

**THE EVOLUTION OF MARTIN WICKRAMASINGHE'S FICTION:  
THE SECOND PHASE  
ROMANTIC MELODRAMA (SOMA 1920 AND AYIRANGANI 1923)**

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**Part 1**

The works of long fiction that form the backbone of Martin Wickramasinghe's achievement as a writer comprise 11 full-length novels, 2 prose narratives which may be labelled "historical romances" (**Unmaada Chithraa** 1928 and **Rohini** 1929), and 1 adventure story falling into the category of "children's literature" (**Madol Doova** 1947). These 14 works fall into two clear groups by dates of composition as well as literary quality, complexity or **naivete** of the fictional techniques employed, and above all in respect of the originality or lack of originality of theme or 'individual talent'. To the first category belong the first five novels in order of composition and two "historical romances" referred to above, all composed during the 15-year period beginning with Wickramasinghe's first novel **Leila** (1914) and ending with **Rohini** (1929), the individual works being, in order of composition, **Leila** 1914; **Soma** 1920; **Ayirangani** 1923; **Seetha** 1923; **Miringudiya** 1925; **Unmaada Chithraa** 1928; and **Rohini** 1929).

**Rohini** which closed the first period of Wickramasinghe's composition of long fiction was followed by a surprisingly long interregnum of 15 years (1929 - 1944) during which there was a complete hiatus in Wickramasinghe's novelistic **oeuvre**. Not a single work of long fiction issued from the pen of this comparatively prolific Sinhala novelist<sup>1</sup> during the one and a half decades between **Rohini** and **Gamperaliya** (1944). This gap of 15 years indeed marks the principal watershed between Martin Wickramasinghe's "juvenilia" (his long fiction between 1914 and 1944) and the later period of his "maturity" (1944 - 1973). During the period of his "maturity" Wickramasinghe published, in rapid succession, 6 more novels, viz., **Gamperaliya** 1944; **Yuganthaya** 1949; **Viragaya** 1956; **Kaliyugaya** 1957; **Karuvala Gedara** 1963; **Bavatharanaya** 1973.

It is for the first time in the present paper that an attempt is made to describe and analyse in detail and in depth the bifurcation clearly evident between Wickramasinghe's early works (his "juvenilia") and his mature

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1. Piyadasa Sirisena was the author of 20 novels during a writing career of 40 years (1904-1944) and W. A. Silva of 12 novels and several collections of short stories during his writing career of 34 years.

works. Indeed, no previous critic of Wickramasinghe has described or even merely noted the peculiar hiatus between Wickramasinghe's juvenilia and his later mature works, let alone attempt to find reasons for it.<sup>2</sup> The present study not only makes this hiatus and the differences between the works of the two respective periods of his novelistic career the main pointer to Wickramasinghe's evolution as a novelist but also makes the important differences between the two phases of Wickramasinghe's juvenilia the foundation for the understanding of Wickramasinghe's first seven novels.

It is a matter of curiosity that the two periods distinguished above as Wickramasinghe's "juvenilia" and the works of his "maturity" are perfectly balanced, each of two periods consisting of 7 works of long fiction, making up a total of 14 long prose narratives published during Wickramasinghe's long literary career spanning 60 years.<sup>3</sup> Wickramasinghe himself on several occasions distinguished his juvenilia from his mature works after he had become a proficient novelist, referring to them in a tone of ironic sarcasm and humorous self-denunciation as "the novels that I wrote as soon as I reached my youth"<sup>4</sup> and "the novels that I composed while I was still an unmarried young man"<sup>5</sup>.

As indicated earlier, Wickramasinghe's juvenilia are clearly distinct and different from his mature works in several ways. Apart from their chronological bifurcation noted earlier, there are immense differences in theme, literary quality, fictional techniques, and the presence or absence in them of the writer's originality. The juvenilia, taken together, for example, are all imitatory and derivative in theme, technique or both, while the mature novels overwhelmingly display Wickramasinghe's originality of thought and the exploration of techniques adequate for the expression of his themes. The juvenilia, again, show the author following and even sometimes slavishly imitating tradition, where as the mature novels show Wickramasinghe's "individual talent" in the sense it is used by T. S. Eliot in his well-known essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the broad dichotomy between Wickramasinghe's juvenilia and his later works, within each of the two groups themselves there are important and often radical differences in themes and fictional techniques which can be brought out only through detailed studies of individual novels

2. The only work (written in Sinhala) which refers to the evolution of Martin Wickramasinghe's novelistic fiction, V. Hapuaarachchi's *Martin Wickramasinghege Navakatha saha Ketikatha*, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1961, makes no mention of this important hiatus or interrugnum in Wickramasinghe's fictional oeuvre.
3. *Leila*, Wickramasinghe's first novel, was published in 1914 and his last novel, *Bavatharanaya* in 1973.
4. New Preface to *Seetha*, 1959 edition, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1959.
5. Preface to the second edition of *Miringudiya*, Mount Press, Colombo, 1950.
6. In T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, Faber and Faber, London, 1932, pp. 13-22.

and/or sub-groups within each broad group. It is the intention of the present writer to subject the whole of Martin Wickramasinghe's fictional *oeuvre* to such a detailed examination, whereby the "juvenilia" and the "mature works" will be studied in order of chronology, the chronological order being necessitated by the need to trace the gradual "evolution" of Martin Wickramasinghe's novelistic fiction.

In the study of the evolution of Wickramasinghe's long fiction referred to above, the juvenilia will be studied first, tentatively divided into four parts, as follows: (1) first, Wickramasinghe's first entry into the world of Sinhala fiction through **Leila** (1914), involving the study of Wickramasinghe's earliest notion of the novel as propaganda, as typified by the greatest contemporary novelist Piyadasa Sirisena (a paper which has already been completed);<sup>7</sup> (2) Second, the present paper which focuses itself on the next (second) evolutionary stage of Wickramasinghe's fiction, where he conceived of the novel as sentimental and romantic melodrama, common in English 'pulp' or 'potboiler' fiction, and previously introduced and perfected by M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva in Sinhala fiction; (3) Next, the third and the more advanced stage of evolution where Wickramasinghe repudiated the romantic melodrama and attempted to write fiction of a more serious and mature kind, under the influence of European "realistic fiction"; and (4) Finally, a relapse and retrogression into a second type of romantic fiction, best designated as "historical romances", containing many of the bad features of "romantic melodrama". This fourth and retrogressive phase is represented by **Unmaada Chithraa** (1928) and **Rohini** (1929). Of the four-part study described above, the first has already been completed, under the title, "Tradition and the Individual Talent in Sinhala Fiction: '**Leila** (1914) and the Beginnings of Martin Wickramasinghe's Novelistic Fiction"<sup>8</sup>. The present paper is the second in the series, and (3), and (4) are to follow in that order.

In later life, Martin Wickramasinghe himself divided the works of his "juvenilia" into two categories in respect of their literary quality and respective state of maturity within the same broad category. Of the 7 novels that comprise his juvenilia, **Unmaada Chitra** and **Rohini** were not even casually mentioned by Wickramasinghe, showing the low literary valuation that he placed on them. With regard to the other 5 novels (**Leila** 1914 to **Miringudiya** 1925), Wickramasinghe clearly perceived a radical difference in quality between the first two (**Leila** and **Soma**) which he always mentioned together as representing his imitations of the two principal traditions of the contemporary Sinhala novel, and the last two, (**Seetha** and **Miringudiya**) as

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7. Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya, "Tradition and the Individual Talent in Sinhala Fiction: '**Leila** (1914) and the Beginnings of Martin Wickramasinghe's Novelistic Fiction", in **Phoenix, Sri Lanka Journal of English in the Commonwealth**, Vols. v and vi, 1997, pp. 92-123.

8. See footnote 7 above.

representing his departure from tradition. The middle item, **Ayirangani** (1923) Wickramasinghe considered to be the novel marking his attempt to break away (though with only partial success) from the tradition of romantic melodrama which by then he felt was seriously impeding the expression of his individuality.

