote the powerful words, "even if I starve to death I won't go to the courts Lisi Nona" ([1924] 2013, 100) thereby indicating the cultural power of social norms. Wickramasinghe pointed out these kinds of failings of village life for some of its inhabitants through his literature from the beginning of his career as a writer. They were not depicted as negative impacts of colonialism, but were related to traditional village culture itself.

In contrast, other early writers such as Piyadasa Sirisena expressed the idea that "pure Sinhala Buddhist culture" was disintegrating due to the colonial encounter. For example, in the novel *Jayatissa saha Rosalind* (1906) Sirisena created a village (to which he used both terms "village" and "city" interchangeably when describing it) that was hidden in the Sri Pāda forest for more than 300 years that had had no contact with European colonizers or any other persons in the country. By the time Rosalind, the main female character of the novel, finds this village in the 1900s, only around fifteen "pure Sinhala Buddhist" people who descended from the King Wimaladharmasuriya II remained. The people in that village taught Rosalind the "real Sinhala customs":

> The present Sinhalese know nothing about the ancient Sinhalese. What was recognized as Sinhala customs during the time of Tamil kings or the Dutch or the

> Portuguese were not authentic Sinhala customs. What can be considered (as authentic) are the customs that existed among the Sinhalese from the eras spanning King Vijaya to King Veera Parakrama Narendrasingha. (Sirisena [1906] 2013, 164)

Sirisena created this timeless village to teach contemporary readers what the "real" Sinhalese values, customs and culture looked like. Wickramasinghe, in contrast, never alluded to such a place in his early or later writings.

By the 1940s, Wickramasinghe's vision of the village had become more sophisticated, though he continued to understand the village as imperfect and heterogeneous. In 1940, he wrote *Apē Gama*, a fictional autobiography which included his childhood experiences. It was structured as a text written by a middle-aged educated man who moved to the city where, in his adulthood, he looks back on his childhood in the village with a nostalgic memory. The book portrays a series of still pictures of life in Koggala, his birth village, in the way it appeared at the turn of the nineteenth century. In *Apē Gama*, Wickramasinghe foregrounds several of the village inhabitants – hunters, fishermen, a blacksmith, a woodcarver, and village doctor, an exorcist (*gurunnānse*), and a teacher – and invites the reader to see both their individual differences and their common characteristics. These characters are described through both individual and collective events in which they were involved. The reader thus gets a vivid picture of the individualities of the villagers and the way they interacted with one another. While appreciating his life as a child in the village as "the days [he] spent whistling like a bird in careless joy" ([1940] 2015, 9), Wickramasinghe also criticizes different aspects of the

village such as the book-oriented education system and the careless punishments given to the children by elders (12,15).[19]

At the very beginning of *Apē Gama,* Wickramasinghe indicates that the past is physically irretrievable, a notion he explored in most of his writings.

> The random remembrance evokes a poignant pleasure or regret; pleasure because childhood was a headlong torrent of delight; regret that it can never be regained. Sometimes, I too recall my childhood. My body can never regain the resilience of a child's, but my mind re-experiences unblunted awareness by trying to remember all I did when I was a boy. (Wickramasinghe 1968, 1)[20]

In "Works and Persons in Sinhala Literary Culture," Charles Hallisey argues that Wickramasinghe "often portrayed the literary as the only means of recovering a certain Sinhalaness, though the pleasures of experiencing it through literature are inevitably tinged with sadness" (2003, 717-718). It is clear that this "certain Sinhalaness," which was only reachable through literature, was not a pure or perfect Sinhalaness for Wickramasinghe. The village described in *Apē Gama* indicates that, although Wickramasinghe experienced a "poignant pleasure" from remembering the past and village life, he respected the idea that the village was not a perfect place to retrieve "as it was." Thus, writing *Apē Gama* was an exercise for Wickramasinghe to understand the village and its relationship to Sinhala identity.

In Wickramasinghe's novel *Gamperaliya* (1944) published four years after *Apē Gama*, he portrays a changing village life based on the sociopolitical influences that were taking place some five to ten years after the period of his own childhood. *Gamperaliya* is based around a feudal family trying to survive the social, economic, and cultural changes

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[19] The criticism of Wickramasinghe about the careless punishments of elders which came in the last three sentences of *Apē Gama* were not in the English translation done by Lakshmie de Silva.
[20] Wickramasinghe 1968 refers to Lakshmi de Silva's translation of *Apē Gama*. The original Sinhala can be found in Wickramasinghe [1940] 2015, 1.

occurring in the village as a result of colonial influence. Wickramasinghe's description of the manor house (*maha gedara*) indicates the phase of colonialism in which Sri Lanka passed from Dutch to British rule. The home, built in the style of Dutch architecture, was crumbling by 1900s when the British took over ([1944] 1967, 11), and, as the narrator states, "was not suitable for the present village" (12). I read the manor house of *Gamperaliya* not as a nostalgic portrayal of unchanging Sinhala Buddhist village values as some scholars argue (Mohan 2012, 139,141), but as another moment of change in an already changed village. There are many other examples of the author's emphasis on this in *Gamperaliya*. On one occasion Matara Hamine, the mother of the family, refuses to marry off her daughter Nanda to Piyal, who they considered lower than themselves because his father was a vegetable street vendor. Wickramasinghe criticizes this act, which was based on the caste norms of the village, through the voice of the narrator (following the Darwinian theory of evolution) who states right after the described scene that "the animals who tried to preserve the old organs/units in their old forms regardless of the changing environment eventually disappeared" ([1944] 1967, 38).

The same approach Wickramasinghe takes with respect to the village—i.e., that it is an evolving cultural space subject to critical change over time—can be found in his ideas about the synthesizing of Sinhala literature and criticism with Eastern and Western literary concepts. Throughout the 1940s, Wickramasinghe strongly advocated against the revivalism of Sanskrit literary theory as well as the blind imitation of Western literary theories in the discourse of Sinhala literature and criticism. He proposed an alternative literary theory that would challenge the hierarchical values given to the Sanskrit and Western literary discourses in relation to the vernacular literary discourse.

Wickramasinghe developed certain theoretical concepts not only in association with the village and the shared values of its inhabitants but also with the hegemonic applications of Eastern and Western literatures in mind. Drawing on four texts *Apē Gama*, *Guttila Gītaya*, *Gamperaliya*, and *Yugāntaya*, in the following section I discuss the manner in which Wickramasinghe theorized the concepts of the reader and *grāmyatā*.

The Concept of the Reader

Wickramasinghe presented three versions of the reader that he developed in the 1940s. In *Apē Gama* (and also in *Vicāra Lipi* [*Critical Essays*] written in 1941), he created the image of the reader as an unrefined villager. In *Guttila Gītaya*, he developed this first image of the villager into a more refined reader which he associated with Buddhist piety (*upāsaka*). In this charaterization Wickramasinghe added the quality of self-restraint backed by religion, where the reader's sensibilities are guided principally by Buddhist culture. Through the character of Tissa in *Gamperaliya* and *Yugānataya*, he created a third version of the reader as an educated person who had contact with both the village and the city. He did not privilege any of the three versions.

Apē Gama: The Untrained Villager as Reader

For Wickramasinghe, the villager was a reader by nature, an idea he developed more fully in *Apē Gama.* Throughout this text, Wickramasinghe deals with the question of how one can learn to appreciate literature and what qualities enable a person to enjoy literature and art. In grappling with these questions, he was responding to efforts on the part of anticolonial Sinhala educated elites to revive Sanskrit literary discourse as one

means to revive national culture. As a result, Wickramasinghe theorized the concept of the reader in conversation with the Sanskrit *alamkāra* tradition.

According to the *alamkāra* tradition, the reader is perceived as a highly sophisticated, well-read and educated person. *Siyabaslakara*, a ninth-century poetic handbook written by King Sena Salmevan in Sinhala intending for Sinhala poets, theorized the reader/critic in this way:

> How can the people who do not have the knowledge of books,
> Separate excellences and flaws?
> Can a blind person see the differences of images? (Ñānasiha 1964, 6)

This verse is a close translation of a Sanskrit verse in *Kāvyadarśa,* an *alamkāra* theory text written by Dandin in the seventh century AD.[21] This conceptualization of the reader as an erudite person continued in Sinhala literary history in different forms. The celebrated twelfth-century Sinhala poem *Kavsilumina* was written by King Parakramabahu II in the style of the great poems (*mahā kāvya*) of Sanskrit literary tradition who noted that "scarce are the eyes that can savor the flavors and sentiments of poetry" (1994, 2). Such statements denied the existence of different kinds of appreciation while limiting the act of literary appreciation to a limited group of people out of the total readership, turning literary criticism into an elite act that required much effort and resources.

