

Sinhalese Literary and Cultural Aesthetics: Martin Wickramasinghe's Novels *Gamperaliya* and *Viragaya*

This paper explores the ways in which a literary narrative set within a specific cultural frame may enhance or challenge our understanding of that culture. Generally, literature collapses large encompassing discourses of nation or culture into private and intimate stories that emerge from the writer's perspective. Writers utilize multifarious and multidimensional aesthetic strategies to reconfigure the static objectivity of discourse. Predominant among them is emotional resonance. I base this essay on the view that emotions themselves are culture specific and help build frameworks that provide insights into a culture's or sub-culture's 'emotionology'.¹ By discussing the ways in which Martin Wickramasinghe aestheticizes political and cultural discourse in his classic literary novels *Gamperaliya* and *Viragaya* I aim to draw out important features of Sri Lanka's unique Sinhalese-Buddhist cultural tradition.²

Due to its central location in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka is perennially open to culture flows from both East and West. The earlier influences were informal, mainly through trade and settlements that filtered in from various directions. While India has remained the most formidable influence on Sri Lankan culture, from around the fifteenth century, Western colonization had a profound effect. However, despite various foreign powers entering and overpowering the country's political life, the Sinhalese aesthetic tradition has retained and developed its own "special character throughout the over two millennia of its existence in the island of Sri Lanka".³

Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language brought to Sri Lanka by northeast Indians around sixth century BC, gradually became restricted almost exclusively to the island. Significant poetical and critical work surviving at least from the seventh century seem to prove that the Sinhala language along with Tamil, was the first local language (*desabasha*) of literature in South Asia.⁴ In the ninth century, as it formally transformed into a literary language, its aesthetic features were set out in the ninth century poetic handbook, *Siyabaslakara* (poetics of one's own language). An adaptation of the Sanskrit treatise on poetics, *Kavyadarsa*, is one of the earliest extant literary texts in Sinhala.⁵

When Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka from India in 250 BC, it pervaded the island's culture, which was, at the time, a mix of indigenous and Aryan civilizations. Buddhism became its major philosophy, reforming and integrating the Sinhalese aesthetic and cultural traditions from within. Importantly, Sinhala language and literature intermingled with Buddhism to such an extent that key aesthetic terms found in the *Siyabaslakara* – such as *guna* (quality), *dosa* (blemish), *alankara* (ornament), *marga* (path), *rasa* (transforming flavour), and *pratibhana* (creative eloquence) are also fundamental concepts of Buddhist ethics.⁶ The *Siyabaslakara* also recommends that the subject of poetry should be the lives of the Buddha.⁷ The Buddhist clergy

¹ See Peter Stearns, "Emotion", in Rom Harré and Peter Stearns, eds., *Discursive Psychology in Practice* (London: Sage, 1995), 37-54.

² Martin Wickramasinghe, *The Uprooted (Gamperaliya)*, trans. by Lakshmi de Silva and Ranga Wickramasinghe (Rajagiriya, Sri Lanka: Sarasa, [1944] 2011); and *The Way of the Lotus: Viragaya (Viragaya)*, trans. by Ashley Halpe (Dehiwala: Tisara Press, [1956] 1985). All quoted extracts are from these translations.

³ James W. Gair, "Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan Isolate", in James W. Gair and Barbara C. Lust, eds., *Studies in South Asian Linguistics: Sinhala and Other South Asian Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

⁴ Charles Hallisey, "Works and Persons in Sinhala Literary Culture", in Sheldon Pollack, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 690.

⁵ See Hagoda Daminda, "Introduction", in King Sena IV, *Siyabaslakara Vivaranaya* (Wellampitiya: Chathura Publishers, 2002), v-xviii.

⁶ Hallisey, "Works and Persons", 705-706.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 704.

developed the system of Sinhala-Buddhist education for the laity, and developed the earliest archives.