Wickramasinghe's poor opinion of **Soma** (1920) and its successor **Ayirangani** (1923) is clearly seen in his description of these two novels as "imaginary tales of wonder"<sup>9</sup> which were both popular successes.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Wickramasinghe wrote of **Seetha** and **Miringudiya** in quite a different vein: "I wrote **Seetha**, **Miringudiya** and **Gaehaeniyak**<sup>11</sup> to liberate myself from the practice of writing naive stories."<sup>12</sup> Thus, on his own declaration, **Seetha** and **Miringudiya** were plainly seen by their author himself as marking the beginnings of his own maturity: "By writing **Seetha**, **Miringudiya** and **Gaehaeniyak** I invented and moulded for myself a narrative and descriptive style appropriate for the effective expression of my intimate experiences of the life of the Sinhala people."<sup>13</sup> The last-mentioned three works, however, were not at all popular, unlike **Soma** and **Ayirangani** which were quickly sold out: "All three works did not sell well. However poor the sales, I could not bring myself to write stories like **Soma** again..... having tirelessly trained myself to write fiction over a long period of 12 years I could not make up mind to write according to the pattern of **Soma** (i.e., sentimental melodrama). Hence I determined not to write novels thereafter."<sup>14</sup> Here lies the true explanation for the significant hiatus in Wickramasinghe's long fiction between 1929 and 1944 referred to earlier in the present paper.

## Part II

Martin Wickramasinghe's first attempt at the writing of Sinhala novelistic fiction, as shown in detail in the paper on **Leila** referred to earlier was made at a time when he was still a raw and immature youth, imitating the most popular Sinhala novelist of all time and perhaps the most prolific Sinhala novelist, Piyadasa Sirisena, especially his first and the first Sinhala novel, **Vasanavantha Vivahaya Nohot Roslin Saha Jayatissa** (1904). It was not surprising that Wickramasinghe, being the greenhorn in fiction that he then was, should have turned to Piyadasa Sirisena as his fictional mentor and closely imitated the latter in the pattern of his (Wickramasinghe's) first

9. Martin Wickramasinghe, **Upan Daa Sita**, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1962, p. 239.

10. These two novels were sold out within two or three months of their first publication.

11. **Gaehaeniyak** was not a novel but a collection of short stories published by Wickramasinghe in 1924.

12. **Upan Daa Sita**, p. 239.

13. **Ibid.**

14. **Ibid.**

novel. Wickramasinghe confessed in the late '60s, "I wrote my first novel **Leila** at the age of 19, imitating the form of Piyadasa Sirisena's novels ..... I believe that I thought of following Piyadasa Sirisena's variety of novelistic fiction as a result of being impelled by the collective subconscious feeling of the people whose mother-tongue is Sinhala."<sup>16</sup> Wickramasinghe also added: "In the composition of my first novel, following Sirisena gave me a good training. As a story however, **Leila** was more barren than **Vasanavantha Vivahaya**."<sup>17</sup>

Following Sirisena closely and adopting without reserve the concept of the novel as a piece of propaganda rather than self-expression and depiction and analysis of real life and human relationships, Wickramasinghe wrote **Leila** attempting to propagate the latest theories regarding modern science, biology, evolution and anthropology. The form of the novel, that of melodrama, was traditional and hackneyed, but the content, (the new ideas) was innovatory, and even revolutionary, and far ahead of its time at the time the novel was first published. The book failed as a novel, as Wickramasinghe himself declared later: "Leila was barren as a story, but as an intellectual treatise, it was of greater value than Sirisena's novel."<sup>18</sup>

By the time he came to write **Soma** (1920) six years later, Wickramasinghe's notion of novelistic fiction had undergone a considerable transformation. He now believed, as many of his contemporaries did, that a novel was intended to entertain the reader, to provide him with relaxation and entertainment, without much regard to its credibility. This did not, of course, mean that he had now abandoned his belief in modern science and logical methods; he had now realised that the novel was not the appropriate medium to achieve such intentions. This realisation of the difference between creative writing and propaganda resulted in Wickramasinghe's publication of two separate works in 1920 for the two different purposes: a collection of essays in Sinhala entitled **Shaastreeya Lekhana** (with the subtitle in English as "Essays Literary and Scientific") to achieve the propagandist aims that he had earlier erroneously tried to achieve through **Leila**, and a second novel, titled **Soma** which had no concealed propagandist motives, but only the naive (yet literary) aim of providing the reader with entertainment. The publication, almost simultaneously of the novel **Soma** and the scholarly, scientific treatise proved categorically that between 1914 and 1920 Wickramasinghe's view of fiction as a literary **genre** had undergone a

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15. See footnote 7 above.

16. Ed. Labuhengoda Chandaratana Thero and Sirisena Vithanage, **Grantha Vignaana**, Lanka Sahitya Seva Mandalaya, Kelaniya, 1966, pp. 10-11.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

18. *Ibid.*

drastic change, that after a single mistake he had come to understand the fundamental difference between **scientific** and **creative** writing. Indeed, in his preface to **Shaastreeya Lekhana**, Wickramasinghe enunciated the basic theme that he had previously attempted to convey through his fictional hero Albert in **Leila**: "The conservation and preservation of ancient customs, ideas and methods, the spread of new revolutionary ideas and the invention of new things, as well as the destruction of the old, lead to the development of scientific knowledge and the progress of a nation."<sup>19</sup>

Thus when Wickramasinghe took up the task of novel-writing once more, it was not surprising that he had purged himself of the erroneous view that a novel should be a work of propaganda, scientific or otherwise. However, this new concept of the novel that Wickramasinghe held now, was still of the most naive kind: that represented by cheap western pulp fiction labelled sentimental romantic melodrama, a form of fiction that was at that time being imitated with much popular success by some Sinhala novelists, M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva in particular, and partially by almost all contemporary Sinhala novelists including the two earliest, Piyadasa Sirisena and Simon de Silva.

Having achieved little or no success with his maiden novel **Leila** either as a commercial success or as a striking literary venture, Wickramasinghe was disappointed with the unexpected **debacle** of his first novelistic enterprise in his youth; the few notices received of **Leila**, moreover, were also severely unfavourable. A famous monk, Yagirala Pagnananda Thero, wrote a series of articles to the Buddhist newspaper **Sarasavi Sandaresa** subjecting **Leila** to severe denunciation and claiming that Wickramasinghe had written **Leila** not only to attack Buddhism but also to attack Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Even Piyadasa Sirisena, Wickramasinghe's own literary mentor, attacked **Leila** in the columns of his own newspaper the **Sinhala Jaatiya**, alleging that Wickramasinghe had written **Leila** to propagate the heretical "theory of evolution".<sup>21</sup> The situation was made worse by the fact that Wickramasinghe was yet a complete nonentity in contemporary society and a slightly favourable reference in the Christian newspaper **Rivikirana** made people believe that he was a Christian.<sup>22</sup> Wickramasinghe learnt that a well-known bookseller and publisher in Colombo (P. K. W. Siriwardena) advised young men not to read **Leila** at the time it was first published. Consequently, of the 2000 copies of the first edition of **Leila** only 300 were sold. The remainder were disposed of through a friend at the rate of 10 cents per copy.<sup>23</sup>

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19. Martin Wickramasinghe, **Shaastreeya Lekhana**, Lankaloka Press, Galle, 1920, Preface.

20. **Upan Daa Sita**, p. 133.

21. **Ibid.**

22. **Ibid.**

23. **Ibid.**, p. 134.

In such circumstances, it was not at all strange that Wickramasinghe next thought of venturing into a new field of fiction, the variety that was currently in vogue among contemporary authors as well as the contemporary reading public. Whether this change was deliberate and intentional or not, the next two novels of Wickramasinghe undoubtedly brought him commercial success. The first editions of both **Soma** and **Ayirangani** were sold out within less than three months. Wickramasinghe was probably quite aware when he wrote **Soma** that it was third-class "potboiler" fiction without any literary value at all, and that he was imitating the kind of fiction designated "romantic melodrama"; he said later about **Soma**: "I wrote **Soma**, my second novel following the tradition of romantic melodrama in western European fiction. It did not contain either realistic characters or realistic language."<sup>24</sup>

According to the author himself, therefore, **Soma** represents the second stage of Wickramasinghe as a novelist, the period in his literary life when he came under the baneful spell of romantic melodrama. He was soon to realise his folly within a short time, for, as he claimed later, he attempted in his third novel **Ayirangani** to repudiate the form of sentimental melodrama that he had so rapturously embraced in **Soma**: "Ayirangani was the result of my trying to free myself, to break away from, the tradition of romantic melodrama."<sup>25</sup> These comments of Wickramasinghe on his own juvenilia are confirmed by the critical analyses of **Soma** and **Ayirangani** in the present study. During the three years that separated **Soma** and **Ayirangani**, Wickramasinghe appears to have matured slightly, though not yet sufficient to reject categorically the non-realistic background, characters and plot action of **Soma**; for **Ayirangani** still remains largely within the broad framework of romantic melodrama characteristic of **Soma**. In **Ayirangani**, Wickramasinghe was only partially successful in escaping the deleterious effects of romantic melodrama, in spite of his wanting to do so.