Wickramasinghe rejected the elitist standpoint of Sanskrit literary theory and showed that the villager was as capable of appreciation of art and literature as the urban elite, but in their own particular way. The first book Wickramasinghe published on

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[21] The eighth verse of *Kāvyādarśa* (Vidyasagar 2008, 5).

Sinhala literary criticism, *Vicāra Lipi* (*Critical Essays*) written in 1941, begins by situating the villager in a higher place than the educated reader.

> I wrote these critical essays not because I had gained a greater learning, appreciation and entertainment from the stories I introduced here than a villager who knows Sinhala would have by reading these same stories. In fact, I would be incapable of even having the same learning, appreciation and entertainment he would have from these stories. I believe a villager who would read these stories with simple wonder enjoys tenfold the entertainment that I—with the arrogance of my learning—would try to experience by reading them. ([1941] 1992, 1)

Apē Gama presented an idea of a different form of literary appreciation that was enjoyed by children and villagers. Education, so the idea went, can take that form of appreciation away from a person. This is what Wickramasinghe meant by the idea that the villager, by nature, was a reader, and the experience he gained through his life by interacting with natural environment helped to shape this appreciation.

> The sprouting of paddy seedlings in the field, the paddy plants that rise and bend, bowing with the lift of the light wind around the farmer when he steps into his field, like playful calves frisking around their mother: the ears of paddy that finally crown the plants, like a gift of the Earth Goddess pleased with his toil—the peasant, to whose sight and touch all these things are familiar, experiences a deeper and more intimate pleasure than the complex aesthetic enjoyment which books provide for the erudite. Some hold the false notion that just as a spoon is insensitive to the savour of food, so the peasant handles but cannot perceive the beauty of the things which surround him. (Wickramasinghe 1968, 73)[22]

Wickramasinghe argues that literature and literary appreciation are not artificial creations but natural outcomes of living in the world and, in case of the villagers, close to nature. The "false notion" alluded to above hints at the Sanskrit view of reading as an elite practice. *Apē Gama* is structured in a way that distances Wickramasinghe from his own childhood—the child is Wickramasinghe's missing model reader. It suggests that in order for Wickramasinghe to be that reader again, he has to unlearn what he has learned. I

[22] Wickramasinghe 1968 refers to Lakshmi de Silva's translation of *Apē Gama*. The original Sinhala can be found in Wickramasinghe [1940] 2015, 67-68.

would argue that the creation of this distance between the child Wickramasinghe and the adult Wickramasinghe is a self-critique of his own position as an educated reader. He is looking to recapture a different kind of appreciation, one that he prefers to that which he has acquired through formal training.

***Guttila Gītaya:* The Critical Reader**

The concept of the reader is developed further in *Guttila Gītaya* (1943), a text that directly criticizes the *Guttila Kāvyaya* written in the fifteenth century AD by Rev. Wettewe as an adaptation of the "Guttila Jātaka." "Guttila Jātaka" is one of the 547 birth stories of the previous lives of Buddha compiled under the name *The Book of Jātaka Stories* which was translated into Sinhala from the Pali *Jātakaṭṭha Kathā* supposedly by monks in the fourteenth century AD. Almost all of the Sinhala writers from the twelfth to fifteenth century drew their subject matters from *Jātaka* stories. "Guttila Jātaka" is a story about the relationship between teacher and student. The student Musila, after learning music from Guttila, the teacher (who is the Buddha in a later life), became ungrateful to the teacher by publicly competing with him for the sake of earning a similar salary. Rev. Vetteve adopts this story into verse in *Guttila Kāvyaya. Guttila Kāvyaya* contains a complex characterization of both Guttila and Musila which makes the reader sympathetic toward Musila the "immoral" student. However, Rev. Vetteve did not follow the Sanskrit form of the "Great Poem" (*mahā kāvya*) which is one reason why *Guttila Kāvyaya* is not regarded as a well-written text by twentieth-century critics. In writing *Guttila Gītaya*, Wickramasinghe expresses appreciation for the Reverend who, unlike other poets of his time who slavishly imitated the Sanskrit *alamkāra* tradition, did not submit to this

tradition uncritically in creating *Guttila Kāvyaya*. In *Guttila Gītaya,* Wickramasinghe demonstrates the creative genius of Rev. Vetteve by using ideas of later *alamkāra* theorists that were neglected by the twentieth-century Sinhala critics.

In his preface to *Guttila Gītaya*, Wickramasinghe theorizes the concepts of the reader/critic, text, and author in a radically different manner from the Sanskrit and Western literary traditions. He pays tribute to Rev. Vetteve for composing a particularly "delightful" (*ramanīya*) poem that always soothed him. "*Guttila Kāvyaya*," he elaborates, "composed by a poet who followed the Innate Writing Style (*sukumāra mārgaya*),[23] is like an intrinsically beautiful lady. Rarely does a person, drawn to an intrinsically beautiful lady, not behave like an *upāsaka*" ([1943] 2012, 7).

The metaphor of the *upāsaka*, the Sinhala term used to refer to devoted Buddhist piety, together with the beautiful lady and the monk, challenged the Sanskrit definition of the author, text, and reader/critic, and also the conventions of Buddhist lay and monastic values. The *upāsaka* is a lay person who observes five precepts[24] every day and eight[25] on full moon days at the temple. The concept of *upāsaka* applied in Sri Lankan villages also contains the sense of self-restraint (*ātma sanyamaya*). Thus, an *upāsaka* is supposed to refrain from committing sinful acts such as killing, stealing, adultery, dishonesty, and drinking alcohol. The *upāsaka* is also expected to behave very respectfully toward

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[23] *Sukumāra mārga* was introduced by the Sanskrit *alamkāra* theorist Kuntaka in the tenth century. It refers to the literary style developed through the poetic genius of the author. The beauty of literature produced by poets who have an inborn talent arises from their poetic genius, and not from their learning. Learning can only enhance their creativity.

[24] The five precepts are to abstain from: 1. killing living creatures, 2. taking what is not given 3. engaging in sexual misconduct, 4. lying, and 5. consuming intoxicants that cause heedlessness (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 616).

[25] The eight precepts add three more precepts to the original five. Abstaining from: 6. resting on a high or luxurious bed, 7. using make up and perfumes and enjoying music and dance, and 8. eating at improper times (Buswell and Lopez 2014,73).

women. However, the term *upāsaka* is very often used ironically in Sinhala popular idioms. For example, there is a saying that "*upāsaka* cats catch the mice, two at a time." This has the connotation of a person who pretends to be morally well-restrained while being attracted to women in a culturally unacceptable manner.

Wickramasinghe's idea of the *upāsaka* and the beautiful woman invites further reinterpretation of the act of reading a text. The characteristics of an *upāsaka* suggest a particular kind of self-restraint on the part of the reader. Extending the metaphor of the *upāsaka* and the beautiful lady, Wickramasinghe states, "the woman poem has a corpus of virtues as well as a corpus of beauty." To see the beauty of a text, he suggests, one should be trained to approach a text with no pre-given assumptions from established literary traditions or direct training. He contrasts this with readers trained in the *alamkāra* tradition whom he likens to an impolite or unrestrained figure, suggesting that these characteristics impede them from a fuller consideration of the virtues and the beauty of a text based in its content and poetic qualities.

***Yugāntaya*: Tissa, the Sophisticated Reader**

The character Tissa which appears in three of Wickramasinghe's novels, *Gamperaliya*, *Kaliyugaya*, and *Yugāntaya* introduces another version of reader. Tissa is imagined as a sophisticated reader who has had exposure to both village and city life. Wickramasinghe appears to have drawn on his own personal experiences to create this character. Tissa is the son of a middle class village family whose fortunes were declining because of their resistance to the emerging capitalist socio-economic system. His father dies when Tissa is still a child and, consequently, he has to stop going to the English

missionary school. He stays for a while in the village unemployed until he leaves for Colombo, the capital, for work. While there he engages in studying Sinhala and reading books.

