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A Cosmopolitan Literary Culture with a Façade of Nativism: A Re-evaluation of the Sinhala Literary Culture around 1956

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ABSTRACT

1956 is often treated as a certain culmination of Sinhala cultural nationalism and a turning point in the trajectory, intellectual and cultural, contributing towards the nationalist discourse of that era. The year is indeed a crucial juncture in Sinhala intellectual activity and numerous artistic, literary and scholarly works were produced that year. In the popular imagination 'the revolution of fifty' signified a victory in Sinhala nationalist politics that was set in motion in the early twentieth century. This paper takes a closer look at two aspects of that 'revivalist movement' and endeavors to see what it was made of: literary criticism and literary studies. From the beginning of the twentieth century Sinhala literary culture witnessed the appearance of new genres such as the novel and short story. Poetry which had an illustrious history, new forms and subgenres appeared. While print capitalism made book production ubiquitous, modern education produced numerous creative writers and scholars in literature and art leading to a significant growth in modern literary activities producing several masterpieces around the middle of the twentieth century. Thus, the revival of 1956 has many facets, and is hardly product of a cultural nationalist trend. This paper reveals that what is often taken to be an indigenous 'cultural revolution' in reality resulted from a confluence of ideas that had been in circulation in and around 1956 a year often described as a historical mark of a victory of the local, traditional, domestic, Sinhala, indigenous and so on. The aim is to show that underneath these rhetorical claims, there existed a richly cosmopolitan

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intellectual milieu which contributed to the phenomenon of the literary revolution of 1956.

Keywords: cultural revival, nativism, cosmopolitanism, interculturalism, literary criticism

1956 was a crucial juncture on many counts: it was the 2500th anniversary of the birth of Gauthama Buddha, celebrated with grand cultural flair and political rhetoric. 1956 also saw S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's electoral victory which largely rode the waves of Sinhala nationalism, and in popular imagination the second incident was a way of celebrating the first. Bandaranaike was seen as a Diyasena, a mythical/legendary hero of Sinhala culture, who was expected to rise up one day and 'reestablish the lost glory of [the] Buddha Sasana killing Christians and non-believers'(Obeyesekere 295). 56 was thought to be the year of Diyasena's arrival. In the cultural scene, 1956 is considered to be a turning point in the modern literature and art (Roberts 2). By that year, 'rural cultural elites such as Buddhist monks, Ayurveda doctors, [and] school teachers [had] ascended to claim state power and their ideologies became dominant and those ideologies played a crucial role in shaping [and] re-structuring postcolonial state mechanisms' (Devasiri 7-8).

The political-ideological movement that led to Bandaranaike's victory and the cultural-intellectual movement that resulted in a set of monumental literary and intellectual works indeed had many things in common. At crucial points, however, those two tendencies were at odds with each other. For example, modernist literary tendencies that led to the creation of memorable literary works at the University of Ceylon were reformist towards culture and tradition, while the nationalist political ideologies of the time were conservative, even reactionary, towards them. Those modernist literary works such as the poetry and fiction of Siri Gunasinghe, and the early novels of Gunadasa Amarasekara were not only modernist in their formal aspects but in content they were also critical of the cultural conservatism prevalent at the time.

One critic evaluating the significance of 1956 names two literary works and a play as texts that signify the value of that historical moment: *Viragaya*, a novel, by Martin Wickramasinghe, *Mas Le Neti Ata*, a collection of poems, by Siri Gunasinghe, and *Maname*, the play by Ediriweera Sarachchandra. The writer argues further that it was no secret that the novel, the collection of poem and play acquired a marked improvement after 1956 and that the texts mentioned above led in that growth. As the main reason for that development, the writer points out, the fact that the creators of those works were learned in classical works of world literature (Kashyapa 218-9). Though this writer attributes literary renaissance of 1956 to the cosmopolitan background of the writers in question,

in popular imagination the 'revolution of fifty-six' is associated with a revival of indigenous cultural traditions of the Sinhala people. This paper investigates the historical and theoretical background of the literary and artistic "boom" that took place in and around 1956. Though this 'boom' was visible in several art forms such as theatre and film I will only focus on the aspects of literature and literary criticism.

Maname, the play, based on a Buddhist Jataka story, written in a poetic idiom akin to the language of the classical poetry of the 15th century, choreographed in a style comprised of dances and signing associated with traditional dance, turned out to be an ideal of symbol to represent 'a cultural revival' in popular imagination. With its phenomenal success it was easy for nativists to celebrate the 'Sinhala Buddhist cultural revival.' Bandaranaike's coming to power in 1956 was seen as the culmination of a Sinhala cultural nationalist movement that had been active/in the process for decades. And in or around that year numerous other cultural and intellectual achievements were to be seen: Lester James Pieris' film, *Rekhawa*, Senarat Paranavitana's *Sigiri Graffiti*, Ralph Pieris' *Sinhalese Social Organization*. This extremely rich and diverse cultural contributions are often celebrated under the banner of Sinhala Buddhist cultural renaissance.

When Martin Wickramasinghe wrote his famous essay "Bamunu Kulaya Binda Wetima" ("the fall of colonial bourgeois/Brahmin class") which celebrates the electoral victory of Bandaranaike, by extension, he was also celebrating the 'cultural revival.' In the essay, Wickramasinghe argues that though Sri Lanka achieved nominal independence from the British in 1948, the country was ruled by a colonial bourgeois class which was like an English educated 'Brahmin (Bamunu) caste' whose mentor was the likes of Sir Ivor Jennings, the founding vice chancellor of the University of Ceylon and author of constitution of Independent Ceylon. Among other things, Wickramasinghe criticizes Jennings and his idea of the university for allegedly promoting a English educated upper class who wanted to create a little England in Sri Lanka (10).[2] Gunadasa Amarasekara, another influential nationalist thinker and writer, claims in his famous 1976 booklet that 1956 was the zenith of a cultural revival moment initiated decades earlier by Anagarika Dharmapala (14-5).