"Romantic melodrama" had enjoyed a long ancestry in Sinhala fiction. Indeed, melodramatic incident provided the main thread of continuity in original Sinhala fiction from the time of its earliest appearance in the works of Bentota Albert de Silva<sup>26</sup> right upto the publication of the first work of realistic fiction, viz., Wickramasinghe's own later novel, **Gamperaliya** (1944), half a century later. Albert de Silva, the first writer to attempt the writing of original fiction in Sinhala with a purely literary, non-propagandist purpose initiated his work by composing non-realistic, highly melodramatic stories couched in the language of the ancient Sinhala prose classics. The

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24. **Grantha Vignaana**, pp. 12-13.

25. **Ibid.**, p. 13.

26. For a detailed analysis of the four neo-classical romances of Bentota Albert de Silva, see Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya, **Sinhala Navakathaavata Maga Paedeema**, Sarasavi Press, Kandy, 1970.

plots of de Silva's works (**Vimala** 1892; **Aadara Hasuna** 1892; **Siribari** 1894 and **Vesak Dootaya** 1894) were strongly influenced by the **Arabian Nights** which Albert de Silva himself had translated into Sinhala from 1891-1894, as well as by other translations like that of the **Ramayanaya** (1886). A decade later, when the first real novel, Piyadasa Sirisena's **Vasanavantha Vivahaya** (1904) appeared its plot was again considerably influenced by the same sources, especially the **Ramayanaya**.<sup>28</sup> In Piyadasa Sirisena's first novel, the heroine Roslin is abducted and kept prisoner like Seetha by Ravana in the **Ramayanaya**. In Simon de Silva's first novel, the second Sinhala novel **Meena** (1905), the heroine is again abducted and lives in the jungle for several days. Thus, all the four short prose narratives of Albert de Silva which paved the way for the Sinhala novel, as well as the first novels of the first two Sinhala novelists proper, Piyadasa Sirisena and Simon de Silva, therefore, made melodramatic action the external framework of their plots.

It was, however, M. C. F. Perera who added to the melodramatic plot of Piyadasa Sirisena and Albert de Silva a strong element of sentimental, romantic love, glorifying and idealising the concept of "eternal" and "true" love, and making it the central interest in his novels. The theme of romantic love had been present in all the previous works of Albert de Silva, Piyadasa Sirisena and Simon de Silva; but it was in M. C. F. Perera's second novel **Mage Pembari** ('My Beloved', 1907) that the particular prototype of love romance or romantic and sentimental melodrama which Martin Wickramasinghe attempted to imitate in **Soma** emerged. The prototype supplied by M. C. F. Perera had been already adopted with great success by W. A. Silva, another contemporary of Wickramasinghe, in his first novel **Siriyalatha** in 1909.

There is sufficient evidence to show that, during the time of composition of **Soma** and **Ayirangani**, Wickramasinghe had come under the tutelage and mentorship of W. A. Silva; as Wickramasinghe declared in his autobiography, around this time, "Every Saturday afternoon W. A. Silva and I used to meet and discuss the subject of literature and the novel. W. A. Silva considered Rider Haggard, Hall Caine and Walter Scott as great novelists."<sup>29</sup>

**Soma** was thus influenced by local as well as foreign models of romantic melodrama. It was influenced by M. C. F. Perera's prototype of romantic melodrama in Sinhala, **Mage Pembari**, and one of its most successful imitations, W. A. Silva's **Siriyalatha**. In addition to this, **Soma**

27. There had been a body of fiction written earlier by Christian missionaries composed purely with the purpose of proselytisation, such as **The Two Families** by Rev. Isaac de Silva, published in instalments from 1866 and later published as a one-volume work in 1894.

28. **The Ramayana** had been translated into Sinhala in 1886 by C. Don Bastian.

29. **Upan Daa Sita**, pp. 217-18.

was also influenced by English writers of popular romantic melodrama whose works Wickramasinghe read avidly at this time of his life. In addition to Rider Haggard<sup>30</sup> and Hall Caine,<sup>31</sup> two popular writers of English melodrama to whom he was introduced by W. A. Silva, Wickramasinghe mentions two others who were presumably in the same category: George M. Reynolds and Adelaide Rowlands. The period of composition of *Soma* was not unexpectedly a period of Wickramasinghe's addiction to cheap melodramatic fiction as described by Wickramasinghe himself:

"I read **Robinson Crusoe** and **Gulliver's Travels** with the help of a dictionary. Next I began to read incredible love stories (romances) and enjoyed Rider Haggard's novels. Even today I can repeat from memory a naive and silly quotation that was imprinted in my memory from a love story written by a woman called Effie Adelaide Rowlands: "With youth love is not a plant of slow growth; the touch of a hand, the glance of an eye, awaken the soul of love with life." I thought that this childish statement was a universal truth, although it will probably be laughed at and ridiculed today even by a child studying in the lower form of a college."<sup>32</sup>

This tendency to worship "romantic love" was encouraged by the advice once given to law students by Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan at a lecture which Wickramasinghe also appears to have attended. In that lecture Ramanathan had advised students to read the novels of an English writer called George M. Reynolds in order to improve their vocabulary. Wickramasinghe, too, followed Ramanathan's advice primarily to extend his English vocabulary. The reading of Reynolds' melodramatic novels of the popular variety with little literary merit probably encouraged Wickramasinghe to imitate Reynolds and others of his ilk. As Wickramasinghe confessed later in his autobiography: "I began to read Reynolds' novels. His novels enthralled me and I could not put them aside until I had read them right to the very end, like the stories in the **Arabian Nights**."<sup>33</sup> Wickramasinghe also described how he was enraptured by Reynolds' cheap love stories, and how as a raw young man he had enjoyed the language and style in which Reynolds described the sensual, physical attractions of his heroines, and even mentioned one of Reynolds' favourite phrases, "budding breasts." "By reading three novels by Reynolds I learned a number of words which I could not have gathered by reading many more novels than that by other writers."<sup>34</sup>

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30. Henry Rider Haggard, (1856-1925), British novelist, author of *She* and *King Solomon's Mines*.

31. Sir Thomas Henry Hall Caine (1853-1931), British novelist.

32. *Upan Daa Sita*, p. 101.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

Wickramasinghe, however, did not himself introduce the sentimental love romance or the romantic melodrama to Sinhala fiction. It had, in fact, been introduced by M. C. F. Perera, one of the trinity of Sinhala novelists of the first generation (the other two being Piyadasa Sirisena and Simon de Silva) as early as 1907. Soon after its introduction, in 1909, it was imitated, moreover, by W. A. Silva in his first novel, **Siriyalatha**. In a broad sense all the works comprising Wickramasinghe's juvenilia show many of the basic elements of romantic melodrama; but it was in particular his second novel **Soma** that was a deliberate and conscious imitation of the typical melodrama popularised by M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva. Also, as he said later in his usual tone of self-ridicule, **Ayirangini**, his third novel, was also cast in the same mould as **Soma**: "The two stories that I wrote before **Seetha**, i. e., **Soma** and **Ayirangini**, both contained characters I had created as puppets following naive, childish love stories ("romances"). In such stories, employing puppets as characters, my own experiences did not receive any important place at all."<sup>35</sup> However, although **Ayirangani** fell broadly into the category of romantic melodrama like **Soma**, Wickramasinghe's reading of the novels of some serious western novelists made him conceive of the titular heroine of **Ayirangini** as a woman of dignity and self-respect fighting for independence and sexual emancipation, seeking her personal identity as no previous heroine in Sinhala fiction had done. This theme, the result of Wickramasinghe's reading of some of the greatest works of Western fiction like Leo Tolstoy's **Resurrection** and Thomas Hardy's **Tess of the D'Urbervilles** gives **Ayirangani** the appearance of a strange type of hybrid which has a serious theme (*inter alia*) which is presented through a highly inappropriate technique, that of naive romantic melodrama. The same kind of incongruity and lack of harmony between theme and form, though to varying degrees, can be observed in Wickramasinghe's next two novels, **Seetha** and **Miringudiya**.

### Part III

The two novels with which the present study is concerned, **Soma** (1920) and **Ayirangini** (1923) represent the second phase of Wickramasinghe's novelistic development, the period of his "romantic melodrama." The term 'romance' is used in this paper to refer to "works with extravagant characters, remote and exotic places, highly exciting and heroic events, passionate love, or mysterious and supernatural experiences."<sup>36</sup> Melodramatic novels may be defined as works of fiction "based on a romantic plot and developed sensationally, without regard for convincing motivation and with an excessive appeal to the emotions (of the reader). The object is to keep the reader thrilled by the awakening anyhow of strong

35. Upan Daa Sita, pp. 239-40.

36. C. H. Holman and W. Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 5th edition, Macmillan, New York, 1986, p. 436.

feelings of pity or horror or joy."<sup>37</sup> In these two novels, under the formative influences mentioned earlier, Wickramasinghe turned away from the propagandist novel (represented by **Leila**) to the novel of popular melodrama, of shallow entertainment of the reader. Unlike in **Leila** where the considerably melodramatic plot merely served as a colourful backdrop and as a peg upon which to hang Wickramasinghe's propaganda on behalf of modern western science and technology and logical method, in **Soma** the story assumes the place of primary importance. The plot is narrated for its own sake, to provide the reader with excitement to take him to an imaginary dream world, using 'puppet' characters and incredible action and behaviour, and making liberal use of coincidence and rare happenings.