The character of Tissa is presented as an amalgamation of Western and Eastern binaries often considered distinct from one other—emotional and intellectual, Christian and Buddhist, literary and scientific. For example, he is critical of social conventions but is also a very emotional person, though he tries to hide this from others. Tissa thus suffers both from the sharpness of his intellect and the strength of his emotions (Wickramasinghe [1949] 2013, 123-4).

> The intellect of Tissa, arising from his extensive education, is like a shell that covers his intrinsic qualities. When this shell is removed what can be seen is a pure-hearted man, much like an innocent child or a hermit who has overcome worldly occupations. (177)

Wickramasinghe wants to demonstrate that underneath the cover of his intellect, Tissa the villager remains intact. Tissa's friends occasionally refer to him as "*upāsaka*" in *Gamperaliya,* (1967 (1944), 110)*,* and in *Yugāntaya* he is transformed into "*kelesun tävū*" (a person who overcame defilements)[26] in the eyes of Aravinda. This means that he has become a person who can be said to be indifferent or to see everything as one and the same. Thus, Tissa is more spiritually advanced than the average villager or the *upāsaka* in *Apē Gama* and *Guttila Gītaya.*

Like Wickramasinghe, Tissa prefers the villager to the urban intellectual. He calls himself "a village *väddā* who became an educated väddā" [27] (Wickramasinghe [1949]

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[26] By destroying defilements one can attain the highest spiritual state preached in Theravāda Buddhism. Defilements are grouped into three: greed or sensuality, hatred or aversion, and delusion; and in some places into ten: anger, hypocrisy, selfishness, envy, agitation or competition, harmfulness, enmity, trickery or guile, and arrogance (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 438).

[27] *Väddā* is the Sinhala term for the aborigines of Sri Lanka.

2013, 133), challenging the dichotomy of the urban as civilized and the village as uncivilized. Tissa's acknowledgment that he discovered the value of the villager once he became an urban intellectual recalls the relationship Wickramasinghe noted between the adult and the child Wickramasinghe in *Apē Gama*. Although the adult knows the value of the child, he cannot become the child again; he cannot unlearn what he has learned.

It is clear from these texts that Wickramasinghe's expectation was that readers of Sinhala literature should stay closely associated with their village selves and at the same time become educated. The amalgamation of these two aspects, he believed, would create a reader who was culturally empowered while being critically open to other cultures. Wickramasinghe privileged all three types of reader he introduced, though he showed that each of these modes was incomplete. For example, the Tissa type of reader does not have sufficient appreciation of the child Wickramasinghe version of the reader and vice versa. While having their own special insights, however the three types of readers share in common an exposure to village culture. In this way, Wickramasinghe remolded the concept of the reader in association with Sinhala Buddhist cultural values and produced a local form of the reader. Thus, Wickramasinghe inserted the "localness" in to the literary concept of reader.

The Concept of *Grāmyatā* (Vulgarity)

In addition to re-conceptualizing the reader, Wickramasinghe contested the Sanskrit literary concept of *grāmyatā* which discriminated the village in the literary discourse. This was a main concept revived in Sinhala literary criticism of the twentieth century. The concept of *grāmyatā* in Sanskrit literary tradition literally means "that which

is of the village is vulgar." The term *grāmyatā* (of the village) is derived from the term *grāma* (village). Dandin, a seventh-century *alamkāra* theorist, described *grāmyatā* as a flaw which harmed the "delectableness" of a poem. In *Kāvyādarśa,* he mentions that the absence of vulgarity is mostly responsible for the delectableness of a poem (Vidyasagar 2008, 33). The ninth-century handbook on poetic verse in Sinhala, *Siyabaslakara,* appropriated this idea and provided examples of *grāmyatā* given in the Sanskrit text *Kāvyadarśa*. The handbook explains how a poem can be *grāmya* through the use of the direct expression of an idea or the use of words in inappropriate contexts. It also states that a combination of two civilized terms can unintentionally convey vulgarity. Accordingly, as the language used by villagers is always considered *grāmya* it should not be used in literature.

Twentieth-century literary critics also adopted the concept of *grāmyatā,* guided by the publication of *Siyabaslakara Vistara Varṇanāva*, a commentary on *Siyabaslakara* published by Rev. Henpitagedara Ñānasiha in 1933 and reprinted in 1964. In Ñānasiha's work—a clear example of the revival of Sanskrit literary theory for twentieth-century Sinhala literature—the village was described as an uneducated/uncivilized place which should be removed from the field of literary studies (1964, 27). It had an influential role in the dismissal of the idea that the village idiom and folk literature were central to the discourse of national literature. The concept of *grāmyatā* was very popular among scholars in the twentieth century who when Wickramasinghe and, following him, other writers, used spoken Sinhala in their novels, referred to it as "the language of the kitchen" (*kussi bāsāva*). This city-village dichotomy of Sanskrit tradition created an artificial division between the Sanskrit learned elites who purposefully used more Sanskrit loan

words when writing Sinhala as a way of demonstrating their learnedness and the villagers who did not know Sanskrit in twentieth-century Sri Lanka.

Wickramasinghe re-interpreted *grāmyatā* in a manner which challenged the elitist notion connected to the concept. In Charles Hallisey's words, Wickramasinghe was "turning the inherited terminology of literary criticism against itself" (2003, 719). In *Yugāntaya*, Wickramasinghe explicitly criticized the concept of *grāmyatā* through the character of Tissa. In a conversation with Aravinada about village and city, Tissa said, "vulgarity is a term invented by city dwellers to condemn villagers. But this word should be used against the city dwellers themselves. Everything unrefined is not vulgar. If so, even naturality (*prakrtiya*) should be called vulgar ([1949] 2013, 135)." Wickramasinghe reinterpreted the concept of *grāmyatā* in a manner quite at odds with its traditional connotation. For him, vulgarity came to mean instances when the poetics of a certain literary text were used without any significant purpose, and only to show off the "ability of the author" [28] or because it was assigned to such use by tradition alone. He detached the quality of being vulgar from its attachment to the village, making it an attribute of the author instead.

The manner in which Wickramasinghe treated the three aesthetic concepts reader, *grāmyatā*, and *atiśayōkti* provided a comparative approach from a decentered perspective. By analyzing these concepts from the point of view of a Sinhala educated villager, he challenged the different values attributed to the village and the city by the Sanskrit literary tradition. In his reinterpretation and remolding of Sanskrit and Western aesthetic values according to local literary culture, Wickramasinghe challenged the

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[28] In *Guttila Gītaya*, Wickramasinghe mentioned that vulgarity occurred when an educated person tried to show off ([1943] 2012, 62).

subaltern position given to local literature by global hegemonic literary discourses. A major outcome of Wickramasinghe's comparative approach is the idea that the local and metropolitan can share similar principles of aesthetics that operate in unique ways for different readers. Therefore, comparisons must be aimed at understanding these differences rather than making value judgments regarding their relative merits. This approach empowers local literary cultures by making their identities and sensibilities visible. It also invites and includes local perspectives within so-called Western literature which is treated as universal. This creates a hierarchy-less space for the interaction between different local literatures through shared principles. This has important implications for contemporary approaches to comparative literature, a discipline that is currently in search of better ways to challenge the discursive values given to different literary cultures.

CHAPTER 4

THE NATIONAL AND THE INTERNATIONAL: COEXISTENCE OF "CONTRADICTIONS"

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Martin Wickramasinghe worked to destabilize the hegemonic cultural and literary discourses in the Sinhala literary arena by bringing them into conversation with "underprivileged" literary and cultural discourses. The comparative approach that resulted from this, I argue, carried two major implications. Firstly, that the geographical origin of a particular literary concept cannot claim sole ownership of that concept, and secondly, that one literary culture can "remould" (*pratiyōjanayen sakaskaragänīma*) or fuse the concepts of another literary culture regardless of their geographical and cultural differences. Thus, there can be a relational coherence of "contradictory" concepts,[29] an idea which later scholars such as Ranjini Obeyesekere would fail to understand. Wickramasinghe worked out his comparative approach in three ways: by destabilizing or challenging the accepted versions of literary histories, by revealing the power relations embedded in literary forms and other literary devices, and by incorporating these ideas into his own fiction.

In this chapter, I analyze how Wickramasinghe's comparative approach to reading literature along with his creation of a modern Sinhala literature "remoulded" national and international literary discourses without privileging either. I also examine how he traced the evolution of modern Sinhala literature to the old Sinhala literary tradition while acknowledging the influence of other literary traditions. Finally, I show how this

[29] Wickramasinghe theorized this idea in the first chapter of *Sinhala Vicāra Maga* ([1964] 1992, 211).

approach can shed light on issues associated with power relations in contemporary comparative literary studies.