The Portuguese and Dutch colonized the island between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, their main purpose being trade and Christianization, and their influence felt more strongly in the coastal capital areas. However, the Dutch contributed to the island's literary activity by introducing the press and cutting the first Sinhala type, paving the way to newspapers and magazines. With British colonization (1815-1948), the local literati were introduced to western literary forms (particularly the novel), which substantially influenced their literary output. The earliest novels were referred to as 'amuthu katha' (strange or fantastic stories) that were easy to popularize because of the reader's familiarity with similar aims, themes and aesthetics in Buddhist literature such as the *Jatakas*, the beast fables, religious tales and *Panchatantra*. Influenced by contemporary British gothic romance and horror novels, a few writers such as W. A. de Silva and Piyadasa Sirisena published popular romance novels. Critics began to refer to them as *nava katha* (new stories), by which term the novel written in Sinhala, even as it later evolved, has continued to be known.⁸

Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948. Surrounded by the upsurge of nationalism throughout this period, the nation became committed to reconstructing its Sinhalese-Buddhist 'national' identity that had been suppressed by over four centuries of western colonization. One of the most important advocates of this movement in literature and literary criticism, Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), introduced the aesthetics of Sinhala language and literature into the historical and political conditions of postcolonial Sri Lanka. He championed nationalism and national heritage, refuting the view that Sri Lankan culture was a replica of the Indian. Though bilingual, he chose to write in the vernacular believing that together with Buddhism, it was an essential part of Sinhalese culture.

However, Wickramasingha argued against the glorification of a utopian past that excluded all else but the Sinhalese-Buddhist tradition, and promoted the hybridization of East and West. He immersed himself in contemporary British and Russian literary traditions, and branched out into Darwinism, Marxism, and western psychology. As Ranjini Obeyesekere reflects:

[N]ationalist though he was, he roundly condemned the fanatics who believed that anything old was necessarily good and should be venerated; or those who claimed that the literary language should not be contaminated with that of modern colloquial speech, or that the culture of ancient Sinhalese should be revived. The difference [in] his nationalism ... arose from Wickramasinghe's exposure to modern liberal and scientific thought through his reading of English literature and rationalist philosophers.⁹

A revolutionary architect of modern Sinhalese literary aesthetics and literature, Wickramasinghe's own aesthetic evolved through three major phases: 1) he was deeply influenced by the English and European realist novel and its poetics of characterization, plot, and socio-cultural reformism; 2) he rejected Sanskrit aesthetic

⁸ Ranjini Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1974), 27-28.

⁹ Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing*, 59.

discourse for its verbosity and ornamentation in favour of the more direct and simple style of Pali aesthetics; 3) he championed a ‘native’ literary criticism that centred Sinhalese-Buddhist culture. Through each phase, he upheld the moral import of literature drawing support from the traditional Buddhist *Jataka* stories, and believed in the prominent role that literature could play in cultural education. His prolific literary and critical output stretched from pre- to post-independence: 1914 and 1973. His oeuvre of 22 books of literary criticism published between 1914 and 2002 that includes *Vichara Lipi (Literary Criticism, 1941)*, *Sinhala Sabityaye Negima (Landmarks of Sinhala Literature, 1945)*, *Vyavahara Bhashava Ha Parinama Dharmaya (Sinhala Language and Evolution, 1997)* and *Ape Urumaya ha Bikkshun Wabanse (Our Heritage and the Buddhist Clergy, 1998)*, holds a prominent place in the tradition of Sinhalese literary aesthetics.

Wickramasinghe’s fiction is an amalgam of eastern and western traditions, and he fused into his aesthetic, the political, religious, historical and literary identities of the country. He drew from his experience in the village of Koggala where he grew up, his knowledge of Sinhalese literature and theory, and his exposure to western and Russian poetics. His fiction, including the trilogy *Gamperaliya (The Changing Village, 1944)*, *Kaliyugaya (Era in Trouble, 1957)* and *Yugantaya (The End of an Era, 1949)*, and later novels, *Viragaya (Devoid of Passion, 1956)* and *Bavatharanaya (Siddhartha’s Quest, 1973)* are perennially acclaimed classics of modern Sinhalese literature.