The sub-title of the novel **Soma** (the full title in Sinhala was **Soma Hevat Nitya Premaya**) "Soma or Eternal Love", indicated quite clearly Wickramasinghe's basic interest and preoccupation in the novel, viz., the eulogisation and deification of 'eternal' or 'unchanging' love. Though a trite and hackneyed theme common to bad romantic fiction in both Sinhala and English, the change to this theme in **Soma** was a negative advance in the evolution of Wickramasinghe, for here, unlike in **Leila**, an attempt is made to construct a story on a preconceived idea or theme (however trite and hackneyed) and to indicate it clearly through the novel's sub-title of "Eternal or Permanent Love". This shows an advance in the author's sense of organisation round a central theme, a pre-requisite of a good novelist. For a writer who in his first novel had no understanding whatsoever of the nature and functions of the novel as a literary genre, it was an important step forward in his craft. The choice of sub-title expressing his main interest and the construction of the plot to illustrate that theme indicates at the least that Wickramasinghe had now come to understand that a novel should not be just any interesting story, but a kind of **moral fable** deliberately invented to illustrate a pre-conceived idea or theme, constructed so as to convey the author's personal vision of life and society. However, it should be stressed once more that the theme of **Soma**, that of ideal and everlasting love was common and not at all original and already overused in both cheap English fiction as well as in the fiction of Sinhala novelists like M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva. **Soma** was without doubt a work of imitation and worthless as a novel, but it was also Wickramasinghe's first moral fable, and therefore marked a requisite step in the growth to maturity of the author as a novelist.

Being still a youth of 20 years and having just read some cheap English love stories typified by the novels of Rider Haggard, Hall Caine and George M. Reynolds, as well as the earlier works of romantic melodrama in Sinhala, Wickramasinghe launched himself in **Soma** deliberately to emulate W. A. Silva in particular, by apotheosising "permanent love". Wickramasinghe's

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37. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

treatment of this love theme did not go beyond the simple and puerile level that it took in M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva. Love is depicted as an abstract emotion superior to physical love, sensual desire and lust. This form of love is put forward as an abstract emotion that ennobles and purifies the minds of men and women who practise it. This deification of an other-worldly, heavenly, unrealistic form of love is found clearly expressed (though crudely, it is true) through the words of the omniscient author in Chapter 3 of **Soma**, in the following passage:

Love is not a psychological state or emotion originating in lust or sexual desire, pure and simple. It is a complex, subtle emotion resulting from the combination of a multiplicity of aesthetic feelings. Love is not, moreover, a simple, one-dimensional, animal-like feeling of pure craving like hunger and the desire for sexual intercourse; on the contrary, genuine, permanent, eternal love is an emotion which purifies and ennobles the minds of men and women, containing within itself feelings and emotions arising from and associated with purity of thought, mutual respect and sympathy, self-sacrifice, and security, together with sexual satisfaction. It is not reasonable to equate genuine love exclusively with sexual desire and lust alone. Real love is the symbol of perfection of the worldly as well as other-worldly qualities of man.<sup>38</sup>

The theme of **Soma** was considerably hackneyed even in 1920. In a novel published 13 years earlier, one of the trinity of first generation Sinhala novelists, M. C. F. Perera<sup>39</sup>, the writer who brought the romantic melodrama to full maturity in a series of six novels between 1906 and 1911, had expressed the same theme as in Wickramasinghe's **Soma** in almost identical words in a novel significantly entitled **Mage Pembari** ('My Beloved'). **Mage Pembari** was perhaps the first novel in which this theme of the sentimental idealisation and glorification of "eternal" or "permanent" love was adumbrated, and which inspired both Martin Wickramasinghe (in **Soma** and **Ayirangini**) and W. A. Silva (in his first novel **Siriyalatha**) to engage in the same preoccupation of writing unrealistic romantic melodrama.

In **Mage Pembari** M. C. F. Perera described "First Love" and "Eternal or Unchanging Love", employing exotic heavenly imagery. The following passage is from a love letter sent by one Sammy to his beloved young lady called Clara:

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38. **Soma**, chapter 3, p. 119. All page references to the text of **Soma** (1920) and **Ayirangini** in the present paper refer to the texts of the two novels as reprinted in **The Collected Works of Martin Wickramasinghe**, Vol. 3, Thisara Prakasakayo, Dehiwala, 1987. Volume 3 contains all the seven works of long fiction comprising Wickramasinghe's "juvenilia" as defined in the present paper, viz., **Leila**, **Soma**, **Ayirangini**, **Seetha**, **Miringudiya**, **Unmaada Chittraa** and **Rohini**.
39. M. C. F. Perera (1879-1922), the last of the trinity of Sinhala novelists of the first generation (the others in the trinity being Piyadasa Sirisena and A. Simon de Silva) composed and published 6 novels during the five-year period 1906-1911: **Mage Karume** (1906), **Mage Pembari** (1907), **Lanka Abirahas** (1907), **Sirimedura** (1908), **Aalaye Leelaya** (1908), and **Lalitha Hevat Ratnamanikyaya** (1911).

There is no sweeter sound in the whole world than the musical sound produced when the bird called First Love first flutters its wings..... (Romantic love between a youth and a maiden) is "other-worldly, a kind of heavenly ambrosia, pure and sweet, capable of transforming the drab, ordinary world to a world of supreme heavenly bliss..... Life without love is like living in a desert..... Firm, inflexible, never-changing love..... leads to happiness of mind and good fortune in both this world and the next ..... This love is superlatively sweet like ambrosia, the food of the gods ..... the love which continues to endure, never changing, to the end of a person's life is a supreme blessing. Such a person's life is comparable to the happiness of the gods....."<sup>40</sup>

A comparison of the above passage from **Mage Pembari** with the passage that parallels it in **Soma** (already quoted)<sup>41</sup> shows how closely and strongly Wickramasinghe must have been influenced by M. C. F. Perera's **Mage Pembari**, if not by Perera's other novels.

It is this notion of sentimental, heavenly love that Wickramasinghe has chosen to make his main theme in **Soma**, as the subtitle of the novel clearly proves. It is, moreover, the theme of the magical nature of romantic love that is embodied in the plot invented by Wickramasinghe, a plot full of violent external action. This form of romantic melodrama had by 1920 become the order of the day in Sinhala fiction, being universally practised by almost all contemporary novelists. Indeed, the kind of sentimental romantic melodrama perfected by M. C. F. Perera in his 6 novels culminated in **Siriyalatha** by W. A. Silva (1909) and Wickramasinghe's own **Soma** and **Ayirangini** and continued into the latter's **Unmaada Chitraa** (1928) and **Rohini** (1929). Although Wickramasinghe soon outgrew his taste for romantic melodrama after 1929 and gave up writing long fiction altogether for the next 15 years, it continued to be in vogue and became more and more popular later on, especially in the later works of W. A. Silva such as **Lakshmi Hevat Nonaesena Raejiniya** (1922), **Hingana Kolla** (1923), **Kaelae Handa** (1933) and **Handapaana** (1941), and in Silva's "historical romances", **Sunethraa** (1936), **Daiva Yogaya** (1938) and **Vijayabaa Kollaya** (1938).

Thus in **Soma**, his second novel, following almost slavishly the second branch of tradition of the contemporary Sinhala novel, Martin Wickramasinghe failed to show much "individual talent", except in respect of a few minor and unimportant aspects of novel writing which will be commented upon later on in the present study.

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40. M. C. F. Perera, **Mage Pembari**, pp. 36-37.

41. **Soma**, p. 119.