This paper closely examines the cultural and intellectual milieu of that cultural revival focusing only on literary criticism and literary studies. In doing so, the paper unravels complex cosmopolitan connections the literati of that time had developed with a variety of other cultures beyond their own. Taking a cue from contemporary thinkers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, this paper holds that

[2] This essay was published in *Rasavahini*, a magazine, in 1956 and won an award for the best essay and it was republished many times.

the cosmopolitan is a citizen of the world who is open to human wisdom and excellence found anywhere in the world without prejudice while maintaining a deep attachment to one's native traditions (2005, 2006). 'Rooted cosmopolitanism' elaborated on by Appiah (2005) seems a fitting term to explain the cultural contributions of nearly all intellectuals who created a vibrant literary culture during the middle of the twentieth century.

Literary Criticism around 1956: An Evaluation of Selected Scholars

Even a cursory look at literary criticism around 1956 is enough to prove that many different ideas from diverse theoretical traditions had entered Sinhala criticism by that time. The critical work of key figures of that era such as Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Martin Wickramasinghe and Kumaratunge Munidasa has received considerable scholarly attention. Ranjini Obeyesekere who devoted her doctoral dissertation to the subject of literary criticism in Sinhala has shown clearly that 'evaluative criticism' of modern literature that came into being in the middle of the 20th Century was heavily influenced by American New Criticism and Practical Criticism of England though it also contains significant influence of certain Sanskrit literary theories. Before the 20th Century, literary criticism was primarily based on Sanskrit literary theories (Ekanayake 1999, Obeyesekere 1974).

Literary criticism in a modern sense began with the publication of Sarachchandra's books *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* (1943) and *Sahitya Vidyava* (1949). It is important to review the key ideas expressed in these works. The first book is a basic introduction to modern fiction, which was a new form in Sinhala literary culture. It was the first ever book of that kind to be published in Sri Lanka. We will return to it when we discuss modern fiction later in this article. The second book was an explanation of literature in general and a basic guide to literary criticism, hence discussed here.

It was the first ever book of that kind to be published in Sri Lanka which literary work will be revisited in discussing modern fiction.

Sahitya Vidyava, developed out of a series of talks Sarachchandra had given on radio in 1946 and 1947, shows that there had been a steady inflow of new ideas on art and literature years before 1956. In fact, the inflow of new ideas seems to have preceded the publication of Sarachchandra's books. K.N.O. Dharmadasa's landmark paper on the 'Peradeniya School', discussing a modernist and experimentalist literary trend which flourished through 1940s to 60s, amply demonstrates that there was a demand for radical change in modern Sinhala literature even during the days of the University College of Ceylon (116). The

renowned university professors of the first generation, such as G.P. Malalasekara, were also setting the background for new literature to appear. It was no accident that Professor Malalasekara wrote an enthusiastic preface to Sarachchandra's earlier book *Modern Sinhalese Fiction.*

The very title of the book, *Sahitya Vidyava,* sounds modern: "the science of literature." The term "Vidyava" (science) in relation to literature did not take root, and no one else used it after that, though the book is still republished with the same title. Interestingly, Sarachchandra himself did not use the term in the text except on the last page of the book, and no explanation is given as to why the term "vidyava" (science) was ever used.[3] However this new terminology is significant evidence indicating that a certain novel way of thinking about literature was emerging.

In the preface to the first edition of the book, Sarachchandra states that he used 'a method of criticism used by contemporary critics to appreciate English poetry' (4). Then, he goes on to argue that that the method is not very different from that of the Alankara theorists of the East - a sweeping claim without much factual or conceptual evidence. The author is explicitly using the Alankara and Rasa concepts in his work but he does not directly indicate what he has borrowed from 'contemporary critics of English poetry.' In order to look for Sarachchandra's sources of influence in literary criticism, I compared the first edition of *Sahitya Vidyava* with E.F.C. Ludowyk's *Marginal Comments* (1945) and found some striking similarities between the two books. Ludowyk, the first ever Sri Lankan professor of English at the university of Ceylon was a pioneer in teaching modern literature at the university, and his *Marginal Comments* was one of the first guidebooks on modern literature to be published in Sri Lanka. His book and *Sahitya Vidyava* were handbooks for teaching literature at higher education institutions, mainly at the newly established university of Ceylon and at institutions where students are prepared for university entrance. Dharmadasa also believes that *Sahitya Vidyava* has the influence of *Marginal Comments* and that both books cover almost the same themes and topics (2004:131, 1992: 124.) The difference in the use of language in different contexts and genres are elaborately explained in both books. In doing so, the authors attempt to distinguish between 'literary' and other uses of language, which is a clear influence of Richard's books such as *Principles of Literary Criticism*.

Professor Ludowyk's book is much more systematic than Sarachchandra's, and all key texts he has referred to are meticulously cited. In Sarachchandra's book

[3] It is possible that I.A. Richards book *Science and Poetry* (1926), which is extensively cited in Ludowyk's *Marginal Comments*, may have inspired Saracchandra to use the word 'science' in his book's title.

the sources of his theories are not given. As Ludowyk was very much a disciple of practical criticism of England, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis are often cited in *Marginal Comments*.[4] Though writing in Sinhala, Sarachchandra was, albeit indirectly, participating in the literary theoretical discourse established by Richards and Leavis. Ranjini Obeyesekere has ample evidence to show that Sarachchandra's literary criticism was heavily influenced by practical criticism and the New Critics (42). Ludowyk's literary vision, however, seems much wider than that of Saracchandra's since the former touches on the phenomenon of high modernism in Europe while the latter focuses mostly on Sinhala classical literary works most recent of which was produced in the fifteenth century.

To be fair I must be observed that Sarachchandra did not have a deep pool of modern poetry in Sinhala in 1949 from which to draw examples for his exercise. He resorts mostly to classical examples. When the book was extensively revised in 1965, he still did not draw examples from contemporary poetry even though the field had become extremely rich and vibrant by the 1960s.[5] It seems that Sarachchandra had decided to distance himself from Ludowyk and others by that time, and the edition of *Sahitya Vidyava* bore much less resemblance to/had little in common with *Marginal Comments.*[6] Sarachchandra's sentence in the preface to the first edition that he was influenced by English criticism is not to be found in the second edition.