Ranjini Obeyesekere, the most prominent bilingual scholar of Sinhala and English literatures, has argued that the coherence of the national and international in Wickramasinghe's writings is both "contradictory" and "inconsistent." In her Ph.D. dissertation (University of Washington, 1968), "The Impact of English Criticism on Modern Sinhala Criticism," she claimed that although Wickramasinghe was not a part of Western-oriented academia, he was nonetheless heavily influenced by Western thought (66). As indicated by the title of her dissertation, however, the approach Obeyesekere employed to analyze the bilingual intelligentsia of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka limited her from examining the ways in which Wickramasinghe was influenced by Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit, and other literary traditions. According to Obeyesekere, "Wickramasinghe's critical position in his early works seems a *strange mixture* of unconscious Western values and a self-conscious commitment to a native Buddhist tradition."[30] She concluded that "many of the *inconsistencies* and *contradictions*[31] in Wickramasinghe's writing" resulted from his being heavily influenced by Western literature and from the social pressure of the recently decolonized country to be nationalist (100). An analysis of the dominant social, political, and cultural power systems at the time at which she wrote her thesis sheds light on why she viewed Wickramasinghe's nationalist and internationalist positioning as contradictory. She would also have been influenced by the limited comparative approach she adopted, as suggested by the title of her dissertation. Obeyesekere's reading of Wickramasinghe

[30] The emphasis is mine.
[31] The emphases are mine.

points to the importance of a more expansive comparative approach for understanding a figure such as Wickramasinghe, whose approach explicitly aims to demonstrate coherence between national and international standpoints.

The coherence of the national and international—as well as other so-called contradictions such as West/East, science/religion, and folk/classical—were a prominent characteristic in Wickramasinghe's writings. This coherence of contradictions can be seen in his novel *Virāgaya* (1956) in terms of characterization and structure. The time line of *Virāgaya* spans the colonial and postcolonial periods. It is structured as an autobiography of Aravinda, a village man, which is published by Samee, Aravinda's distant friend. The novel, which begins from the point of view of Samee, challenges the reader to recognize Aravinda's character, a seeming impossibility since the latter's character draws together many things that one cannot easily imagine to coexist. From the second chapter to the end of the novel, Aravinda's autobiography is presented in Aravinda's first person narrative voice. The structure of this novel itself is a combination of two different worldviews. Moreover, the characterization of Aravinda also demonstrates the coherence of "contradictions." For example, the novel opens with Samee visiting Siridasa, Aravinda's cousin, a few months following Aravinda's death. At the home of Aravinda's cousin, Samee finds Aravinda's material possessions, which symbolized the complexity of his life:

> English, Sanskrit and Pali books, some bound in leather, some in cloth, languished in the cupboard, deprived of the care of the enigmatic scholar who had handled them so often. As I read the titles of the books on Chemistry, Buddhist metaphysics, occultism, magic and psychic research, it occurred to me that I had not been far wrong in my original imagination of Aravinda's mind. A bronze statue of the Buddha stood on a little table. Near it was a pile of ola-leaf manuscripts. I turned up one of them and tried to read a leaf. Apparently it was

> about the kind of magic and the occult practices that the Buddha called the absurd science. (Wickramasinghe 1985, 7)[32]

Aravinda's possessions included a collection of books and many other items that one might consider to be contradictory with each other. For instance, Samee finds that Aravinda was interested in chemistry, which was related to Western science, Buddhism, which was an applied Eastern religion, and sorcery, which was related to local folk rituals and beliefs. The villagers or his family members could not understand him because he did not belong to any of the singular categories of conventional society of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Aravinda's life and interests challenged the distinctions between these categories. Consistent with the modern Sinhala literature for which Wickramasinghe advocated, Aravinda belonged to the village, the city, and the world all at the same time.

In what follows, I analyze how Wickramasinghe applied his comparative approach as exemplified in the novels *Virāgaya* and *Bava Taraṇaya* (1973) and the literary theory text *The Buddhist Jātaka Stories and the Russian Novel* (1957).[33]

Theorizing the Comparative Approach

In order to understand Wickramasinghe's comparative approach, and in particular his ability to combine the seemingly contradictory positions of the national and international, I use a metaphor Wickramasinghe drew upon to describe the modern Sinhala short story as well as modern Sinhala novel:

> In the present, the Sinhala short story should be recognized as a river which is enriched by many tributaries. To criticize it based on the presumption that it is

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[32] Wickramasinghe 1985 refers to Ashley Halpé's translation of *Virāgaya.* The original Sinhala can be found in Wickramasinghe (1956) 2015, 8.

[33] In this text, Wickramasinghe compares the characteristics of Dostoyevsky's fiction with the characteristics of Sinhala *Jātaka* stories, which are stories about the previous births of Buddha, translated from Pali into Sinhala in the fourteenth century.

> derived purely from the Western narrative is an attempt not to go beyond the rules of a few Western critics of one generation. The river which receives water from everywhere flows faster; its water gets purified; it gets deepened; and widened. (4)[34]

This metaphor of the river invites us to understand Wickramasinghe's comparative approach as a process. A river does not have one origin but multiple origins. The fusing of the tributaries forms the river, one body of water, which makes it impossible to say which water is drawn from which tributary. Thus, a tributary and the river have their own different identities and also shared elements. Similarly, a local literary tradition does not have one particular origin but multiple origins. This multiplicity of origins prevents the local literary culture from claiming a singular ownership for its concepts. As the fusion of tributaries form the river, a local literary tradition is created by the fusion of concepts of different literary traditions. Once those concepts are fused, they are internalized by the local literary tradition. Wickramasinghe called this fusion "re-moulding." If we extend this metaphor, all these rivers of local/national literary traditions flow to the sea of world literatures. Although the rivers have different tastes than the sea, the common element of water allows the rivers to form the sea. Thus, the local/national literary cultures have their own cultural specificities while having fundamental commonalities with other literary cultures which facilitate the reader of world literature.

Wickramasinghe's comparative literary approach was grounded in two main principles: First, literary concepts do not belong to any literary culture on the basis of their origin. Second, any concept that exists in a given literary culture can be "remoulded" and incorporated by another culture. The rejection of the notion of origin-

[34] See also Wickramasinghe (1951) 1970, 8.

based ownership of literary concepts and the reformulation of literary concepts as phenomena that may be circulated among literary cultures create a hierarchy-less base for comparison. In this regard, a local literary tradition is recognized as becoming more sophisticated, beautiful, and capable of more rapid improvement when it is enriched by different literary traditions within and beyond the national boundaries.

To demonstrate this view, Wickramasinghe argued that a number of literary concepts that one would regard as belonging to one particular literary tradition are in fact found in different geographical regions of the world and at different time periods. For example, realism, often treated as a Western concept, existed in Pali literature produced in the sixth century B.C. and later as well.[35] These similarities may be due to contact between the two literatures or they may have emerged independently from each other because of having similar kind of philosophical and ideological background in both literary cultures (Wickramasinghe [1965] 1992, 434). The most important implication of this argument is that it challenges any presumed hierarchy between different literary cultures based on the derivation of literary concepts. Because the literary histories of local literary cultures were heavily influenced by the colonial project, those histories were/are invented from a largely Eurocentric viewpoint. As a result, Europeans claim ownership of the concept of realism[36] while not acknowledging realism in Pali literature. When Wickramasinghe says that a literary tradition cannot own a concept on the grounds

[35]See chapter eight of "New Prose Styles and Old Buddhist Literature" in Wickramasinghe's *Navakatānga hā Virāgaya* (*Virāgaya and Elements of the Novel*) (1965).
[36] For example, in *Realism*, Pam Morris links the emergence of "realism" as a literary concept with the eighteenth-century novel which developed "alongside enlightenment thought and capitalism" (n.d., 10). There she traces the evolution of literary realism along French and British literary histories.

that it originated within it, the power structure at work is challenged. He contests the hegemonic power, but, importantly, does not advocate for a reversal of hierarchy (434).