Wickramasinghe's **Soma** is not only a melodrama in the sense already defined, but also a typically sentimental romantic type of melodrama. In sentimental romantic melodrama, melodramatic scenes, especially love scenes and death scenes are made use of to arouse unduly and in a deliberately artificial manner the emotions and feelings of the reader. This kind of "sentimentalism" has been described as "an overindulgence in emotion, especially the conscious effort to induce emotion in order to analyse or enjoy it.... Sentimentalism may be said to result whenever a reader or an audience is asked to experience an emotional response in excess of that merited by the occasion or one that has not been adequately prepared for". Sentimentality is elsewhere described as "the effort to induce an emotional response disproportionate to the situation, and thus to substitute heightened and generally unthinking feeling for normal ethical and intellectual judgement."<sup>42</sup>

**Soma** illustrates quite clearly the dictum of T. S. Eliot in his well-known essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"<sup>43</sup> that even a talented writer often and almost invariably succumbs to the prevailing tradition (or one of its branches), even when the tradition is quite effete and inane. In writing **Soma**, in addition to being strongly influenced by western practitioners of cheap melodramatic fiction, Wickramasinghe chose to abandon one native contemporary tradition (that of Piyadasa Sirisena) only to embrace the equally sterile, barren and impotent tradition of sentimental romantic melodrama in **Soma**. Eliot in his essay referred to above asserted that the poet or artist of any sort who first enters the world of his chosen art cannot create a significant work of art without conforming to the prevailing tradition, which Eliot describes in the words "the necessity that he shall conform, that he will cohere, (in a way) that is one-sided," such that when his new work is introduced, "the existing order must be, if so ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new."<sup>44</sup> In other words, every new work of a new writer must, **ipso facto**, conform to tradition; he cannot express his 'individual talent' (if any) except through the mainstream of the tradition which he has chosen to work in as an amateur.

In Eliot's conception, however, there is not one, but two ways in which a new writer may "conform" with tradition; a writer who enters a particular literary **genre** for the first time may "merely conform", which, according to Eliot, "is not to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore, not be a work of art."<sup>45</sup> This first kind of conformity would be slavish imitation of past or contemporary tradition. The second way in which a new writer

42. Holman and Harmon, *op. cit.*, pp. 462-63.

43. T. S. Eliot, *loc. cit.*, pp. 13-22.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

45. *Ibid.*

could "conform" would be to produce something new, "which also appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other."<sup>46</sup> To put it more simply, a new writer's first work may or not be mere conformity to tradition, without any expression of his "individual talent", or it may be the expression of his "individual talent" (to a smaller or greater extent) **through** the contemporary tradition: in neither case can he avoid conforming to the prevailing tradition in his chosen field.

Applying Eliot's dictum to Wickramasinghe's juvenilia, it appears that his "conformity" in **Leila** was rather of the second type than the first (i.e., in it he displayed **some** originality and individual talent); on the other hand, in **Soma** he appears to "merely conform" to the tradition represented by M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva: the tradition of the "sentimental romantic melodrama." But even when "merely conforming", there is that very slight appearance of the individual talent even in **Soma**, as will be pointed out below. In **Ayirangini**, Wickramasinghe once again tried to conform but at the same time also to express some individual talent; in **Ayirangini** there is once again a strain (though slight) of originality, an element that was completely absent in **Soma**. Thus the two consecutive novels, composed in 1920 and 1923 respectively, and written basically in the same tradition of melodrama, show some similarities as well as some important differences between them. In other words, **Ayirangini** though still in form a cheap melodrama, shows an advance or progress in Wickramasinghe's novelistic *oeuvre*, however slight.

A brief survey of the plot action of **Soma** illustrates quite well that the novel is replete with many of the stock ingredients of melodramatic fiction. The whole plot of **Soma** rests, for example, on the shaky Plautine situation of the existence of two twin brothers (Edmund and Peter) who both fall in love with the only daughter of a neighbouring family, resulting in the well-known love triangle of melodramatic fiction. Soma, however, loves Peter and considers Edmund as a brother. More love intrigue is introduced into the plot in the form of Soma's involvement during her school days with a young man called Sextus with whom she has exchanged love letters. Sextus tricks Soma into visiting his room one night, on the pretext of returning her love letters. Edmund, by sheer coincidence, happens to be present when Soma arrives there and a violent fight ensues between Edmund and Sextus, at the end of which Edmund snatches the bundle of letters and gives it to Soma. In the meantime, Soma's father has suddenly fallen ill in the night, but this time

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46. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

being the period of the 1915 riots, martial law prevails, with a curfew at night. In the absence of Peter, Edmund has to violate the curfew to visit a doctor; on his return, he is challenged by a Punjabi soldier and after a violent struggle Edmund snatches the soldier's own rifle and hits him on the head with the butt of the rifle. On attempting to flee, Edmund too is shot on the back and falls senseless on the ground. Peter now goes in search of his brother and after a skirmish with the same soldier rescues Edmund after binding the union between Peter and Soma in a sentimental death-bed scene. Soma's father, also on his death-bed makes Soma promise to marry Sextus, to whom their house and property have been mortgaged. Soma agrees but interprets her promise literally, marrying Sextus legally but refusing to have any sexual relations with him. Sextus, on the wedding day, attempts to have sexual relations with Soma. Soma is compelled to run away at night and seeks refuge at the house of her friend called Laura. Peter is sentenced to two years imprisonment for violating the curfew and for assaulting a soldier; on his release, Peter visits Laura's house at the same time (Laura and Sextus too have, by another coincidence, been past lovers!) and a severe physical clash occurs between Sextus and Peter. Sextus is thrashed by Peter and tries to run away but slips on the ground and hits his head on a large stone. He later dies of a serious head injury. Peter is arrested again, and tried for the second time for killing Sextus, but after a trial before a judge and jury he is acquitted. The novel concludes with the expected typical fairy-tale ending of the two lovers uniting.

The above summary of the external plot shows clearly that **Soma** does not depart from the popular sentimental melodrama, with its well-known formulaic ingredients such as a series of violent physical encounters, a triangular love relationship, several love intrigues, many coincidences, two death-bed scenes, two court trials, all characteristic of cheap melodrama. **Soma** appears to be a good example of melodrama in containing "a romantic plot. . . developed sensationally, without regard for convincing motivation and with an excessive appeal to the emotions (of the reader)", the main object of the novel being "to keep the reader thrilled by the awakening anyhow of strong feelings of pity or horror or joy."<sup>47</sup> Violent, sensational physical action is the staple of the narrative throughout: in addition to the four physical fights between men (the first between Sextus and Peter, the second between Edmund and the Punjabi soldier, the third between Peter and the same soldier, and the fourth between Peter and Sextus during which the latter meets his end), the sensational plot action includes the following: in chapter

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47. Holman and Harmon, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

4, Edmund smashes open the locked door of Sextus' room with his bare hands;<sup>48</sup> Soma enters Sextus' room alone in the night, covering her head with a shawl;<sup>49</sup> Soma, on the night of her wedding, first attempts to stab Sextus who tries to have sexual relations with her by force with a dagger<sup>50</sup> and later attempts suicide herself. The death-bed confession, another frequent convention of romantic melodrama, figures prominently in two places, to raise the emotional pitch of the story, and both scenes are deliberately sentimentalised.<sup>51</sup> Soma's dying father not only extracts a promise from his daughter to marry Sextus but symbolically unites their hands before he breathes his last. Even more sentimental is the scene where Edmund dies after placing together symbolically the hands of Soma and Peter. At the end of the scene, just before Edmund breathes his last, "Soma's soft pale lips, trembling with sorrow, approached Edmund's lips. Her lips, made hot by the fire of sorrow, united with Edmund's ..... She pressed her lips on his as if she was squeezing out her heart filled as it was with compassion, and feeding him with the ambrosia of her love; this hot kiss seemed to Edmund like a drop of ambrosia placed at the tip of his tongue."<sup>52</sup> Here, the deliberate attempt at the exaggeration of emotion, sheer artificial sentimentalisation, is quite manifest. Again, at the end of the scene, "Soma's heart filled with sorrow, and her eyes filled with tears, her lips trembling with sighs, Soma bent her head downward and laid it on Edmund's breast..... She cried out, "Edmund! Edmund!" through the sigh-filled opening of her lips.. Tears began to gush out from her eyes like a rush of water flowing unrestrained from a pot filled to the brim."<sup>53</sup> Edmund's self-sacrifice in favour of the woman he loved and his twin brother is also characteristic of cheap sentimental melodramatic fiction. Again, in chapter 7, Soma's distress caused by her love for Peter and her promise to her father (to marry Sextus) is described in sentimental terms, as follows: "Soma's body began to burn with the fire of sorrow. Her tears, boiling like hot water heated by a flame of sorrow, fell from her eyes, flowed along her soft cheeks burning them, and dropped upon the soft white dress that covered her body."<sup>54</sup>

Such sentimentality of treatment of emotional scenes (especially love and death bed scenes) goes hand in hand with the employment of the "vulgar melodramatic rhetoric" characteristic of 'vulgar melodrama' as defined by

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48. **Soma**, p. 133.

49. **Ibid.**, p. 131.