Though *Sahitya Vidyava* is still printed and used as a textbook at universities the 'science' in it is extremely limited. It does little to explain the literary writing even of its own time. Perhaps, this limitation comes from its being a textbook. Typically, a textbook closely follows a *curriculum*. The limited scope of such *curricular* at the time might have kept/prevented Sarachchandra from dealing with cutting edge literature. Hence, the conceptual gap between *Sahitya Vidyava* and *Marginal Comments*, which even touches on European high modernist texts such as Joyce's *Finnegan's' Wake* (9). Sarachchandra, however, ends the second edition

[4] He was a student of Leavis. Richards and Leavis had made literary studies in the UK something appealing to classes below British elites after the First World War (Eagleton 29-32), and their method must have been appealing to Ludowyk, the student from a small British colony.

[5] Since he had discussed some of new Sinhala literature in *Kalpana Lokaya*(1958) he must have thought it was unnecessary to discuss them again in revised *Sahitya Vidyava.*

[6] Sarachchandra's bitter experience with Neumann Jubal, a Hungarian theatre director, who had come to come to Peradeniya to conduct theatre workshops for students, seems to have led to a split between Sarachchandra and Ludowyk. Ludowyk had been instrumental in bringing Jubal to Sri Lanka. Though Sarachchandra wanted to produce some Sanskrit plays with the help of Jubal, Ludowyk had seen this project as "chauvinistic". In Sarachchandra's portrayal of the incident, Ludowyk appears to be 'pro-Western' (Sarachchandra 1997: 132-3). The theatre workshop became a place of conflict between Western and Eastern (indigenous) thoughts on art.

of his book with the following observation: "Even though there are invaluable books in Sanskrit on the 'science of literature… in practical criticism, today's critic has to learn Practical Criticism found in Western literature" (108). In addition to Sarachchandra, the writers who regularly contributed to famous literary journal *Sanskriti* from early 1950s have used different theoretical concepts borrowed from English Practical Criticism. It is argued that it was Gananath Obeyesekere who coined "bhavira vicaraya" in 1953(Weerasinghe 2012: xxvii)

Sarachchandra's second book on literary criticism, *Kalpana Lokaya* (1958), looks to be an attempt to explain the ontology of literature to those studying modern literature. Perhaps, he needed to explain what literature was because many people did not understand the nature of literature even in the middle of the century. Drawing on literary examples from both Eastern and Western sources, even more importantly from modern literature, Sarachchandra demonstrates that 'literature' is an imaginative world that exists parallel to the real world. He goes onto cite a real-life example of a friend, a budding fiction writer, who happened to give up writing fiction in the early years of the twentieth century simply because his immediate society, i.e. his teachers and parents, did not understand the difference between literature and the real world. Though he has some passing remarks on some Western literary works Sarachchandra quotes extensively from Sanskrit literary theory. In addition, citing some autobiographical information about the difference between his and some of his friends' real-life experiences and representations of those experiences in literary works. Thus, he elaborates on how an everyday experience can be transformed into a literary work. Apart from explaining the 'nature of literature (modern literature), Sarachchandra does something important in that book: He brings several different genres in modern Sinhala literary works, into a critical discourse on literature, and perhaps more importantly, to the institutional study of literature.

During the 1940s, there had been a certain upheaval in Sinhala literary studies in modern educational institutions taking up the systematic teaching of literature. It is worthwhile to linger a bit longer to briefly survey some other manuals of teaching literature at time and to ponder as to how they could have influenced the literary debates leading to the 1950s. *Sahityasevanaya* (Savoring Literature) published by Reverend Velivitiye Sorata in 1947 is one such book. The author states in his preface that the book was 'compiled at the strong request by several people who were preparing for the examination of Sinhala Teaching Certificate.' Drawing on traditional sources brilliantly, he explains how elegant Sinhala prose should be written. Then, he goes on to demonstrate the nature literary writing. The work remains a useful handbook on correct and elegant Sinhala prose and ornamented prose typically used in classical literature. He does not touch on the content of literary writing but merely explains stylistic qualities of literary expression. The last few pages of the book introduce the basics of Rasa theory -

a branch of Sanskrit literary theory that describes various flavors literary works can provide.

Sinhala literary criticism around 1956 does not show signs of the parochialism found in later manifestations of Sinhala cultural nationalism. Some of the key critics during the decades prior to and after 1956 had been informed by both Sinhala literary traditions and Western literary theories. The work of Sarachchandra Wickramasuriya is a case in point. Wickramasuriya was a scholar attached the department of English at the University of Ceylon, and a key figure in literary critical discourse during 1950s and 60s.

Let us first look at an excellent review essay he wrote of Gunadasa Amarasekara's *Guruluvata* (1962), a long poem, in which the poet attempts to discover an 'indigenous' poetic form. Amarasekara seems to have wanted to invent a modern poetic form that would serve as an alternative to European modernism. In that sense, what he aspired to was to do what Sarachchandra had done in the field of theater: find an indigenous idiom for modern poetry. According to Wickramasuriya, Amarasekara's attempt was to create a synthesis of ancient Sinhala literary tradition and 'modern literary intentions' (7-9). For Wickramasuriya traditional Sinhala literature and modern literature differ in their respective aims. While the aim of traditional Sinhala literature was religious and the aim of modern literature was to 'artistically express the author's personal experience' (5).

In demonstrating that Amarasekara's poem does not achieve its goal, though the poem was an important landmark in the Sinhala poetry, Wickramasuriya draws equally on local literary knowledge and Western literary theory. Even though Amarasekara uses the elements of mythologies as the central metaphors/motifs of his poem, Wickramasuriya argues that since those myths are not known and have not taken root in the consciousness of the readers, the poem fails to make the intended impact. In making that claim, he cites as example the work of D.H. Lawrence, W.B. Yeats, Charles Baudelaire and so on, in whose work he claims the use of mythic elements has produced the desired poetic effect. And Wickramasuriya goes onto show that Amarasekara himself was influenced by these Western poets in his search for 'indigenous' forms.

A.M.G. Sirimanne, another scholar attached to the department of English, wrote several books demonstrating the use of 'practical criticism' and its influence on criticism in Sinhala. His efforts culminated in a book titled *Bhavita Vicaraya* (1961), which literally means "practical criticism." It is a guide for literary appreciation and an introduction to "Practical Criticism of theorists such as F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards. Since the book is based on a series of radio talks that

he has delivered on national radio in 1954, the ideas articulated in the book likely had a direct impact on the critical discourse that was taking shape in the 1950s.