I would argue that this standpoint distinguishes Wickramasinghe not only from his contemporary counterparts in Sri Lanka but also from post-colonial theorists who emerged later in the century, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty. For example, Chakrabarty introduces a concept close to Wickramasinghe's use of "re-appropriation." Declaring the project undertaken in the book *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Chakrabarty asserts that "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought –which is now everybody's heritage and which affect us all—may be renewed from and for the margins" ([2000] 2008, 16). By "European thought," he means the "concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, social justice, scientific rationality and so on" (4). Susan Friedman, in her essay "World Modernisms, World Literature, and Comparativity," argues that Chakrabarty serves the underlying structure of the hierarchical relationship between the West and the Rest even when he means to challenge it. Friedman rightly disputes Chakrabarty for "reinstating European discourses of modernity as the default position" in his text (2012, 514). Although his idea of "renewing" the "European" concepts "from and for the margin" creates a space for re-appropriating the "European concepts" into the local cultures of the South Asia or any other "non-European" culture, the hierarchy between the West and East is maintained by granting ownership of the concepts to Europe. Chakrabarty does not assert that the concepts of the non-European world could be renewed "from and for the periphery." In

contrast, by disputing the origin-based ownership of concepts, Wickramasinghe empowers the "marginal" cultures by challenging the hierarchy between "center" and "periphery."

The second basic feature of Wickramasinghe's comparative methodology is "remoulding." In *Sinhala Vicāra Maga* (*The Path of Sinhala Criticism*), he introduces the concept of "remoulding" (*pratiyōjanayen sakas karagänīma*) through several examples in which he distinguishes between "borrowing" (*ṇayaṭa gänīma*) and "remoulding." Borrowing entails receiving a concept from another culture as it is, without making any adjustments according to the receiving culture. If the receivers do not appropriate the borrowed concept according to the features of their culture, that concept will not be internalized by their culture. It continues to exist as an external element. "Remoulding," as Wickramasinghe explains it, is entirely different. The way a Sinhalese villager pronounces English in the articulatory style of Sinhala is different from an educated urban Sinhalese who tries to imitate the exact pronunciation of the British English. The former "remoulds" the spoken English while the latter merely "borrows" or "imitates" it ([1964] 1992, 295-299). Another visual example Wickramasinghe provides for "remoulding" is the appearance of the Buddha statues created in different Buddhist cultures. He says, "Although China, Japan, and Tibet borrowed the Buddha image from India, the sculptors of those countries attributed their national character to the Buddha image by adding the facial appearance of their people" ([1941] 1992, 51). Thus, he understood "remoulding" as an indispensable process in the continuation of an independent national culture that nonetheless learns from international cultures. In the

process of "remoulding" the cultural specificity which is unique to the receiving culture is implanted in to the borrowed concept.

Wickramasinghe stated that "good"[37] art has no boundaries or limitations to be defined by the words "Eastern" or "Western." They will serve to indicate cultural and geographical differences" (1952, "A Standard for Assesment for Sinhala Literature," *Ceylon Daily News,* May 30). He claimed that different literatures are simultaneously marked by both a "fundamental unity" and "cultural differences." The fundamental unity of world literatures allows different literary cultures to learn from each other, while the cultural differences of world literatures, which can be strengthened by remoulding, emphasize the particularity of national literatures. In a discussion about Modernist Studies, Friedman mentions the need for "a more sophisticated discourse of comparison, one that focuses on the dialogic tension between similarities and differences, one that takes into account the politics of comparison without being paralyzed by them" (2012, 507). I would argue that, as Wickramasinghe theorized, recognizing the cultural particularity of world literatures while admitting the fundamental unity among them challenges the binaries of "center/periphery" and "West and the rest," binaries that haunt the discourse of comparison in present literary disciplines.

[37] The major characteristics of "good" art for Wickramasinghe are that the art is non-imitative and related to the experiences of the author. In addition, a good literary text should combine the feelings, thoughts, and language of the people in accordance with its content. Examples of literature considered "good" art by Wickramasinghe: Sanskrit texts *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyana*, and the works of Kalidasa; Pali texts *Dhammapada* and *Theri Gāthā* (poems of nuns); and the Russian fiction of Dostoyevsky and Chekhov.

Exemplification of the Comparative Approach

Wickramasinghe also exemplified his comparative approach in his controversial argument that modern Sinhala fiction is an evolution of Sinhala literary tradition. During the same time that Wickramasinghe was developing his views, there were two other notable positions regarding modern Sinhala fiction in circulation. According to one, associated with E. R. Sarachchandra, modern Sinhala fiction was a borrowed genre from the West. According to the other, associated with Sarathchandra Wickramasooriya, modern Sinhala fiction was a hybridization of the Sinhala prose tradition and the Western novel. Based on his novels *Virāgaya*, *Bava Taraṇaya*, and literary theory text *The Jātaka Stories and the Russian Novel*, I will demonstrate how Wickramasinghe's comparative literary approach is reflected in the construction of his argument, and also how his standpoint advocated for an independent evolution of national literary tradition while being influenced by international literary traditions. I focus first on the formation of Wickramasinghe's idea of realism, followed by his use of narrative devices and the combination of the ideological aspects of socialism and the Buddhist concept of "love of life" (*jīva bhakti vāda*) in his novels.

Wickramasinghe's Idea of Realism and Novelistic Characteristics: Harnessing Exaggeration with Realism

Not only was Wickramasinghe's interpretation of realism different from the Western and Sanskrit literary traditions, this difference also created a space for modern Sinhala fiction to evolve alongside local traditions while remoulding international concepts. In the essay "Emplotment and Character in Narrative Discourse: *Vessantara* as

a Proto-novel," Liyanage Amarakeerthi argues that to prove that modern Sinhala fiction is an evolution of Sinhala literary tradition, a standpoint which can be called "nationalist," Wickramasinghe claimed that the Sinhala *Jātaka* stories are similar to Western realist novels. Thus, Wickramasinghe's view was "not only novel-centered but also realism-centered" (2006, 84). Although I agree with Amarakeerthi's basic argument, I would add that Wickramasinghe's own idea of how a text can become realist was significantly different from the Western notion of realism. While heavily influenced by Western critics such as E. M. Foster in discussing the realistic and novelistic features of *Jātaka* stories, Wickramasinghe's idea of realism was also shaped by *Jātaka* stories themselves. Thus, Wickramasinghe's interpretation of realism was a remoulding of Western realism and *Jātaka* story realism.

According to Wickramasinghe, realism includes exaggeration. In *Apē Gama* (1940), for instance, he developed this argument in conversation with Sanskrit literary concepts of exaggeration (*atiśayōkti*) and factuality (*svabhāvōkti*). *Atiśayōkti*, defined as the "expression, transgressing the limit of usage, about a particular thing" (Vidyasagar 2008, 142), situates itself against the concept of *svabhāvōkti,* which is defined as a realistic or naturalistic description of a thing which creates aesthetic delight at the same time (Ñānasiha [1933] 1964, 56). In this interpretation, *svabhāvōkti* and realism share basic idea of "verisimilitude" or "reference to the real world." According to Sanskrit theory, *atiśayōkti* and *svabhāvōkti* are contradictory concepts (187-8). In *Apē Gama*, alluding to a figure of an old man carved by the village wood-carver, Wickramasinghe deliberately refused the categorization of *atiśayōkti* and *svabhāvōkti* as contradictory ornaments on the basis of being direct or indirect ([1940] 2015, 72-3). According to him,

every art is “indirect” and, therefore, only the level and the manner of indirectness can be different. In *Apē Gama*, Wickramasinghe connected *atiśayōkti* to the real life of people by describing *atiśayōkti* as a mundane act that villagers performed in their own manner and for their own purposes. The *atiśayōkti* may be produced, for instance, in folk art or in telling exaggerated stories for the purpose of socializing. However, Wickramasinghe did not prefer the Sanskrit connotation of *atiśayōkti* because, he argued, it did not have a relationship with the real life of people. Thus, for Wickramasinghe, *atiśayōkti* was included in realism because *atiśayōkti* can be understood as an indirect manner of drawing connections to reality.