Wickramasinghe reclaimed and revitalized the Sinhalese Buddhist aesthetic tradition through his fiction, arguing against the static and ornate Sanskritist (*Alankarist*) aesthetic tradition that was the original source of Sinhalese literature. However, in all this, Wickramasinghe’s aim was to connect the best from each culture. Informed by western poetics that gave predominance to plot and character development, he upheld the theory of *Rasa*, for instance, that, although part of the Sanskrit poetic discourse, implied (in Wickramasinghe’s understanding) a creative process not too different from the Western. In fact, as the second paragraph quoted below suggests, he adapted the theory with his knowledge of western poetics and techniques of plot and story.

Anandavardhana [a developer of the *Rasa* theory] says that a great poem ought to consist of the following features: Its construction should be such that the story whether drawn from reality or from the imagination, should be rendered beautiful by the appropriate use and descriptions of *bhava* (simple emotions), *vibhava* (causes of emotions), and *vyabhicari bhava* (subsidiary emotions) in order to arouse the appropriate sentiment (*rasa*). The use of *alankara* (images and figures of speech) should not be merely resorted to for the purpose of following the rules laid down, but in order to heighten the communication of feeling. ... Bharata [the founder of the *Rasa* theory] and Anandavardhana have both described the plot as the body of a poem. Bharata says that the body of a poem is its story while its soul is its *rasa*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Martin Wickramasinghe, *Landmarks of Sinhalese Literature* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1948), 34-35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

With most Sinhalese Buddhists, Wickramasinghe shared the view that the advent of Buddhism to Sri Lanka laid the foundation for “the growth of a higher and independent culture in the Island”.¹¹ After substantial conflict with Mahayana Buddhism that

preached a more secular doctrine, Sri Lanka became the protector of the ascetic and purist philosophy of Theravada Buddhism. As Wickramasinghe maintained, with the influence of the more direct and plain Pali language (the language of Buddhist rhetoric), a style and spirit that “[came] near what might be called indigenous” was introduced to the classical Sinhalese poetic tradition.¹² Though as foreign a language as Sanskrit, Pali was felt to be more ‘Buddhist in spirit’, and therefore closer to the indigenous culture.¹³

Wickramasinghe appropriated the western realist novel and naturalized it in indigenous soil. It was a revolutionary new form of aesthetic expression in a literary culture that had so far been dominated by the tradition of classical Sinhalese poetry that, as noted above, was deep-rooted in the Sanskrit tradition of *alankara* (ornamentation). Here is an excerpt from Sri Rahula’s *Salelibini Sandeshaya* (*The Message of the Nightingale*, fifteenth century) from the classical period:

The stream called Diyavanna with its ripples and its wavelets
Seems a silk garment worn by the woman-city.
Worked with rows of red lotus, and figures of golden swans,
Its spreading cascades the long rippling waist folds.¹⁴

The nationalist fervour that spread among the Sinhalese-Buddhist population in the decades prior to independence promoted the village as the utopia of Sinhalese-Buddhist culture. In concert with it, and also possibly rebelling against the only other realist novel (written in English) that dealt with the Sinhalese village experience, Leonard Woolf’s abjectly dystopian *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), Wickramasinghe aestheticized the village like old lace in his novel *Gamperaliya*. Compared with his contemporaries such as W.A. de Silva (see above), Wickramasinghe introduced a revolutionary realist texture and modernist aesthetic to Sinhalese literature.

Set in 1904, *Gamperaliya* turns a nostalgic gaze into a timeless past. The harmonious slow rhythm of village life anchored in Buddhism and tried-and-tested Sinhalese cultural mores, its charm and simplicity are captured in the dialectical Sinhalese of the southern villager. Here is the famous opening paragraph that brought to the Sinhalese readership the intimacy and emotional resonance of village life through the aesthetic space of literature.