Sirimanne begins his book paying tribute to previous introductions to modern literary criticism such as Sarachchandra' *Sahitya Vidyava* (1949) and Martin Wickramsinghe's *Sahitya Kalawa*(1950). Then, he goes on to argue, quite rightly, that though those books are important beginnings they do not introduce any coherent theoretical concepts. For him, one needs to return to English criticism, in particular to Richards', in order to find the origin of modern literary critical concepts. As he contends, Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) signify a 'definite moment in literary critical theory'(10).

Sirimanne agrees that contemporary Sinhala literature needed some sort of nurturing critical intervention, and he praises Sarachchandra for making an effort to do the necessary. Sirimanne recognizes, however, that Sarachchandra is split between two tendencies prevalent during those days: on the one hand literary critics needed to find a form of practical criticism to evaluate the increasing modern literary output in Sinhala. For that task one needs to develop connections with the world outside. On the other hand, during those days, nationalist sentiments were also on the rise and one needed to celebrate the 'nobility of national heritage.' For Sirimanne, in *Sahitya Vidyava*, Sarachchandra is in the grip of the second tendency (12-3). Sirimanne's observation appears to be brilliant/noteworthy/groundbreaking when those debates are examined nearly fifty years later.[7]

He argues that there is no use in claiming 'our literary critical tradition is equal to Western literary critical tradition,' as Sarachchandra does in his book. After all, he shows, Sarachchandra is equating British criticism *of that time* to Western literary criticism in general. He states further that "what we have to do today is find gaps in our contemporary literary criticism and to fill those gaps. If we do not have a good method of literary criticism we need to accept in public a good critical method that is suitable for us (14).

Sirimanne's book is a scathing criticism of the rampant nativism that existed with regard to literary criticism in 1950s. It was argued by nativists that theories such as *Rasa* found in Sanskrit literary criticism was sufficient for appreciating modern poetry. Sirimanne devotes his first chapter to demonstrate that the nine *Rasa*s are

[7] Sarachchandra's split-consciousness needs to be understood historically. By 1940s and 50s nearly all Sinhala intellectuals felt that rediscovery of Sinhala language heritage and resisting the encroachment of English language Sinhala cultural life were integral to the process of decolonization. P. B. Balasuriya's *Sihala Bas Hatana*(1955) and K.D. P. Wickramasinghe's *Sinhalaya ha Rajya Bhashava* (1956) demonstrate the extreme cultural nationalist sentiments existed prior to 1956 in relation to everything about Sinhala.

a kind of labelling poetry rather than analytically showing why and how a certain work of poetry is praiseworthy in poetic quality. In all nine chapters of the book Sirimanne makes the case that what is considered 'indigenous' literary theories were not sufficient for producing worthwhile literary analysis, and goes onto argue that some of the celebrated classical Sinhala literary works fail to provide a modern reader with a rewarding literary experience. In his analysis of *Hansa Sandesaya,* Sirimanne claims that the classical messenger poem 'does not deepen our understanding of human life' (116).

Sirimanne introduces a host of new literary critical terms in Sinhala which differ from those borrowed from Sanskrit. "Image", "Symbol", "Rhythm" being some of them. The Sinhala term for "image," seems to have been coined by him: "*vadan citraya*" ('word-picture'). He borrows concepts and terms such as "image" from European modernists and symbolists in order to argue that real poetry is not simply didactic preaching, but an exercise in portraying something figuratively. In a time when cultural nationalist rhetoric was pervasive Sirimanne does not shy away from stating that modern Sinhala literature needs to borrow literary theoretical concepts from the West in order to develop as an art and to be able to address modern human experience.

The author's outright rejection of Sanskrit literary theories and classical Sinhala literature is a bit too hurried and superficial. Even today, the terms of Sanskrit literary theory such as Rasa, Dhavani, Alankara, Chamatkara are commonly used even in literary criticism heavily influenced contemporary literary theory. And there are some classical Sinhala poems such as *Kavsilumina*, that can 'deepen our understanding of human life.' But in writing this book, Sirimanne seems to have wanted to provide some antidotes to prevalent nativism and cultural relativism found in the literary scene in 1950s. He was perhaps provoked by Sarachchandra's superficial claims in *Sahitya Vidyava*. Saracchandra's hesitation in accepting English practical criticism that had been introduced to Sri Lankan literary studies through the work of Ludowyk resulted from another factor: from the about the middle of 19th century there was some vibrant literary and scholarly activity publicized through Sinhala newspapers and periodicals where considerable attention was given to Sanskrit literary theoretical concepts. A Ceylon branch of the Royal Asiatic Society had also been established in 1845, and they had also begun to study local literary traditions. Such research led to intense discussions on literary theories such as *Alankaravada (*The theory of Literary Ornamentation). Moreover, classicists such as Munidasa Kumaratunge had also used Sanskrit literary theoretical concepts in his scholarly essays and editions of classical Sinhala literary works.[8]

[8] Accounts of different length and focus on these activities are found in Obeyesekare (1974), Dharmadasa (1992).

In addition, as I pointed out earlier, Rev. Velivitiye Sorata had published a handbook on literary appreciation entirely based some concepts taken from Sanskrit literary theory. The book, *Sahitya Sevanaya* (1947), was intended to be a textbook for those were taking the exam of 'Sinhala Teacher's Certificate- a national exam that no longer exists. Given this wider context, Sarachchandra may have thought to take a 'middle path' looking for good things in both Sanskrit and Western (English) criticism. An even more interesting argument is that Sarachchandra used Sanskrit literary terms "that closely paralleled modern western concepts" in order to "transfer modern western literary theory" in to Sinhala literary discourse (Obeyesekere: 1974: 48). Observed closely, one can see that Obeyesekere has a point: Sarachchandra's use of Sanskrit terms absorbs into them the meanings of New Critical terms. Perhaps, the meanings of terms of New Critics too are also enriched with what they acquire from Sanskrit.