50. **Ibid.**, p. 176.

51. **Ibid.**, pp. 146-149 and 156-57.

52. **Ibid.**, p. 147.

53. **Ibid.**, p. 148.

54. **Ibid.**, p. 153.

Eric Bentley.<sup>55</sup> "An elevated rhetoric," Bentley points out, "is a legitimate and indeed inexorable demand of melodrama."<sup>56</sup> *Soma* uses this typical "vulgar rhetoric" of melodrama to a considerable extent and on an unprecedented scale (except perhaps in W. A. Silva's *Siriyalatha*, 1909) confirming the fact that *Soma* is set firmly within the genre of cheap, popular sentimental melodrama. Bentley gives the following phrases in illustration of "vulgar melodramatic rhetoric": intense frowning; eyes wide open; display of teeth; grinding teeth and contracting of brows; ..... threatening action of arms; stamping with the feet; deep inspirations; panting; growling and various cries; ..... convulsion of lips and facial muscles; of limbs and trunk; acts of violence to one's self; ..... bright redness of face; sudden pallor of face; extreme dilation of nostrils; standing up of hair on head .....<sup>57</sup> *Soma* contains many of the phrases mentioned by Bentley and several other similar phrases. For example, when Edmund tells Peter that he (Edmund) had loved *Soma* from childhood, Peter "stiffened like a statue when Edmund's words fell on his ears."<sup>58</sup> When *Soma* entered Sextus' room, Edmund "stiffened like a stone."<sup>59</sup> Sextus "grinds his teeth in anger" more than once and "frowns".<sup>60</sup> Edmund's eyelids "remained open for a long time unwinking."<sup>60</sup> Edmund "shook with anger", "trembled with rage", and "fainted with anger";<sup>61</sup> his eyes "shone with the fire of rage like a pair of sun-like gems";<sup>62</sup> Sextus becomes "mad with anger";<sup>63</sup> Edmund's hands "began to tremble, his wide cheeks began to dilate"; Sextus "started grinding his teeth like a demon (rakshasa) who has been infuriated";<sup>64</sup> Edmund too "ground his teeth".<sup>65</sup> In chapter 6, when Peter thinks of his twin brother, "his entire body began to burn with sorrow. The blood in his body began to boil, and he felt his heart was pierced in the centre by an iron spike."<sup>66</sup> When Peter learned of Edmund's serious injury he "fainted with fear" and "his eyes shone like sparks of fire."<sup>67</sup> *Soma*'s heart (in the scene of her father's death) "melted like a pot ghee";<sup>68</sup> on his wedding night, Sextus' entire body "began to burn with

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55. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*, London, 1965, pp. 200-206.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

58. *Soma*, p. 125.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

lust" but when Soma pulled out a dagger he "trembled with fear and left the room, grinding his teeth."<sup>69</sup> In chapter 10, when Peter and Sextus meet, Peter's eyes "reddened with anger and his clenched fists began to shake;"<sup>70</sup> his lips, "seized by fear, became red", and "the veins on his wide forehead protruded."<sup>71</sup> Even women in this novel share the violent physical behaviour of the men; Soma too "grinds her teeth" and "trembles with rage";<sup>72</sup> she "opened wide her eyes which were burning with the fire of anger like two lampwicks and began grinding her teeth" (for the second time).<sup>73</sup> In the last scene of the novel, another woman, Ethel Jayasinghe, "started grinding her teeth in anger".<sup>74</sup> In the same final scene Sextus once more "ground her teeth" and frowned at Peter" while "sparks of fire issued forth from his eyes".<sup>75</sup>

Wickramasinghe's excessive use of this "vulgar rhetoric" of melodrama in **Soma** was probably the influence on him of W. A. Silva's **Siriyalatha**, where almost all the formulaic stock expressions mentioned above had been employed by W. A. Silva in his first novel more than a decade before the composition of **Soma**.

Little is known about the publishing history of the prototype romantic melodrama, viz., M. C. F. Perera's **Mage Pembari**, but W. A. Silva's **Siriyalatha** was re-published in 1911, i.e., within two years of original publication (1909), showing its great popularity. Wickramasinghe's **Soma**, when published in 1920, was an even greater commercial success, for, as the author declared later, "the 2000 copies of the first edition of **Soma** were sold within three months", and "it was praised by clerks in government offices and created a feeling of arrogance in my mind which was soon dispelled as a result of my own critical sense."<sup>77</sup> It is this sense of self-criticism and self-awareness that distinguishes Martin Wickramasinghe probably from all his contemporaries, for he was perhaps the only novelist in the pre-1950 period who showed advance and progressive evolution in his works, all the other major novelists, especially Piyadasa Sirisena and W. A. Silva showing little or no advance or maturation throughout their entire respective writing careers.

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69. **Ibid.**, p. 176.

70. **Ibid.**, p. 182.

71. **Ibid.**

72. **Ibid.**, p. 173.

73. **Ibid.**, p. 174.

74. **Ibid.**, p. 181.

75. **Ibid.**

76. For a detailed study of W. A. Silva's **Siriyalatha** as typical of the sentimental melodramatic tradition of Sinhala fiction, see Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya, **Sinhala Navakathaave Negeema**, Pradeepa Prakasakayo, Colombo, 1972, pp. 128-162; a list of the terms of "vulgar melodramatic rhetoric" used by W. A. Silva in **Siriyalatha** is given on pp. 152-153, many of the terms being identical in **Siriyalatha** and **Soma**.

77. **Upan Daa Sita**, p. 217.

Like its predecessor **Leila**, therefore, **Soma** shows very little literary merit or true originality in theme. **Soma**, however, occupies an important place in the evolution of Wickramasinghe as a novelist. With regard to subordinate themes and interests, in particular, **Soma** marks a significant transitional stage in Wickramasinghe's *oeuvre*, for here we see him eschewing categorically his first erroneous concept of the novel as propaganda. He approached creative writing a little more closely in **Soma** than in his first novel by embracing the concept of fiction as pure entertainment. This was a necessary step in Wickramasinghe's maturity, for it is with this change in outlook that Wickramasinghe quickly graduated from non-literary and non-creative propaganda to creative writing, though of a puerile sort.

**Soma** is also important in showing the continuity of certain minor themes in Wickramasinghe's fiction, themes which ran through all his juvenilia and even spilled over into the work of his full maturity. Two such themes or interests were (1) the satirisation of certain weaknesses in contemporary Sri Lankan society such as caste prejudice, and (2) the criticism of the current attitude towards women in Sinhala society.

The theme of casteism as a serious obstruction to progress and social harmony among the Sinhala people is a theme which runs through almost all Wickramasinghe's fiction, first appearing as early as his first novel **Leila** and showing its presence significantly in **Soma**, and continuing into the works of his maturity, especially the trilogy **Gamperaliya-Kaliyagaya-Yugantaya** and surfacing again in one of the author's last two novels, **Karuvala Gedara**. In all these novels, caste is shown to play a key role in matters of matrimony and the comparative position of families and individuals in the Sri Lankan social hierarchy.

The satirisation and castigation of casteism in Sinhala society was not a main theme in **Leila**, although in that novel certain other social weaknesses like the belief in superstitions and religious myths and cosmology became Wickramasinghe's objects of criticism and ridicule. In **Soma**, however, the theme of caste as a serious obstacle to social progress and harmony is introduced deliberately as an important theme at the beginning of the novel itself. **Soma** opens with a satirical portrayal of a typical caste feud in a Sinhala village depicted through the enmity and jealousy between two neighbouring families (the Gunatilakes and the Gunasinghes). Although Mudaliyar Gunatilake has liberal views, his conventional wife looks with contempt upon the Gunasinghes who are supposedly of a lower caste.<sup>78</sup> Caste difference is also the main reason for the Gunatilakes opposing the love affair and marriage of Peter and Soma. However, this theme remains submerged in the novel after the first chapter and re-appears only in chapter

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78. *Soma*, pp. 99-100.

7,<sup>79</sup> where Mudaliyar Gunatilake, now forgetting his liberal and democratic views, objects to the marriage, commenting, "This curse of casteism is like that. Even a person who doesn't care for it cannot escape its baneful effects. What can we do except curse those who first brought the caste system into being?"<sup>80</sup> Wickramasinghe here as omniscient author comments: "To unenlightened people, of course, caste differences are like iron chains which cannot be shattered. To strong men with noble ideas, however, they are like flimsy cobwebs which can be destroyed easily."<sup>81</sup> This theme, however, is developed only in rudimentary form in this novel; nevertheless its appearance as an organic part of the story makes **Soma** an important step in the evolution of Wickramasinghe's themes. Thus in spite of **Soma** being a typical melodrama, in this particular aspect Wickramasinghe has shown some 'individual talent', putting his finger on one of the basic problems of early 20th century Sinhala society, caste prejudice. Another mark of Wickramasinghe's slow maturation as a novelist is that (unlike in **Leila** where the condemnation of such reactionary attitudes was crude and direct) here the theme is presented dramatically through the interaction of fictional characters, not in the words of the omniscient author or the writer's spokesman and mouthpiece.