The village of Koggala lies in a long stretch of land bounded on one side by the Indian Ocean, and on the other by the Koggala Oya, a beautiful wide river. The smooth black ribbon of road linking the southern towns of Galle and Matara runs between the village and the sea. Verandahs are a feature of each village house, whilst the sea-shore is the panoramic front-verandah for the entire village. On an embankment a few feet above ground level, the rail-track extends as far as the eye can reach, like a long ladder with no beginning and no end. ... Water from little streams running under numerous culverts, has collected in the ditches, to form little ponds that abound in water lilies and lotuses, and little fish. (1)

The novel is studded with informative descriptions of village customs and superstitions, rituals and rites surrounding marriage and funeral. However, Wickramasinghe’s aim was also to encourage his readership, the Sinhalese-educated

¹² Ibid., 66.

¹³ Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing*, 56.

¹⁴ Sri Rahula, “Salelibini Sandeshaya”, in C.H.B. Reynolds, ed., *An Anthology of Sinhalese Literature up to 1815* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), 284.

intelligentsia, to critically evaluate traditions that hindered progress. For instance, while the village practice of Buddhism that is suffused with superstition is etched into the novel, the author assumes the intrusive point of view of a critical commentator:

Some villagers believe that the powers of deities have taken residence in the rock. The belief that there are divine powers that transcend their understanding is not confined to ignorant villagers. Even educated people acknowledge such powers, although they may reason that these are the result of planetary influences, or the workings of the laws of karma. Villagers, who see the Devalgala as the steadfast witness from the dim past, to their grief and joy, tears and lamentations, are guided more by what they see and feel, than such abstract reasons. (2)

Faithful to village tradition that prescribed roles rather than to a Western habit of individualism, the characters in *Gamperaliya* are depicted as performers of role identity: husband, wife, sister and daughter. I will focus briefly on the female protagonist Nanda, the younger daughter of the mansion. Having grown up on a solid foundation of Sinhalese Buddhist tradition, she is of marriageable age when the novel commences. Wickramasinghe's representation of her as the dutiful daughter and *pativrata* (ideal wife) is masterful. Her willing surrender to her first marriage to Jinadasa, arranged by her parents, her fidelity to him through crisis after tragic crisis, her unflinching dignity in social interaction, evoke the stock character: "Her feelings [for Jinadasa] were those of a devoted wife for her husband. A village woman's relations with her husband was a complex amalgam of passion, empathy, longing to be a mother, mother love" (134).

Nanda is never liberated from this Sinhalese-Buddhist cultural frame – her consciousness is held gracefully within it. But what is revolutionary about Wickramasinghe's art is his suggestion of depths of character that role identity prohibits. Nanda experiences an enigmatic sensuality for Piyal, the up and coming young man from the lower social stratum of the community, destined to be her second husband. With him she would finally take the first steps out of the home and into the world – the city of Colombo. These deeper levels of meaning in the novel are laid unobtrusively and with deep understanding of village expectations of high-caste, high-class Sinhalese-Buddhist womanhood. As Philip Coorey reflected on Lester James Peries' artistic vision in directing Sinhalese films including *Gamperaliya*:

Even the interior drama finds expression in movement, gestures, speech patterns, which are radically different [from western film]. In the East, at its simplest level, the greater the conflict, the greater the withdrawal into oneself ... This attitude, this behaviour-pattern, is the result of many factors: influence of a caste system, submission to parental authority, and ... above all, the influence of *Karma* (fate) and the acceptance of its inevitability. Thus conflict ... is often [caught in the film] through the tell-tale betrayal in a voice, in a gesture, or a look.¹⁵

¹⁵ Philip Coorey, *The Lonely Artist: A Critical Introduction to the Films of Lester James Peries* (Colombo: Lake House, 1970), 65-66.