In this context Sarachchandra seems to have considered creating a synthesis of Sanskrit and 'Western' literary theories. Written in the form of textbook for the novices of literary studies, *Sahitya Vidyava* is not a product of intense scholarly research and theoretical reflection. Though Sirimanne claims that Sarachchandra was only making some superficial comparisons, the latter by no means seems to have intended his book to be an in-depth analysis of two literary theoretical traditions. We need to take the book for what it really is: a beginner's guide to the study of modern literature in a time where there no such books were readily available. After all, Sarachchandra's book, as was stated earlier in its first edition, was also a collection of talks given over Radio Ceylon. Sirimanne, however, was right in arguing that Sarachchandra should have openly acknowledged his indebtedness to 'new literary criticism of Cambridge' (14). What is important for us in this paper is to see that Sirimanne's book has introduced a new dimension to the literary cultural discourse of the period.

In fairness to Sarachchandra, one must also realize that his reluctance to openly acknowledge the importance of European literary theories in creating a modern form of criticism in Sinhala may be a reaction to the dominance of Western culture during his formative years. It may also have to do with the influence of nationalist sentiments during those days- especially the influence of Anagarika Dharmapala. Sarachchandra, as a young, man came under the influence of Dharmapala through Gunapala Malalasekare who was Sarachchandra's teacher at the University College of Ceylon. The atmosphere of the University College was dominated by an 'imperialist colonial' culture' when Sarachchandra was a student there. Only Malalasekara, who had changed his original name George Peiris to Gunapala Piyasena maintained respect for national culture and national dignity (Dharmadasa 1992: 115). In describing the cultural milieu of those days,

Dharmadasa translates a section from Sarachchandra's memoir, *Pin Ati Sarasavi Varamak Denne*:

> In the University College which had a colonialist culture and an imperialist atmosphere, the only person who attempted to create a feeling of national self-respect was Professor Malalasekara. We, who were Sinhala-speaking, and studying Oriental languages, felt that we were people of low status. I believe that a few of us, under the leadership given by Malalasekara were imbued with a nationalist feeling as a protest against the anti-national atmosphere in our institution (Dharmadasa 115).

In addition, as Dharmadasa convincingly shows/demonstrates, traditional classicist scholars outside the university system such as members of *Hela Havula,* often attacked everyone associated with Oriental studies at the University College claiming that they lacked in real knowledge of indigenous languages and traditions (115). Before long, Martin Wickramasinghe also began attacking Sarachchandra for being overly pro-Western. [9] It is thus natural that Sarachchandra did not want to make a radical break from indigenous culture. In the middle of the 20th century, the background/context was completely different from today with direct colonialism ending in 1948 and post-colonial cultural nationalism rapidly rising. At that time modern Sinhala literature was showing a phenomenal growth making it essential to have a new form of practical criticism to sustain a public discourse on literature. Yet, again even in his first book *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* (1943), Sarachchandra was not afraid of using modern Western fiction as the norm for evaluating Sinhala fiction. But Sirimanne is right in pointing out that Sarachchandra did not make a comprehensive study of Western and Eastern literary critical traditions, even though he made sweeping statements comparing them. In that sense, Sarachchandra's literary consciousness is a classic example of the workings of an intellectual mind in a post-colonial condition- split between two traditions, caught between two sets of rhetoric, still wanting to part with his rich cosmopolitan taste.

When Sirimanne's book came out, Sarachchandra was the 'doctor' of the Sinhala literary scene and his influence had spread to/over nearly all areas of contemporary culture. Yet, *Sanskriti*, the main journal committed to propagating new ideas on art and literature, took Sirimanne's book quite seriously and brought the idea of "*Bhavita vicaraya*" (practical criticism) to the center of literary critical discourses. Amaradasa Weerasinghe, one of the editors of the journal, argues that *Bhavita vicaraya* (practical criticism) can be utilized in distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic literary art ("Bhavita Vicaraya"51).

[9] Wickramasinghe indirectly challenged some assumptions of Sarachchandra found in *Modern Sinhalese Fiction*, and by 1950s, Wickramasinghe's resentments towards the University of Ceylon was directed at Sarachchandra himself. See Wickramsinghe (1956), (1965), and (1968).

Eminent critics who contributed to *Sanskriti* through the 1950s and 60s also held that adopting the conventions of 'English criticism' was needed in order to develop a practical literary critical tradition in the field of modern literature in Sinhala. Dharmasiri Ekanayake was, along with Gananath Obeyesekere and H. L. Seneviratne, among the most noted critics of the time. In his essay, on 'English literary criticism and Sinhala literature' Ekanayake, who had studied both Sinhala and English at the university, forcefully argues that 'English literary theories are essential for analyzing Sinhala literature.' In order to support his argument, he states that though human beings are different in their cultural appearance, they are similar internally and hence, literature has a universal appeal. Since English literary criticism also has a universal appeal of that kind it can be used for practical literary criticism both in the East and the West (24-5). For Ekanayake a good work of literature is something with trans-historical and universal meanings of human life. Today with the advent of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, feminism and the like, one may easily challenge the 'universality of literary merit' and argue for diverse contextualized functions of literature. But the belief in the universality in literature itself may have reflected the influence of 'English' criticism. Ekanayake cites fifteen reasons to explain why English criticism should be used to develop a tradition of literary criticism in Sinhala. All those reasons echo the literary criticism of Richards and Leavis - a point I do not have space to elaborate on. Ekanayake claims: "Sinhala literature does not have a local tradition of criticism. Though this is an unpleasant truth one has to accept it." Then, he goes to argue that in order to develop a tradition of criticism in Sinhala, it is essential borrow concepts from vibrant literary critical traditions such as English and French. Some schools of Sanskrit literary criticism such *Dhvani* will be of some help but theories such as *Alankara* will be of little significance in that regard. For us to have a fully developed modern literary critical discourse he argues we have to look into literary traditions such as Greek, Latin, English, French, Italian, German, Chinese, Japanese and so on(30-2). Summarizing his arguments, Ekanayake says, "No rich literature in this has ever developed without taking nourishment from some other literature… If a literature remains isolated for a long time without being influenced by any other foreign literature, the vitality of that literature withers away and eventually dies" (31).

Ekanayake ends his essay claiming that those who are against being influenced by Western criticism are three-fold: (1) those who do not have a good grasp of Western criticism, (2) those who have been misled by extreme nationalism and (3) famous writers who are worried that Western criticism might reveal weaknesses of their literary work (34).