Understanding realism in terms of *being connected to reality* rather than merely *representing reality* enabled Wickramasinghe to see *Jātaka* stories, which consist of many unrealistic features, as “closer to realism” ([1946] 1959, 205). The *Book of Sinhala Jātaka Stories,* written in the fourteenth century was translated from Pali *Jātakaṭṭha Kathā*. Yet, the Pali *Jātakaṭṭha Kathā* is believed to have initially been translated from Sinhala to Pali. It includes 547 previous birth stories of Buddha. All the stories share one basic form made up of two parts, “the present story” and “the story of the past.” These are proceeded by a part called *samōdāna*, or an explanation of who was who in the two parts. “The present story” takes place in the time of Buddha and is always connected to the real life of monks or a layperson. “The story of the past” is told by Buddha to explain that the “present story” is not an accidental incident but something that either had already happened in previous lives or resulted from an act of previous lives. That previous life can involve realistic stories, animal fables, or even superhuman presence. However, by the *samōdāna* of *Jātaka* stories, “the story of the past” is linked to “the present story,”

which is always written in association with "real life incidents." I would argue that the fact that *Jātaka* stories linked "unrealistic" events to discuss the "realistic" events or issues shaped Wickramasinghe's understanding of realism as *being connected to reality* instead of being limited to *representing reality*. In *The Buddhist Jātaka Stories and the Russian Novel*, he writes, "there are exaggerations in many of them (*Jātaka* stories). But not for the sake of romanticism and sentimentalism. These exaggerations sometimes reveal the devastating aspect of human passions and occasionally the working of the subconscious mind" ([1957] 2007, 5). Based on the fact that the unrealistic or exaggerated events of *Jātaka* stories convey psychological, social, or political reality, Wickramasinghe treated them as realist (5).

There are a few ways in which Wickramasinghe compares *Jātaka* stories with the modern realist novel: drawing the story from real life, plot and causality, using ordinary language, psychoanalysis, or examining the subconscious of the characters, and social and political engagement. The last two characteristics were not necessarily based on the form of the fiction, but could be expressed by employing surreal or unrealistic and exaggerated representational methods. This prepared the background for the Sinhala writer to employ "unrealistic" events and characters to engage with the social political reality. Thus, it paved the way for the incoming new literary trends such as stream of consciousness, modernism, mythic realism, and magic realism, which can be drawn from any national or international arena. Wickramasinghe's comparison suggests that contemporary Sinhala fiction writers can learn from *Jātaka* stories how to employ such new trends by fusing and "remoulding" them with the old Sinhala prose, in this case *Jātaka* stories, to create their own mode of Sinhala fiction. In short, this entails

"remoulding" national and international aesthetic concepts while participating in the continuation of the independent literary tradition. In the next section, I examine some of the narrative devices in *Virāgaya* in order to demonstrate how Wickramasinghe himself constructed the modern Sinhala novel as an evolution of the Sinhala literary tradition.

Narrative Devices of Wickramasinghe's Novels

A western-oriented reader will find elements of modernism, stream of consciousness, and realism in *Virāgaya*. A reader who is invested in the old Sinhala literary tradition as well as with the western novel will find a different kind of familiarity in the same narrative elements than a Western-oriented reader. This is due to the fact that the novel contains techniques Wickramasinghe had learned from the West as well as his own literary tradition that were remoulded in creating *Virāgaya*. Thus this novel exemplifies a continuous Sinhala literary tradition which *does not turn its back to the past*[38] although it is influenced by other literary traditions.

Virāgaya is structured in two parts, which, I would argue, have significant parallels with "the past story" and "the present story" of *Jātaka* stories. The first chapter of *Virāgaya* is presented from the viewpoint of Samee, a friend of Aravinda's cousin Siridasa who is curious about Aravinda's character. Samee meets Siridasa after a long time and, anticipating a meeting with Aravinda, asks about Aravinda. Siridasa and his wife, Sarojini, inform Samee about the death of Aravinda and proceed to share their

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[38] E. R. Sarachchandra, Wickramasinghe's counterpart, wrote in the preface for *An Anthology of Sinhala Literature of the Twentieth Century* that modern Sinhala literature began with the writers who arose from the class of Western-oriented intelligentsia who "were exposed to a variety of literatures of the West, mostly through translations in the English language, and, stimulated by the contact with the new genres these literatures introduced, [they] set out as if to make *a fresh beginning*, *turning their backs on the past"* (1987, v). My emphasis.

feelings about his death. Among the belongings of Aravinda at Siridasa's home, Samee finds an autobiography written by Aravinda. This is "the present story" of *Virāgaya* and includes the aftermath of Aravinda's death. From the second chapter, the reader is presented with the autobiography of Aravinda, which was edited by Samee. This is "the past story," presented in the voice of Aravinda but edited and published by Samee. Thus, we can see parallels between the basic formal elements in *Jātaka* stories and *Virāgaya*. The character of Samee, the first person narrator of the first chapter of the novel, is the one who finds Aravinda's life story and publishes it. The rest of the novel, beginning from the second chapter, though edited and published by Samee, is written in the narrative voice of Aravinda. This second part includes Aravinda's life story, which Aravinda had not shared with anyone. Like Buddha, who knows and presents the past stories of the characters who participate in "the present story" of *Jātaka* stories, Samee is the one who finds Aravinda's story and presents it to the public. The difference between *Virāgaya* and *Jātaka* stories is that both past and present stories of the *Jātakas* are written from the viewpoint of an omniscient third-person narrator.

Another important formal resemblance between *Jātaka* Stories and *Virāgaya* is the recurrence of the same characters in both the present and past stories. Other than Samee, the three characters in the first part of the novel (Siridasa, Sarojini, and Bathee) are the main characters in the second part. In addition to the recurrence of the same characters in both parts of the novel, Wickramasinghe creates another level of recurrence. On the surface level the novel is about how Samee is trying to understand the human character of Aravinda. This struggle of understanding someone who is relatively different from others regarding conventional social norms is repeated throughout the novel. Just as

Samee tries to understand Aravinda, Aravinda also tries to understand Kulasooriya, a retired postmaster in his village. In addition, while Kulasooriya and Aravinda are different from one another as individuals, there are significant similarities between them. For instance, villagers not only treat both as "strange," but also use terms like "mad" and "disease" to refer to each. In addition to these two recurrences, there is a third version. We, as readers, are trying to understand Aravinda in the course of reading *Virāgaya*. In fact, the author explicitly challenges us in our capacity as readers to understand the character of Aravinda: "[W]hat kind of a man was he? If you can answer that question after reading this, you must have a deep understanding of human character and indeed of life itself" (1985, 7).[39] More interestingly, Aravinda himself needs to correct us, the readers, from "misunderstanding" him. For example, in the middle of his autobiography, Aravinda says, "[I]f you read this autobiography to the end you will certainly think that it was very unwise of me to be so without regard for established custom, and that this was why I've had to suffer so much. I have never thought so myself (35).[40] Thus, instead of clarifying the character of Aravinda as the narrator of *Jātaka* stories would do, the novel problematizes what it means to understand someone who does not submit to the conventional social norms.

In this sense, *Virāgaya* differs from *Jātaka* stories as well as from modern realist fiction. In *Realism*, as Pam Morris explains, the basic structure of the realist fiction was to bring up a problem in the first few pages and let it be resolved through the course of the narrative (n.d., 11). However, in problematizing Aravinda's character as an

[39] Wickramasinghe 1985 refers to Ashley Halpé's translation of *Virāgaya.* The original Sinhala can be found in Wickramasinghe (1956) 2015, 10.
[40] Ibid; 28 with some modification.

incomprehensible or an uncertain one, and depicting his character from several point of views—from the “outside” perspectives of Sarojini, Samee, Siridasa, and from the “inside” viewpoint of Aravinda himself—as of a cubist painting, Wickramasinghe’s *Virāgaya* proceeds along a different track that one might call modernism. Wickramasinghe’s fiction was undoubtedly influenced by his equal enthusiasm for western modernist writers such as Joyce, Proust, and for much of old Sinhala and Pali literature, including *Jātaka* stories. Wickramasinghe’s idea is that the elements used by Western or other modern fiction writers should not be imitated but studied carefully and compared with the elements of the Sinhala literary tradition. It was through such study and comparison that Wickramasinghe intended to “remould” the two in the creation of a proper modern Sinhala fiction. In this manner, Wickramasinghe turned the twentieth-century Sinhala novel not into a borrowed genre from the West as Sarachchandra claimed in *Sinhala Navakatā Itihāsaya hā Vicāraya* (*The History and the Criticism of Sinhalese Novel*) ([1951] 1968, 93), but into a continuation of the indigenous narrative art which also drew from international traditions.