By retaining this behaviour-pattern Wickramasinghe introduces to the Sinhalese literary tradition the complexities of character development – a spark of subversive individualism and rebellion. Assuming an objective third person point of view, he

subtly suggests to the reader, Nanda's unsettled introspective thought-process. Here is one instant when her part conscious, part unconscious selves are captured without direct confrontation or challenge to custom, during a village pilgrimage to the neighbouring Paragoda.

This unaccustomed shyness, apprehension, uncertainty and agitation with regard to Piyal had to come from wayward half-realized feelings for him. Family pride, marital devotion, custom, and social conventions were instrumental in preventing even thought of any sub-conscious feelings that bordered on marital infidelity, in the morality of the social milieu that she [Nanda] occupied. She was herself uncertain whether there were any such dormant feelings for Piyal. The little shops, the chena, and the great jungle stretching to the horizon had brought memories of Jinadasa [her first husband] and her life with him, and with that, the intrusion of Piyal from her sub-conscious. (147)

Nor is *Gamperaliya* a paean to village life as it was being celebrated in Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist discourse. The artist's power lies in the emotive configuration and cognitive re-figuration of a culture in transition, when the village was uprooted, in the early twentieth century, as tradition confronted and fell to western modernity. With controversial fervour, Wickramasinghe attacked the movement of nationalist revival as decadent and impotent, advocating change and revival: "That which does not change becomes inert and dies. That which changes survives. The past survives in us because we have been changing. We can perpetuate the past only by changing ourselves and our heritage".¹⁶

With Chekhovian poignancy the novel laments the failing aristocratic struggle to change with the pressures that western influence imposed on it. The *mahagedera* (mansion) and its inmates are already in a state of collapse at the beginning of the story:

A discerning observer would conclude that despite its solid structure, this house would decline to an irreparable state of decay in a few decades. By delving into their past and their present way of life, an intelligent and inquiring mind would conclude that perhaps a similar fate awaits its inmates, with the inevitable erosion of their pride in the past lineage, a relic of the past no longer relevant to the changing village, and the consequent erosion of their privileged position. (5)

The mansion and the once distinguished family crumble owing to the inability to adapt to change. The novel ends with Piyal continuing to prosper under the western regime, with Nanda as his wife. By thus presenting a subjective perspective through particularized characters responding with culture specific emotions to culture specific moments of history, Wickramasinghe challenges the reader to critique the abstract objectivity of Sri Lanka's nationalist agenda of the village as an unchanging and unchanged utopia.

Viragaya (1956), Martin Wickramasinghe's next novel of great national significance was written in the atmosphere of near-fanatic Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism that pervaded the island just after independence. In the same year as

¹⁶ Wickramasinghe, *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture*, quoted in Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing*, 61.

the publication of the novel, Sinhala was officially restored as the national language by the then Government. Wickramasinghe was already Sri Lanka's Grand Old Man of Sinhalese literature, famed author of *Gamperaliya*, and the author of over twenty-five other fictional and critical works. By this stage of his career as a literary critic, he was moving away from his partial allegiance to western values and the traditional (Sanskritist) system to a total rejection of both, in favour of Sinhalese-Buddhism. Obeyesekere argues that he perhaps sought refuge in Buddhism in particular, because it offered him a mystical affirmative higher consciousness than that afforded by a Western secular consciousness.¹⁷

¹⁷ Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing*, 64.

With regard to the Sinhala language, it was Wickramasinghe's strong conviction that a national literature could breathe only if it was rooted in the language (Sinhala) and life of the people (village). As a committed socialist-nationalist, he continued to advocate that literature had to be communicated in the simple language of the people for the people, rather than as a replica of classical Sanskrit for the connoisseur. This extract from *Viragaya* is an excellent example of theory in practice: note the simplicity of expression that instils a glowing, almost spiritual stillness to the transient *sambogya rasa* (love in union) that Aravinda experiences in this early encounter with Sarojini. The ambience enhanced by the Buddhist festival of Vesak, the immediacy of the life of the village flowing past, offer a wonderful backdrop to the secret interlude between the adolescent girl and boy on the threshold of romantic love:

It was the night of Vesak ... Our verandah and garden were full of friends and relatives ... I became more and more conscious of a girl sitting among them ... today she was swathed in a saree. I could not take my eyes off her; I wanted to talk to her.