More important than the theme of casteism, however, is the theme of the emancipation of the female sex, the need for the recognition of the equality of the sexes, in keeping with modern, liberal and democratic attitudes developed in the west. This theme too begins with Wickramasinghe's first novel and runs through all his juvenilia, and continues into his later more mature work too. The theme had appeared towards the end of **Leila**, in that novel more like an afterthought than a deliberately introduced, fully thought-out theme. The theme of female emancipation had been dealt with already by Simon de Silva in his three novels (**Meena** 1905, **Theresa** 1907 and **Ape Aagama** 1910) at a serious level and by Piyadasa Sirisena too from his first novel **Vasanavantha Vivahaya** (1904), and was therefore not a theme original to Wickramasinghe; however, the fact that it was no mere borrowing from those two predecessors is shown clearly by the fact that Wickramasinghe had in his collection of scientific and critical essays called **Shaastreeya Lekhana** (1919) one year before **Soma** expressed the revolutionary idea (for that time) that writers of classical Sinhala prose and poetry had treated the female sex shamefully and unjustly, complaining that "while our ancient

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79. Ibid., p. 155.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., p. 156.

poets described the physical beauty of women, metaphorically even going to the extent of stripping them of their clothing to describe their features minutely item by item without omitting even a single hair or a fingernail, they were completely blind to the spiritual and other inner attributes of women ..... There is not a single appreciatory reference to women's superb spiritual and moral qualities in all the works of our poets."<sup>82</sup> The theme of female emancipation had, however, been adumbrated first in **Leila**, though in that novel female emancipation was not a main theme nor even a minor one; (in fact, the idea of the superiority of women is tagged on mechanically in the last chapter (chapter 14) of the novel). Chapter 14 begins with the following significant epigraph from Washington Irving: "There is in every true woman's heart a spark of heavenly fire which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity; but which kindles up, and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity."<sup>83</sup> This expression of the theme of the equality (and sometimes the superiority) of the female to the male is in the same last chapter conveyed through a passage showing how Albert (the hero and spokesman of the author in **Leila**) seeing Leila's abilities, realises that his former notions of and attitudes to women were inaccurate and unreasonable. Here Albert is made to engage in deep contemplation, and his thoughts are presented as a piece of stream of consciousness or indirect interior monologue:

Although he (Albert) had believed earlier that women are unable to withstand disasters by nature, he was compelled to change that view after learning about the past life of **Leila**. He realised that women by nature were superior to men by their being able to bear up great disasters and sorrows in a calmer manner than their male counterparts. When facing intolerable pains and sorrows, when men encounter great pain and suffering, they (men) engage in various meaningless acts; but women do not do so..... we hear that a woman has committed suicide, unable to withstand great sorrow, very rarely. In such matters women are better at maintaining their mental equilibrium than men.<sup>84</sup>

Next Albert is reminded of the stanza by Sri Rahula Thero in **Kavyasekera** where women are depicted as possessing little will-power and self-control over their passions, especially sexual desire. Sri Rahula Thero claimed in that stanza<sup>85</sup> that "there are no women who will not succumb to sexual passion provided they get the opportunities of a secret place and a convenient time." Here Wickramasinghe's notions of sexual equality emerge through Albert's thoughts expressed in the passage below:

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82. **Shastreeya Lekhana**, p. 47.

83. **Leila**, p. 91.

84. **Ibid.**, p. 94.

85. **The Kavyasekera** (1449) by Thotagamuve Sri Rahula Thero, a Mahakavya (Epic) written in 887 stanzas divided into 15 cantos. The stanza referred to is number 4 in canto 13.

"I believe this statement (i.e., the derogatory attitude to women in the stanza of Rahula thero) is more true of men than of women. In this regard, women have greater ability to suppress and control their lustful desires than men. Here men act more slavishly than women, but however unrestrainedly they act, they are not subjected to the same kind of shame and disrepute as women. This is the chief reason why they are less liable to such accusations. Leila, I am surprised at the way you withstood all the pains and sorrows of the past". With this compliment Albert looked at Leila, who is described as feeling a happiness she had never enjoyed before in her life.<sup>86</sup>

After the publication of **Leila**, the theme of the emancipation of the weaker sex obviously preoccupied Wickramasinghe a great deal, and was expressed strongly in one of the essays in **Shaastreeya Lekhana**<sup>87</sup>, an article ostensibly on Sinhala classical prose and poetry. In the preface to this collection of essays, Wickramasinghe claimed that his purpose in publishing the essays was to bring out the value of the freedom of thought and expression. In the article on classical Sinhala literature, he devoted a considerable space to the adverse and reactionary attitude of classical Sinhala writers to women, and said that he wanted to enable his readers to take a "balanced and sensible attitude" in such matters. In particular, according to Wickramasinghe, "In our ancient civilisation there are valuable features which we should conserve and protect, like our own lives; but there are also some unpleasant features which pollute and soil the good ones. The duty of true nationalists is not to preserve all of it, but wash away the unpleasant features in it."<sup>88</sup>

The denunciation of classical Sinhala writers for their reactionary and unjust attitude to women comes in the third essay of **Shaastreeya Lekhana** and is titled in English "An Unprogressive Language". After ironically praising the ancient writers for their descriptions of the external beauties of women, Wickramasinghe caustically commented: "Our poets, however, never described women's internal or spiritual qualities ..... they were blind to the women's spiritual virtues. Their belief that women were devoid of a soul should not be accepted.... In all the poetic compositions of our poets there is no mention of women's ability to bring about mental purification and lofty ideas."<sup>89</sup> Further, declared Wickramasinghe, "I have not found in all the Sinhala books that I have read a single saying that arouses high ideas in an educated man's mind regarding the female sex."<sup>90</sup>

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86. **Leila**, p. 95.

87. **Shaastreeya Lekhana** (English title: 'Essays Literary and Scientific'), Lankaloka Press, Galle, 1920, 52 pp.

88. **Ibid.**, Preface.

89. **Ibid.**, p. 47.

90. **Ibid.**

Therefore it clearly appears that Martin Wickramasinghe around 1919/1920 was fired with and obsessed by the feeling of doing justice to the female sex, showing women's equality (if not superiority) to the male, and that this idea provided at least one of the main threads binding together his novels of the early 1920s (**Soma** 1920; **Ayirangani** 1923; **Seetha** 1923; and **Miringudiya** 1925). Its appearance as early as 1914 at the end of **Leila** has already been noted. In **Soma** this new, revolutionary attitude to women emerges principally through descriptions and references to the heroine Soma, who is shown as an exemplarily unblemished character who preserves her chastity with great care. Soma has been brought up according to the traditional values of Sinhala-Buddhist culture. In chapter 8, Wickramasinghe engages in a long passage of third person point of view authorial commentary extolling the virtues of women, in an effort, obviously, to set right the record in view of the heavily biased attitude to women in classical Sinhala literature<sup>91</sup> and explaining the nature of love and woman's relation to love, sexuality and chastity, where he declares, *inter alia*, "Love does not respect the external beauty of women but their purity..... this female chastity, which has attracted the minds of the founders of religions, ascetics, fools and low rascals.... Purity (chastity) is a valuable gem protected by women with immense effort.... Female beauty which is a gift given by nature as a weapon to protect her also proved to be a cause of her ruin and she even used it often to destroy men... Therefore it is beneficial to the world to expose the nature of the female heart and to understand and appreciate her inborn, inherent virtues. Our (Sinhala) poets have shown to the world woman's animal qualities; her inborn, natural virtues of maternal love, her sense of self-sacrifice and other such other-worldly virtues should have been studied instead, by opening out her heart. But our poets were a set of ascetics who lived apart from women... They scratched the extra-soft skin that covered her body and decided that "there is nothing in the women except the flesh and blood found in beasts and animals." It is extremely unfortunate that in the past no woman was born who was capable of defending their sex by attacking the male poets who stripped the innocent Sinhala woman naked and applied on her body the golden coloured clay of poetic decorations and figures of speech disfiguring her appearance, turning her into the picture of an animal."<sup>92</sup>

The style and wording of the above onslaught in chapter 8 of **Soma** testifies quite clearly to the sincerity of Wickramasinghe's sympathetic attitude to women, his strong desire to do justice to women by bringing out, through his novels, the hidden spiritual virtues of women and the female sex. Wickramasinghe's attitude is one of warm admiration for women, who are

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91. **Soma**, p. 163-64.