Ideological Aspect: Socialism and Buddhist Concept of “Love of Life” (*Jīva Bhakti Vāda*)

Another aspect worthy of examination in order to understand Wickramasinghe’s comparative approach is the manner in which he “remoulded” ideologies related to national and international discourses. Wickramasinghe’s last novel, *Bava Taraṇaya* (1973), exemplifies how he was shaped by both the Buddhist concept of “love of life” (*jīva bhakti vāda*) and socialism. By the time Wickramasinghe wrote *Bava Taraṇaya*, the

social and political atmosphere of Sri Lanka was facing significant changes. In 1970, a new government combining capitalist and socialist representatives came to power. In 1971, a few months after the election, a leftist insurrection was launched by *Janatā Vimukti Peramuṇa* (People's Liberation Front) and was suppressed by the government. In 1972, a new constitution was established, and the country, which was under British dominion states and still called Ceylon, was renamed the *Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*. Parallel to these political changes, in the Sinhala literary scene, socialist realism was trending and becoming popular among the novelists, poets, and dramatists. I would argue that *Bava Taraṇaya* is a response to this social, political, and literary atmosphere and also shaped by it.

Bava Taraṇaya is written based on the Buddha's biography. It includes the life of Buddha from the time he was a teenager, named Siduhat, and follows his existence as a layperson until he attained enlightenment and became Buddha who spread dharma around India. In the novel, Wickramasinghe depicts the character of Siduhat (and later Buddha), in a totally different manner from that to which Sinhala readers were accustomed. Most importantly, avoiding all of the exaggerated, traditional literary narratives[41] which turned Buddha into a supernatural being, he depicted him as a normal man with human sentiments like those of any other man. One letter Wickramasinghe received from a young student after reading *Bava Taraṇaya* reveals how realistic his characterization of Siduhat/Buddha was perceived to be:

> Buddhist texts say that Prince Siduhat didn't even carry Rahula.[42] That he left home secretly. That made me feel so sad. I even got angry that Siduhat hadn't shown any love to the little prince. But you say that he carried his son. That he

[41] For example, Siduhat talked as soon as he was born and at the time seven lotuses bloomed on the ground at the place where he was born. He walked on those flowers and uttered a *gāthā*.
[42] Son of Siduhat.

> even told Yasodara[43] before leaving. That must be how he went. I like to imagine that it happened like that in *Bava Taraṇaya*. (Jayaneththi n.d., 62)

More interestingly, in *Bava Taraṇaya*, Wickramasinghe depicts Buddha, the religious leader, as a socialist rebel. In *Mānava Hitavādaya hā Etera Viyattu* (*Humanism and International Scholars*), Wickramasinghe says that Lenin, Gandhi, and Buddha were all humanists who followed different paths to achieve their ideals (1970, 85). Wickramasinghe, by adding the Buddhist concept of "love of life" (*jīva bhakti vāda*), which teaches us to love every living being, into the character of Siduhat, broadens the socialist ideal of the West. He constructed the character of Siduhat, the son of a royal family who is entitled to the throne after his father, in relation to Siduhat's social, political upbringing based on the class and caste systems at work. This depiction connects the characterization of Siduhat to realism as well as to socialist realism, which emphasizes the social political formation of a character depicted in literature. Even the concept of "love of life" embedded in the character of Siduhat is structured by the class, caste, political, and philosophical discourses prevalent during the time in which he lived. For example, in the opening scene of the novel, when Siduhat and his friends debate the topic of shooting animals as a part of their war training as members of the caste of kings, Siduhat argues that the fact that they enjoy looking at the animals they kill is wrong and unwise. Siduhat argued that if a *väddā* enjoys looking at an animal they killed, that is fine because that is a meaningful act (Wickramasinghe 1973, 17-20).

According to the Buddhist literature, Siduhat left the lay life because he saw four signs that led to his disappointment: an old person, a sick person, a dead body, and a monk. King Suddhodana, Siduhat's father fearing, as his brahmana consultants had

[43] The wife of Siduhat.

predicted, that Siduhat would leave the lay life after seeing the four signs, tried his best to prevent Siduhat from experiencing them. Wickramasinghe completely ignores this interpretation of traditional literature. In *Bava Taraṇaya*, Siduhat leaves his comfortable royal life because, after closely associating with people of different social sectors, he comes to understand the class and caste discriminations against them. He tries temporary solutions for some problems but realizes that there are no simple solutions for such a complicated issue.

There are interesting parallels between the character Malin in Wickramasinghe's earlier novel *Yugāntaya* (1949), who is a socialist leader who belongs to an upper class business family and Siduhat in *Bava Taraṇaya*. In both novels, Wickramasinghe asks the question: What is the difference between an ascetic who is looking for a way to liberate people from their sufferings and a socialist rebel who gives up his attachments to fight for equal treatment on behalf of every human being in the society? Both Siduhat and Malin rejected existing social norms that they found to oppress a sector of the society. When Aravinda reminds Malin that he might hurt his parents by neglecting their norms and criticizing their acts, Malin says that "I'm willing to make drastic changes that will even silence my parents" ([1949] 2013, 84). In a similar vein, when Kapila, Siduhat's friend, reminds him that releasing the slaves of his father Siduhat went against the administrative system and therefore, administrative officers might have objections, Siduhat replies, "if they oppose me, I will be more resolute about my order. If my father and the other leaders side with them, I will leave the palace" (1973, 26). Thus, Siduhat leaves his royal life after coming to the realization that, as long as he is a part of the system, he cannot change its effects. He leaves the palace in order to figure out a different system that will

work for every sector of society. Wickramasinghe depicts Buddhism as a vision that has as its objective not only spiritual liberation but social emancipation.

The socialism of *Bava Taraṇaya* is also enriched with the Buddhist concept "love of life." Siduhat's love for all living beings uncovers an alternative vision to understand and appreciate the beauty of the natural. In a conversation with Yasodara, Siduhat says that he was watching *väddā* bathing naked. This leads to a discussion about nudity and civility:

> Why should we study *väddā* based on their environment? To understand the natural beauty of their lives. The fish's environment is the water. Their natural beauty, and the beauty and rhythm of their movement, fins, tails, etc. can be understood by watching them in their environment. Not by seeing them in a fisherman's cart. (56-7)

In the course of this conversation, Siduhat shows how one can enjoy the real beauty of something by changing the way he or she looks at it. Certain "civil" acts can be called uncivilized and vice versa if we think about them from the viewpoint of nature. Here, the author problematizes the concepts of civility and culture by providing an alternative viewpoint of nature. As I have discussed in this section, Wickramasinghe remoulds the seemingly contradictory concepts of socialism and Buddhism's "love of life" and offers a fresh interpretation for both. The character of Siduhat in *Bava Taraṇaya* is formed by bringing together national and international ideologies.

Wickramasinghe set out to disrupt the tradition of imitating the West by demonstrating how to amalgamate Western elements with elements from the Sinhala and/or Pali literary traditions, and recreate the literary text as an evolution of the Sinhala literary tradition. He believed that if Sinhala authors thought of the novel as merely a borrowed form from the West, they would continue to feel they had to borrow Western

standards to analyze and understand the Sinhala novel. This resulted in Sinhala authors continuing to feel compelled to imitate the standards of western literature rather than create their own modes and standards of Sinhala literature. By claiming that modern Sinhala fiction was an evolution of an older Sinhala literary tradition and exemplifying it in his own fiction, Wickramasinghe challenged the idea that the novel was a Western genre. His contribution to the destabilization of Western hegemony over the novel has important implications for developing the identity and continuation of local literary traditions. It also corrects prior assumptions about the West's superiority because it alone *invented* the novel and free verse and that others have merely imitated them. Within comparative literature, Wickramasinghe's position that one can be both nationalist and internationalist at once is an argument that allows for unbiased comparison. Its particular strength resides in the fact that it does not demand that the comparatist give up one standpoint for another. As Wickramasinghe wrote: "Nationalist sentiment and internationalism are two contradictory elements. Nevertheless, the two can and should coexist in the same mind" ([1955] 1995, 4).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

From my position as a scholar of literary studies from Sri Lanka, the process of writing this thesis has been one of growing self-awareness. As an undergraduate and graduate student in the Sinhala Department at the University of Peradeniya, my own perspective on Sinhala literature was distinctly "local." During my time in the United States as a Fulbright scholar in Comparative Literature, I have considered Sinhala literature from the perspective of the "metropole," where I have observed the growing attempts to contest the Eurocentrism of literary studies in Western academia. Encouraging the study of regional literatures like Sinhala in Comparative Literature departments here is one example of such attempts. My thesis has been enriched by this experience. From my liminal vantage point I have come to understand Eurocentrism as just one among many tensions, including Sanskrit-centrism, which Sinhala literary discourse has had to confront. This has allowed me to view Sinhala literature not only within the larger structure of world literature but also to recognize the remarkable variations within Sinhala literature itself.