The Vesak lamps shone more brightly; the moonlight seemed ethereal ... The light from a yellow lantern made the jewels in her earrings flash with fire ... The carol-float was approaching like a swirling cloud bearing little groups of children on its breast. I was in a world of dreams as beautiful to me as the carol-float was to the children in the garden. The moon shedding its gentle rays upon the earth was like some vast lamp set in the heavenly canopy of a visionary land ... All the gay lanterns were now out, their candles burnt down; all but one that flickered on at a corner of the fence. The shadows lay deeper. We could hear the laughter and chatter of people returning after offering flowers at the temple. The sight of them seemed to remind Sara too, that it was time to go ...

"Sara, wait: surely you needn't go yet?" I begged.

"Mother will scold me. She doesn't like me coming here very much." (29-35)

The aesthetic achievement of *Viragaya* is the author's skilled engagement of the reader in the sensibilities of Buddhism. In this sense, the novel becomes a vehicle for transmitting knowledge, a mediator easing the reader into a complex and abstract dogma.

The story is set in a small self-contained village community that is sustained by a feudal hierarchical social system. The protagonist Aravinda and his family are of the higher echelons and live disengaged from the 'rustics' whose presence is always felt in the way they keep the traditional culture alive. The maintenance of traditional Sinhalese-Buddhist cultural mores is the community's guiding focus. The novel's theme is the ascent of the protagonist Aravinda from the plane of human emotion

to the higher plane of spiritual enlightenment. This is the Buddhist path – the path of life that leads to the supreme Truth.

Viragaya is embedded in Buddhist symbolism and metaphor beginning with its title that means ‘devoid of passion’ or ‘dispassion’. As G P Malalasekera explains, in sum, “*viragaya* can be seen to comprise in a nutshell the whole gamut of the *Dhamma*, being a term that stands for the path to be taken as well as for the goal to be reached”.¹⁸ This is a state of mind that counteracts the samsaric predicament of the cycle of sorrow caused by emotional states of being such as human lust, desire and craving. In Buddhist philosophy, the hold on the self by these human passions is gradually reduced by the mind’s recognition of their impermanence. Destruction and decay follow this recognition, and the passions are removed. The mind then attains a state of *nirodha* (cessation). In an occasional scripture such as the *Ratana Sutta*, *viraga* is also seen as a synonym for *nibbana* (enlightenment).¹⁹

The very name of the protagonist Aravinda derives from the Sanskrit word for ‘lotus’ that is also deeply embedded in the metaphoric aesthetics of Buddhism. Imaged in the sitting position, Buddha’s seat is a lotus, and he also holds a lotus in full bloom in his hand. When depicted in the posture of standing, each of his feet rests on a single lotus. As such, the title of the novel’s English translation by Ashley Halpe, *The Way of the Lotus: Viragaya*, with its epigraph from the Buddhist scripture, *Anguttara Nikaya* is meaningful.

The lotus emanates beauty
and fragrance.
Untouched the water from which it is born
Rising above the world into which he is born
the Superior Being follows the way of the Lotus. (np)

The lotus is also the Buddhist symbol of purity. While its roots are in the mud, its stem grows out of the water, and finally, the perfumed flower lies pristine above it, signifying the progress of the soul from the mud of materialism, through the waters of experience into the bright whiteness of enlightenment. This process illustrates Aravinda’s ‘love’ for Sarojini that remains pristine pure throughout their romance and even after her marriage to another man. At a deeper level, it is a metaphor for Aravinda himself, and his growth from human passion to dispassion.