Dharmasiri Ekanayake's numerous essays on literature and criticism have been informed by theoretical tools taken from many different scholars, writers and

thinkers. That borrowing has often been quite eclectic without any systematic alignment with a specific theoretical school. That has been the case nearly always in Sinhala literary culture: writers and critics needing some conceptual tools to do the work at hand freely borrow ideas and make use of them. Perhaps, that is how ideas traveled/seeped in to any literary culture. In relation to modern Sinhala fiction too, Ekanayake has emphasized the need of learning from the West. We will return to him in this regard in the next section.

Debates around the Origin, Art and Criticism of Modern Sinhala Fiction

The art of modern Sinhala fiction has also witnessed an ideological confrontation between nativists and 'pro-westerners' or 'internationalists' in the mid-twentieth century. By that time Sinhala literary culture had produced some masterpieces in fiction - numerous short stories by Martin Wickramasinghe, G.B. Senanayake (and others) and novels such as Wickramasinghe's *Viragaya*. The debate associated with the art of fiction was primarily regarding its origins.

Beginning with his *Vichara Lipi* (Essay in Criticism) in 1941, Wickramasinghe labours to demonstrate that in terms of characterization and plot development modern fiction is not very different from the Buddhist narratives found in Sinhala classics such as *Saddharamaratnavaliya* (13th century) and *Jataka Potha* (14th century). Two years later, Sarachchandra's *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* (1943) attempts to evaluate Sinhala fiction that had been published to date. Sarachchandra's book implicitly takes the Western naturalist/realist novel as the ideal form against which Sinhala novels must/need to be evaluated, and he finds very little to be happy about the Sinhala novel up to the early forties. Yet, he sees Wickramasinghe's short stories to be admirable literary works. By the time Sarachchandra revised his book in 1950, Wickramasinghe had produced two of his novelistic masterpieces, *Gamaperaliya* (1944) and *Yuganthaya* (1949). For Sarachchandra, these books represented the best literary realism in Sinhala.

A key argument on the similarity between modern fiction (novel and short story) and classical Buddhist narratives begins to surface with Wickramasinghe's *Sinhala Sahityaye Nagima* (1946), where he argues that in terms of introducing the reader to the complexities of human character the Buddhist Jataka stories are similar to modern fiction. He concludes that 'one can learn some key aspects of novels from the Jataka stories-'(*Nagima* 240) an argument he kept repeating throughout his career in several other books such as *Bana Katha Sahitya* (1956), *Buddhist Jataka Stories and the Russian Novel* (1957), *Navakathanga ha Viragaya* (1965), and *Jataka Katha Vimasuma* (1968). In fact, he puts forward this argument directly and emphatically for the first time in 1951 in an essay added to his collection of stories, *Vahallu*. Since his argument achieves a book-length expression in, *Jataka*

Katha Vimasuma let me focus on that book. Wickramasinghe's repeated attempts to define modern Sinhala fiction as a modern incarnation of classical Buddhist narratives was a reaction to Sarachchandra's failure, in his 1943 book, to see any connection between the two traditions.[10]

In the restricted space of the present essay, I will summarize only two elements of Wickramasinghe's claim that the *Jataka* stories are similar to modern fiction:

1. *Jataka* stories deal with complex psychologies of human characters: for example, the *Asatamanta Jataka* is about an aging mother of a famous teacher to whom many young men come from many parts of the country seeking knowledge and wisdom. One good-looking young man arrives at the teacher's school and he is entrusted with taking care of the teacher's frail mother. When massaging her body, the young man begins to praise her beauty of which marks of beauty are still left on her aging body. The young man's words arouse her sexual feelings, and, she plots to kill her son, the teacher, so that she can make love to the young man. Wickramasinghe claims that this story can be compared with Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamasov* in terms of the psychological complexities of the characters. This argument rests on the 'content' of both genres (137-8).[11]

2. Wickramasinghe argues further that the Jataka stories are similar to modern fiction through the cause and effect realism found in both. In many Jataka stories events are connect to one another through causality, and, therefore, they have 'plots.' A well-constructed plot is a mark of a good novel, he claims, and goes to elaborate on a causality-driven plot drawing on an example from a Jataka story:

> "The son of king Dharmapala died; the king's wife also died; the king married another queen. This is a story."
>
> This is a *story* similar to the ones found in *Arabian Nights*, says Wickramasinghe.

[10] While Wickramasinghe's *Navakathanga ha Viragaya* (1965) is an indirect response to Sarachchandra, he added a separate essay to that book in order to attack Sarachchandra and Sinhala literary studies at the University of Ceylon. His *Sinhala Navakathava ha Japan Kamakatha Hevanell*a (1969) is also even more unjustified attack on Sarachchandra and Peradeniya University, where he accuses modernist fiction written during that time as being influenced by Japanese erotic novels.

[11] He was arguing that that Jataka stories and modern novels are similar in terms to portraying psychologically complex characters all through in 1950s. See Wickramasinghe (1951) and (1956).

> "When the king arrived in his bed chambers, the queen continued to cuddle her infant child. Angered by that act, the king had the baby killed. Unable to bear the sorrow, the queen killed herself.
>
> This is not just a story but also a plot that is built on causality. This, causality, is one key aspect that separates [the] novel from an ancient story (145-6)."

This example taken from a Jataka story is eloquently used to make the case that the cause and effect realism of modern fiction is found in the Jataka stories. Interestingly, the basic definitions of 'story' and 'plot' are taken from E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* where Forster states: "'The King died, then the queen dies' is a story", while " 'the king died, then the queen died of grief' is a plot". Though, Wickramasinghe never cites Forster in *Jataka Kata Wimasuma*, it is clear from *Navakathanga ha Viraragaya* (1965) that he knew Forster's book by heart. In fact, the title of the book can be translated as "Aspects of the Novel and Viragaya." Sri Lankan appropriation of *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), a collection of lectures given at Cambridge University, has an interesting history to which we will return in the paragraphs to come. What happened to Forster's theories in Sri Lanka reminds one of Edward Said's idea of travelling theory where he shows that when theories 'travel and are used elsewhere they sometimes acquire prestige and authority, even becoming a kind of dogmatic orthodoxy' (437).