Approaching Wickramasinghe's work from this position, I have examined the manner in which he dealt with the structural formation and positioning of Sinhala literature in the early and mid-twentieth-century literary discourses within Sri Lanka. I have come to appreciate the most important lesson that Wickramasinghe's approach to literary criticism offers: the idea of learning from others without blindly imitating or rejecting their methods. Wickramasinghe developed a comparative approach that

contested the binaries and the hierarchical power structures embedded in literary comparison. There were two important principles of his comparative methodology. The first was his rejection of the ownership of literary concepts based on origins. He destabilizes the very idea of an origin by arguing that similar literary concepts can grow in different literary cultures with or without contact with each other. The second principle is that literary concepts from one culture can be “remoulded” by another culture to make them its own. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, Wickramasinghe exemplified these comparative principles in both his fiction and literary criticism.

To introduce his method to twentieth-century Sri Lankan critics, Wickramasinghe engaged with the dialogues of pro-Sanskrit and pro-Western groups, though he did not embrace either of these two mainstream standpoints on Sinhala literature. His was an alternative position. He believed that the Sinhala tradition should be open to drawing from all good literature regardless of tradition. He focused on the *approach* one should adopt toward those traditions instead of the *tradition* per se. According to Wickramasinghe, over-exaltation of a particular tradition led to imitation and might harm the receiving tradition. This shift of focus launched a new direction in the evolution of modern Sinhala literature in the twentieth century. Because of his firm idea that literature is something that evolved with time, he advocated against forming literary groups as this would make a particular set of literary concepts static and hinder change. He criticized Kumaratunga Munidasa’s *Hela Haula* group and also E. R. Sarachchandra for having “followers,” as that created blind imitators instead of critical thinkers. His idea that having followers harmed independent thought prevented him from creating a group of students around himself. He became one of the most prominent figures of twentieth-

century Sinhala literature and theory without subscribing to any academic institution or literary group.

The Current State of Literary Studies in Sri Lanka and Beyond

In the 1960s, Wickramasinghe criticized his contemporary academics, and members of the Department of Sinhala at University of Peradeniya in particular, for not being comparative enough and for over-emphasizing the Practical Criticism of I. A. Richards in their syllabi. This situation has not changed much in the subsequent fifty years. As an undergraduate in the Sinhala Department of the University of Peradeniya between 2005 and 2009, I was trained to look at Sinhala literature in the light of two metropolitan literary traditions, Sanskrit and Western. The curriculum for the Sinhala honors program for undergraduates included three courses related to literary theory: "Principles of Western Literary Criticism," "Practical Criticism and Literary Appreciation," and "Principles of Sanskrit Literary Poetics and Sinhala Prosody." Significantly, there was no course called "Sinhala Literary Criticism" or even a course in which the twentieth-century history of Sinhala literary theory was discussed. Western and Sanskrit literary traditions are still treated as two separate entities distinct from Sinhala literary theory, and Sri Lankan English and Tamil literatures are not incorporated at all into Sinhala literary studies. Thus, even today, the prevailing approach toward Sinhala literature in Sri Lankan academia can be seen as "metropole-centric" and reliant upon well-established binary categories. Despite a strong corpus of modern local literature written in Sri Lanka's three main languages, Sinhala, Tamil, and English, the Departments of Sinhala, Tamil, and English literary studies function in isolation from

each other. Rarely would a student whose major is in one literary studies program enroll in a course of another literature program as a minor concentration. This is also a result of the post-independence sociopolitical power dynamics of class and ethnicity reflected in the three languages. The very few translations of Sri Lankan literary texts in these three languages is a further indicator of this compartmentalization—a serious issue which negatively impacts literary studies and society at large.

This situation suggests that Wickramasinghe's views are more relevant today than at any other time period and that his approach offers a promising model for current academic practices of literary studies in Sri Lanka. Wickramasinghe remains a central literary figure of Sinhala literature as well as of the larger field of Comparative Literature. The fresh understanding of his ideas put forth in this thesis suggests a new path for literary studies in Si Lanka that would expose the structural formation and continued limitations of both the academic and social systems. Wickramasinghe's standpoint was that every literary studies department should be comparative. Practicing comparison as an approach in learning any single literary tradition has the capacity to not only enrich the development of Sinhala, Tamil, and English literary studies but also to address enduring social problems in Sri Lanka based on language.

Wickramasinghe's model of the role of the comparatist has important implications not only for Sri Lankan academia, however, but also for the future of comparative literary studies elsewhere in the world. His comparative approach challenged the hierarchy between different literary cultures and binary structures. Through his historical and textual analysis of different Sinhala literary texts and those of other languages he demonstrated that literary cultures are mutually constructed rather than hierarchically

organized across time and space. He argued that the critical standards of every literary culture have “a fundamental unity in spite of their cultural differences” (1952, “A Standard for Assesment for Sinhala Literature,” *Ceylon Daily News,* May 30). Looking at a literary text or a literary culture as having both shared elements and particularities is a nuanced postcolonial standpoint that suggests the potential to compare two literary cultures without harming their identities. This realization has contributed to the current rethinking within comparative literary criticism regarding the continued embrace of historically well-established binary structures, and the terminologies related to those binaries, in comparing different literatures.

The relevance and influence of Wickramasinghe’s literary theories in the emergence and evaluation of literary trends—both of which came after his lifetime—is worth considering. Wickramasinghe introduced two contributions to the critical study of literature. The primary contribution of his comparative approach is the idea that a literary tradition is not static but is always evolving with time. This forms the basis for his second theoretical contribution exemplified in the method of criticism for contemporary Sinhala literature he introduced in *Sinhala Vicāra Maga* (1964) in which he synthesized the principles of Pali and Western literary elements. There is a relationship between these two views in that while his comparative approach assumes that all literary traditions are temporary and subject to change, it also suggests that any tradition can be studied by focusing on its role in a particular time and place. In this way, Wickramasinghe demonstrates how the present study of contemporary Sinhala literature, which now includes post-realist fiction and fiction influenced by Christian and Tamil cultural

perspectives, must be viewed as an evolutionary process instead of in relation to a static corpus of canonical texts.

Wickramasinghe's comparative approach is reflected in both his analytical writing and fiction; in both, he strengthened modern Sinhala literature's attachments to older literary traditions while enriching it through concepts from other literary cultures. Later Sinhala fiction writers such as Simon Navagattegama (1940-2005), Ajit Tilakasena (1933), Manjula Wediwardena (1966), and many others have continued (consciously or unconsciously) to practice this approach. The groundbreaking works of Navagattegama and Tilakasena who began writing in the 1960s reflect the influence of Sinhala and Hindu folklore and old Buddhist literatures such as *Jātaka* stories and *Petavatthupakaraṇaya* as well as modern Western fiction. Wediwardena uses both Christian and Buddhist mythological elements in his fiction and poetry to introduce modernist effects in his texts. Although Wickramasinghe did not necessarily comment on post-realist fictional trends such as magic realism, mythic realism, post-modernism, or any fiction like that of Tilakasena or Navagattegama, his claim that modern fiction is an evolution of the old narratives facilitated their writings. Their fiction thus continues to strengthen this claim. As far as his criticism is concerned, I would also propose re-readings of the highly established literary figure E.R. Sarachchandra and a re-examination of the manner in which he and Wickramasinghe complemented each other in forming modern Sinhala literary discourse.

Wickramasinghe's comparative approach toward both creative writing and literary criticism has important implications and applicability for Sinhala creative writing in the twenty-first century. He grappled with many of the same questions that modern

comparative scholars are currently considering regarding, for example, how to be more inclusive, the politics of comparative methods, how to obliterate the hierarchical power relations embedded in given literary cultures, and how comparatists themselves are positioned within them. Wickramasinghe's innovative approach provides ample suggestions as to how to address these questions in the contemporary field. His numerous writings on literature and theory, having been read and re-read by generations, are evident in the writings of modern writers, though they do not explicitly or intentionally recognize his influence. By viewing Wickramasinghe in a comparatist context, it is my hope that his writings and also twentieth-century Sinhala literary history can be read anew. The new understandings of Wickramasinghe elaborated throughout this thesis serve as a first step toward a reimagining and enhancement of the multiple literary traditions within Sri Lanka and of comparative literary studies elsewhere in the world.

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