At the beginning of the novel, Aravinda, an adolescent village boy is entangled in familial and romantic attachments. His parents and sister play an overriding role in his life, from trying to steer him into a medical career, to deciding the course of his marriage. Through all this, the death of his father, the loss of his first love Sarojini to his worldly-minded cousin, his mercenary sister’s eviction of him and his mother from their ancestral home, drive the teenage Aravinda into deep disillusion. He is now in a state of emotional discoloration. He rents a basic house and develops a strong attachment to Bathee, the little daughter of his servant woman. If Bathee represents human passion and sensuality through the early to mid part of their relationship, the village maverick Kulasooriya

¹⁸ G. P. Malalasekera, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, vol. VIII (Colombo: Govt. of Ceylon, 2008), 688-690.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 690.

represents the tenets of Buddhism, particularly in detachment from desire as a form of freedom of the spirit.

The novel's complexity lies in Aravinda's struggle between the human emotional entanglements and liberation from them. As the story develops, so does Aravinda's dilemma, and Wickramasinghe's aesthetic prowess engages the reader into empathy with Aravinda in his state of *viprvalamba rasa* (love in separation):

I went to bed early, but that night the heavy darkness failed to soothe my mind and body ... though I lay quite still, my mind was seething. Innumerable notions streamed up in my consciousness, like those little winged termites that come swarming out of their nests in the ground on rainy days. It is no better than being on a treadmill. At last, worn out by the endless succession of repetitious thoughts, my mind seemed to dissolve into the darkness that had already obliterated the outer world. I floated between sleeping and waking in a state of utter exhaustion. Twice, a leg twitched involuntarily, jerking me back into painful consciousness of my situation. (84)

Against Aravinda's spiritual growth, Wickramasinghe critiques the mental and spiritual deficiency of lesser mortals who are unable to gain access to the higher intellectual plane of Buddhism, earthbound as they are. Aravinda's sister Menaka, sunk in materialist sensation is unable to understand the complex theory of detachment; in her mind it can only be derided as indifference, as this ironic dialogue suggests:

Menaka: "Why do you spend so much time with Kulasooriya? He's no more alive than a sack of vegetables."
"Then how does he walk out into the countryside every morning and evening?" I [Aravinda] said.
"Well, then, that's the only difference between him and a sack of vegetables."
"How can you know what he's really like? He's the only person I know... [who] doesn't bother with what's over and done with."
"Now, isn't that just like a vegetable? You have to be a real vegetable to be so indifferent to everything. I'm not surprised that his son and daughter never come to visit him."
"Kulasooriya doesn't complain about that."
"There you are! Only a vegetable could be like that." (96-97)

Gradually, Aravinda detaches himself from emotion and worldly desires. By engaging with the *Abidhamma* (scriptures of Theravada Buddhism) and Kulasooriya's mentoring, he moves into the state of cessation. Finally, as a dying man in Bathee's care, he is able to relate to everyone including Bathee, with a selflessness and disinterested *metta* (loving kindness), devoid of lust, passion or desire. Here is the ending of the novel that eloquently upholds for the reader, the moral import of the story. Having received *metta* from the uneducated and naïve rustic Bathee, Aravinda has himself learned the meaning of *metta*: "I know now that I will not survive this illness. But the sense of despair, of loss, of futility, has left me, because here kindness, love and affection are palpable human qualities" (173).

One of Wickramasinghe's philosophies was that Buddhism should be humanist rather than abstract, and with the ending he achieves this feat within the aesthetic

of the novel. In this sense, *Viragaya* is his attempt to aestheticize the crux of Buddhism – its various states of being. This is an elusive and difficult task to execute in fiction, and his character Aravinda’s realization of the near-impossibility of his journey possibly parallels the author’s own recognition of the fine line between cultural specificity and creative license: “But how can anyone cut himself off from people completely except by living like a hermit in the forest? ... It takes courage and resolution to go alone into the wilderness, or to enter a monastery, or to rid oneself completely of desire, and I lack both these qualities” (162-63).