In 1965, Wickramasinghe set out to write a book explaining his own masterpiece *Viragaya,* a novel that had led/given rise to many literary and cultural debates.[12] The book is in fact an exposition of the art of the novel, taking *Viragaya* as the central example. Wickramasinghe's book appears to be a book-length conversation between his novel *Viragaya* and Foster's exposition of the art of fiction as found in E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*. In that conversation one can see two great minds at work. Perhaps, the Sinhala novelist is the best ever reader to engage in such a creative and sustained reading of Forster's work.

Wickramasinghe's book is an extensive analysis of the concept of 'prophecy' as explained in *Aspects of the Novel*. For him, other aspects of the novel such as story, plot, pattern, and character – all of which are explained in Foster's book-, are rather technical, whereas 'prophecy' is an aspect that arises as the result of all other aspects and gives the novel a visionary quality that creates a certain overarching vision of human life in general. According to Wickramasinghe this element is extremely rare in Western novels.

[12] For a recent discussion on this modern Sinhala classic, see Amarakeerthi 2019.

Forster's discussion of 'prophecy' is the most difficult in respect of the concept of the novel. At times he seems to be speaking of a universal humanitarian vision, about the tragic sense of life that arises from the novel as a result of the integration of all technical elements:

> Prophetic fiction, then, seems to have definite characteristics. It demands humility and the absence of the sense of humour. It reaches back—though we must not conclude from the example of Dostoevsky that it always reaches back to pity and love (136).

As examples of novelists with prophetic quality, Forster presents Fyodor Dostoyevsky, D.H. Lawrence, Herman Melville, George Elliot, and Emily Bronte. In their novels, there is a certain mystic quality of various degrees and, therefore, they are able to capture certain unknown areas of human life that rationality cannot reach. This element of mysticism that exists beyond reason is appealing to Wickramasinghe.[13] When Western novels have that element in them, they show some affinity with the Eastern thought. Thus, he claims, Buddhist Jataka stories too have what Foster calls 'prophecy.' For him, Eastern literature is naturally qualified to contain the element of prophetic quality: "Western novels with that aspect [prophecy] are extremely rare because rationality and materialistic philosophy are covering over the social life of the West as a hen sitting on her eggs (381)"

Wickramasinghe's appropriation of *Aspects of the Novel* shows both his fertile and intellectually shrewd mind: He uses Forster's book to claim that Jataka stories are similar to modern fiction since they have plots built on causality. His argument is that Jataka stories are similar to Western fiction since they are grounded in rationality. Thus, in *Navakathanga Ha Viragaya* his primary argument is that, since Jataka stories (and other Eastern tales) contain 'prophetic elements' they are similar to Western novels with same elements. His argument is that the Jataka stories are similar to some great Western novels since they transcend rationality.

The space allowed in this paper does not allow me to continue with this extremely engaging text of Wickramasinghe's. Yet, the importance of in this discussion is already clear: Modern Sinhala fiction is not something directly borrowed from the West, instead, it evolved from the classical Buddhist narratives, especially the Jataka tales.

Wickramasinghe's claim can be contested on many counts if we were to take it merely as an argument about the evolution of Sinhala fiction. This is not the case.

[13] Wickramasinghe's book *The Mysticism of Lawrence* (1951) is also an offshoot of his encounter with Forster's book.

He was also taking part in the cultural nationalist discourse in search of an identity, a lost one perhaps, a few years after the end of colonial rule. Ideas presented in book form have been presented in journalistic form even during the period of colonial rule. Wickramasinghe himself seems to have been aware of the difficulty in claiming that Sinhala literary culture did not borrow modern fiction from the West. At times, his confusion slips out into his prose: Piyadasa Sirisena's novels were not great as works of art because he decided not to be influenced by the Western novels (46-7). Wickramasinghe is not a parochial nativist, and he spent nearly all his life developing interests and connections with various intellectual discourses outside of the island: "Independence we inherited from Pali literature and Sinhala culture is not a dried up, rigid stick. It is like a kind wax that can be molded any way we want. What we take from other literatures should be reshaped putting them in that our mold and used for our original creations" (379).

In addition to Wickramasinghe, the most prolific and influential Sri Lankan writer and intellectual of the 20th century, numerous others also entered the debate on modern Sinhala fiction, its origin and art.

Dharmasiri Ekanayake, encountered earlier, is one such intellectual. His essay "Nawakathawe Akrutiya"(the form of the novel) deserves some attention here. The essay has been written in 1961(obviously before the publication of Wickramsinghe's book discussed earlier), a few years after the publication of several landmark Sinhala novels, and it is one of the first to elaborate on the craft of fiction writing. By then the novel and short story had taken root, and the fact that the art of fiction requires a different type of technical knowledge and craftsmanship had also been established. Ekanayake's essay endeavors to widen the knowledge in the field of fiction writing and draws on the ideas presented by Edwin Muir, Alan Tate and Edith Wharton, in their books, *The Structure of the Novel*, *Technique of Fiction*, and *The Writing of Fiction*. Most importantly perhaps, he extensively cites E.M. Forster's *The Aspects of the Novel*. Thus, as examples supporting the techniques described in the essay, Ekanayake mentions writers such as Dickens, Thackeray, Stevenson, Dumas, Jane Austen, Fielding, Tolstoy, Lawrence, Joyce and many others. In addition, he supports his arguments, providing examples from Sinhala writers such as Amarasekara, Senanayake, and Wickramasinghe.

A large part of the essay is committed to introducing two important concepts taken from *The Aspects of the Novel*: story and plot. Following Forster, Ekanayake argues that careful designing of a plot is an essential aspect of a novel (14-5). Furthermore, he emphasizes the fact that the art of the novel has its own form, and challenges the idea that '[a] novel is a poem without its own unique form (26). These arguments were made when Sinhala fiction writing and criticism were

developing their own conceptual tools, vocabularies, technical terms and so on. In his essay, Ekanayake uses a new Sinhala term for "plot" ("katha ratawa") instead of what Martin Wickramasinghe used ("*wasthuwa*"). Though Ekanayake's term did not take root in Sinhala literary discourse, it appears to be a very good rendition of the concept of plot.[14]

These kinds of formal theories about the art of novel writing are not found in earlier scholarly writing about the Sinhala novel. The first ever academic book on the Sinhala novel, Sarachchandra's *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* (1943) and its revised version *The Sinhalese Novel* (1951) do not draw on concepts such as form, story or plot. In fact, Sarachchandra does not seem to have been familiar with the books on the craft of modern fiction such as *The Aspects of the Novel*.