In western literature Aravinda could easily be read as the existential antihero, that lonely indecisive central character drifting through his life, unable to communicate with anyone, and incapable of making any decisions. However, in the Sinhalese-Buddhist culture, he is seen in a very different light – almost as the personification of a concept – the elimination of suffering and attainment of spiritual well being. The highly figurative language of symbolism and metaphor of the abandoned fields and ploughland, the mountain summits and their peaks, and the clouds in the following paragraph close to the end of the novel reveals to the reader that Aravinda is within sight of *nibbana* – he may now blossom free of the mud in which he was rooted.

Through the bars of the window I see an abandoned field stretching into the distance. Beyond this again is a rocky range whose summits seem to vie with each other to be the highest. The outlines of the furthest peaks, reaching up and merging into the sky, appear like clouds. At sunrise, however, they are preternaturally clear and massive, the summits of the range tangled in cloud, but the base set firm in the ploughland.

My mind flutters like a swallow with broken wings. (172)

While throughout his life, his worldly relatives and friends have attempted to push him into the mainstream, the response of the simple villagers to his lifestyle as they mourn his death, reveal the ways in which Wickramasinghe directs the reader to read the character of Aravinda.

I gathered from Siridasa that his relatives had been amazed by the crowds that came to the funeral. It had been in his own village. The country people had come to pay their respects in an unbroken stream. I wonder if these ... rustics have some instinctive capacity for recognizing real goodness? (6)

Wickramasinghe’s fiction and literary criticism is part of the transnational network of world literatures. However, while he is recognized as Sri Lanka’s foremost novelist (writing in Sinhala) of the twentieth century, his work has not received sufficient international attention. Translations of his books into English have been few and far between. This is a pragmatic problem that has hindered its global circulation. There is also what is lost in translation. In addition, the layered meanings in his novels meticulously framed by a particularized cultural context, ethos and aesthetic, may elude readers nurtured by a different culture. They may experience the pleasure of the text, certainly, and the exotic of being introduced to another culture, but still remain outside of it. However, current trends in

world literary criticism show how these obstacles may be overcome through universalization, and how they may consequently enrich our reader responses. I draw support on this point from Dan Shen who in his essay titled “Language Peculiarities and Challenges to Universal Narrative Poetics”, makes an excellent argument for the deep rooted ways of cultural thinking and language particularities in Chinese language that may lead to the detection of narrative modes not found in western narratives. His conclusion is that:

Narratives from different cultures also have various unique features that defy accommodation to a universal narrative poetics. The demand on narrative theorists and critics is therefore twofold: to build up universal narrative poetics to account for shared structures, and to pay attention to multicultural particularities.²⁰

²⁰ Dan Shen, “Language Peculiarities and Challenges to Universal Narrative Poetics”, in Frederick Luis Aldama, ed., *Analysing World Fiction: New Horizons in Narrative Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 32.

My aim in this essay has been to meet the challenge of this demand. The other ongoing challenge that critics of world (vernacular) literatures face is to develop a transnational network of vernacular aesthetics and poetics. Important to note, there is no single, autonomous postcolonial poetics. “Colonial and postcolonial authors”, as Brian Richardson reminded recently, “have utilized a variety of aesthetics and poetics; I do not believe there is or can be a single essence that runs through them all. The task for narrative theory is to come up with a framework sufficiently capacious to encompass these resonant texts”.²¹ Wickramasinghe’s fiction, read within the frame of Sinhala-Buddhist poetic discourse, illuminates one of the many narrative modes that contribute to world literature.

²¹ Brian Richardson, “U.S. Ethnic and Postcolonial Fiction: Towards a Poetics of Collective Narratives”, in *ibid.*, 15.