Theoretical concepts of the modern novel, entered through English scholarly books, shaped the idea of modern Sinhala fiction. While Sarachchandra utilized numerous Western concepts to evaluate Sinhala fiction at that time, Wickramasinghe argued that the idea of fiction, especially the short story was a continuation of traditional Sinhala literature such as the Jataka stories. In other words, for him the genre of the short story was not something borrowed from the West (1951, 1955, 1957,). The argument, repeatedly expressed throughout his career, was that the Buddhist Jataka stories are/were similar to Western fiction in their subject matter. The argument found its most pronounced form in *Jataka Kata Wimasuma* (The Analysis of Jataka Stories) in 1968. The debate around the origin of Sinhala fiction was made intense by the cultural-political atmosphere of the society at that time rather than by the intensity of the facts involved in that debate. In other words, the facts were obvious enough to show that the idea of modern fiction entered the Sinhala literary scene from the West. Wickramasinghe was perhaps the best person to know it. His claim that the Sinhala short story is not a borrowed genre but a continuation of the traditional narratives such as the Jataka stories, was not convincing during that time, and it does seem anymore convincing today. His own short stories remind one of European realism rather than Jataka stories. In fact, in his early years as a writer he closely imitated some short stories by writers such as Guy de Maupassant (Suravira 1981: xvii, Wickaramasuriya 1981: xxxviii).

Sarachchandra Wickramasuriya, a lecturer attached to the department of English, wrote several books in Sinhala. *Navakata Vivaranaya* (1963) is perhaps the best book of its time to explain the inner makeup of the genre of the novel. It is not surprising that the book was published with an enthusiastic foreword by Ediriweera Sarachchandra himself. Wickramasuriya states in his preface that he wanted to introduce the theories of the novel found in books such E. M. Forster's

[14] "Katha Ratawa" means "the pattern of the story."

Aspects of the Novel, Edwin Muir's *The Structure of the Novel*, Robert Liddle's *A Treatise on the Novel* and Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction.* But something interesting happens when he begins the book proper: He closely follows Katherine Lever's *The Novel and the Reader*, which had been published in 1961 consequently acquired by the library of the University of Peradeniya in the same year. At times Wickramasuriya quotes from that book citing relevant pages. But most of the time he simply glosses Lever's ideas in Sinhala without citing at all. What is important for us to know is that one of the key books that advanced the knowledge on the art of fiction in Sinhala has been heavily influenced by the English language literary thought of the time. The Following sentences of Lever appear as exact translations in Wickramasuriya's first chapter without proper citation: "Before we start consideration of the art of the novel, we should be sure we know what a novel is.", "His fist task is to be sure that the book in hand is in fact a novel at all. The nature of the novel being what it is, this task is more difficult than one might suppose.", "The primary difficulty is that in common usage of the word novel often denotes all types of book-length fiction."

Wickramasuriya is not only plagiarizing; he goes as far as to adopt some of those foreign ideas with remarkable creativity and sensitivity. He must have found Lever's book to be one of the most accessible books to model his own book on in his effort towards introducing new theoretical concepts of modern fiction.

His translation of Lever's definition of the novel: "A novel is the form of written prose narrative of considerable length involving the reader in an imagined real world which is new because it has been created by the author" (16) has been used repeatedly since then in teaching the art of the novel both at schools and universities. Many of us repeat the Sinhala version of that sentence without knowing that the thought in the sentence actually belongs to a female British scholar.

In explaining other elements of the novel such as "plot" and "character" Wickramasuriya draws heavily on E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel.* In his discussion on those topics too one finds places of 'plagiarism' similar to to the instance shown above. At the same time, Wickramasuriya is excellent in elaborating those borrowed points with local examples. This book along with his other book, *Sinhala Navakathawe Vikashanaya*, published in the same year, provided a significant grounding for the development of Sinhala novel in the decades that followed. And they were the key theoretical treatises on the art of fiction after Sarachchandra's *The Sinhalese Novel* published in 1950, which is an extensively revised version of his 1943 book, *Modern Sinhalese Fiction*. In addition, he uses creatively borrowed ideas to make a case for an artistically refined novel in Sinhala.

1956 is a turning point in Sinhala cultural history when some of the relatively grander events took place. Grand events are often subject to multiple interpretations. What happened in and around 1956 in the arena of Sinhala literary culture has two diverging interpretations: it was considered a revival of indigenous culture and a renaissance activated by a group of cosmopolitan men and women. Our examination of just two areas of Sinhala literary culture demonstrates that the nativist interpretation of this cultural history is the farthest from the truth. Yet, a rootless cosmopolitan explanation will not suffice either. Only a rooted cosmopolitan history of modern culture can capture the cultural upheaval of Sri Lanka of the 1950s. It is only a kind of approach that can adequately explain any moment of cultural history of an Island, whose fate is/was to be increasingly decided by extreme forms of parochialism.

As was discussed earlier, the cosmopolitan is an individual open to the advancement of human knowledge, wisdom, and culture regardless of where it happens and who leads such advancements. Those literary intellectuals, who were at the forefront of literary and cultural achievements of the 1950s in Sinhala literary culture, have been cosmopolitans in that sense. Those renaissance figures, however, were "not the hard-core cosmopolitan[s] who regards [their] friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality"(Appiah 2006: xvii). All the intellectuals and writers I have focused on above had deep attachments to their own cultures and traditions. That attachment was one key factor that made them look beyond their own native culture in order to enrich their own culture. In that sense there were 'rooted cosmopolitans' to borrow Appiah's term. For him, it is the cosmopolitanism worth defending not the objectivist aloofness and indifference that has no attachment to any place or a community. And all the key intellectuals above knew the meaning of an African proverb that Appiah uses as the closing statement of a chapter: "*Kuru korõ mu nni nyansa*: In a single city, there is no wisdom" (Appiah 2005: 272.). They knew that Sinhala literary culture had to learn from elsewhere; some of them stated it directly and publicly, some of them indirectly and publicly, some of them directly but privately. Some of them never accepted it publicly or privately; but that should not take anything away from their rooted cosmopolitanism and make them parochial.

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