92. **Ibid.**

shown favourably in contrast to men: in chapter 9, for example, on the wedding night, Sextus who has earlier on promised to refrain from physical sex, behaves like a beast blinded by lust, but Soma acts completely contrary to the description of women by Sri Rahula thero, and instead of indulging in an orgy of sex, preserves her chastity at the risk of her life. Here Wickramasinghe juxtaposes Sri Rahula thero's view that women are by nature lustful and mentally frail to Joseph Conrad's view that the female heart is like a deep ocean: "A woman's heart is like a mine containing immeasurable compassion as well as hate, quietness as well as excitement, pity as well as cruelty, self-sacrifice as well as selfishness."<sup>93</sup>

In another long passage of authorial 'preaching', after quoting Conrad Wickramasinghe goes on to add: "Like the valuable, even priceless gems lying at the bottom of the sea, the female heart, taken in its entirety, is filled with the gems of filial love, compassion, virtue, intelligence and obedience to her husband, while at the same time it is a place containing the cruel, cold water of devilish destruction. The power of woman is capable of creating or destroying the world.... Woman is multi-faceted; one of her aspects resides in the pleasant, attractive virtues born of her powers of creation, praised by poets; another of her aspects is the repellent side shown by ascetics; when possessing gentility of behaviour, love, purity, self sacrifice and faithfulness (chastity) to her husband, she is a goddess who supersedes and transcends humanity. When enraged and provoked by fierce lust and selfishness, she is a prostitute who has been created to burn the world to ashes... Woman's great virtues like filial love that supersede everything in this world as well as her moral defects are based on desire."<sup>94</sup> Soma symbolises such a woman; moved by pure love, she prefers to kill herself rather than lose her chastity. In chapter 9 ("The Wedding Night") she desperately defends her "pure love" for her lover Peter.<sup>95</sup>

In **Soma**, therefore, contrary to the conventional, traditional view of the woman as frail and fickle, we are presented with the portrait of a strong-willed character, a woman who defends her love for her lover at the risk of her life, and never wavers or gives into animal lust or betrays her love and her lover. This variety of undying, eternal love is expressed by Soma when she tells Sextus, "Sextus, I will never become your wife. Why did you ever force me to promise to marry you, knowing that there was no love for you in my heart? What a crime it was! Another man has won my heart. I have promised to be his wife. So I cannot change my word even if I have to die."<sup>96</sup>

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93. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Martin Wickramasinghe's revolutionary attitude to women is expressed in the novel dramatically mainly through the change of attitude to the female sex by Peter, brought out mainly in chapter 3, where he (Peter) tells Edmund how he had come to experience "eternal and real love" and in the process discovered that his previous notions of women were unreal and untrue, the two happenings being simultaneous. In the key discussion of the two main topics in chapter 3, Peter describes the change that he has experienced as follows:

Yes, Edmund, I considered marriage as a big harrassment (earlier). I thought that a wife's murmurs and complaints would be a nuisance that a man could face worse than the murmuring of mosquitoes. I thought that trying to make a woman's heart happy by giving her everything she desires is like an occupation fit for small children and idiots who try to paint the wings of butterflies. I thought that there are no more foolish creatures than women who hang pieces of jewellery on their necks, ears, hands and feet which are perfect in shape (without them). I believed that women too are a species of butterflies... but now, however, my view is different. Isn't a man who grows old and dies without ever loving a woman like a blind man who dies without understanding the value of a gem that strikes his foot? Aren't the murmurings of a wife like the sweet music of a lyre? Isn't it a sheer pleasure to make a wife's heart happy by supplying her with what she enjoys to have? Isn't a woman, who is a symbol or mixture of beauty, genteel, refined behaviour and purity, like an epic poem written by a supreme poet versed in six languages, combining sweet music with a romantic theme, according to Sri Rahula thereo who led an ascetic life?"<sup>97</sup>

In **Soma**, the new emancipated 'modern' picture of the woman, rejecting **in toto** the conventional and traditional, reactionary view embodied in classical Sinhala prose and poetry and customarily accepted uncritically by people in general, is categorically put forward by Wickramasinghe as his personal view, through his spokesman and mouthpiece, the hero of **Soma**. The chief character of the novel **Soma** has been deliberately created as a living embodiment of the New Woman, seeking her own fulfilment and emancipation by selecting her own future partner, and openly rejecting the partner imposed upon her by her own father. This new woman is more realistic, natural and true to life than before; she is neither frail nor fickle compared to the woman as depicted in classical Sinhala poetry; she is as

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97. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

mentally strong as any man, and capable of steadfastness, purity and determination, independence of thought and judgment that few men are capable of. The nature of this new woman is brought out in action, through the behaviour of Soma in the novel. In chapter 6, for example, Soma is described as combining, in one person, "purity and nobility of character together with female beauty and gracefulness."<sup>98</sup> Soma is the New Woman, expressing and practising, in contrast to her father with his conventional caste prejudice, a radically modern and enlightened view of caste: "I have no regard, no respect for caste, father", she tells Mudaliyar Goonetilleke.<sup>99</sup> Later, just before her father dies, Soma again reiterates the same modern view when she asks her father, "Papa, isn't marrying Peter a thousand times better than marrying Sextus who is like an emasculated embryonic plant growing in the field of decayed aristocratic birth?"<sup>100</sup> Soma's emotional honesty and faithfulness are also brought out clearly when she tells Sextus: "I shall never become your wife.... My heart has been won by another. I have promised to be his wife. So I cannot change my decision even though I have to die."<sup>101</sup> Soma's noble qualities of chastity, steadfastness and purity are also exhibited when, on their wedding day, Sextus tries to have sexual relations with her without her consent and burning with lust. Here, Soma pulls out a dagger and nearly stabs herself, thus almost sacrificing her life for the sake of her emotional integrity. Her strength of mind is also exemplified in the way Soma runs away from Sextus and seeks protection in the house of her friend Ethel Jayasinghe.<sup>102</sup> Soma's strength of character is also demonstrated quite well in her letter to Peter where she affirmed: " I will not break my promise to you until my death."<sup>103</sup>

This theme of a new and modern attitude to women was not, however, an innovation of Wickramasinghe. The theme was first adumbrated by Bentota Albert de Silva in his last "neo-classical romance" **Vesak Dootaya** (1894) where the young antiheroine is depicted as a strong character, quite different from the frail, timid female of Classical Sinhala literature. Later on, in the first decade of the 20th century, both Piyadasa Sirisena and, to an even greater extent Simon de Silva, depicted such enlightened women in their fiction.

Unlike in **Soma** where Wickramasinghe had tried to depict the "pure" woman who preserved her chastity at the cost of her life, in **Ayirangini** he depicts the woman being subjected to male domination, a young woman who

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98. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

has been seduced by force under unavoidable circumstances, and at a time in her life when she was unable to understand the gravity of her "misdemeanour". Ayirangini is condemned to shame and social ostracism as a result of this unfortunate incident. In this novel too there is offered to the reader a variation of the same theme of female superiority over the male. Ironically, to make the comparison of the two sexes more pointed, in this story both the male as well as the female main characters commit the same kind of sexual lapse: before his marriage Reginald has resorted to prostitutes and lost his "male chastity", and is no longer a "pure" young man at the time of his marriage, while Ayirangini too has lost her virginal purity at the hands of a young cousin under unavoidable circumstances and against her will.<sup>104</sup> Ironically, although it is the man's lapse that is more grave, it is Reginald who refuses to pardon the comparatively innocent Ayirangini, the latter readily pardoning him in her turn.

The method Wickramasinghe has used in **Ayirangini** is a corollary of, and the complement to the method in **Soma**, making the two novels complementary aspects and treatments of the same theme of female virtue and female superiority over the male. In **Soma**, the thematic emphasis is on Soma's virtuousness and purity, while in **Ayirangini** the stress falls on male domination and female innocence and helplessness. In comparison, it is Soma who is depicted as a perfect, therefore rather unrealistic woman, remote from real life, whereas Ayirangini appears to be comparatively more life-like and realistic. Also, unlike in **Soma**, in **Ayirangini** Wickramasinghe employs strong irony depicting Reginald as highly "enlightened" and well-versed in modern philosophy and science, but ironically far inferior to the less scholarly Ayirangini morally and spiritually. Reginald is, for example shown to be a teacher by profession and shown in the opening scene carrying a book in his hand.<sup>105</sup> Two weeks later, when Ayirangini runs into Reginald's verandah to seek shelter from the rain, he is again shown reading.<sup>106</sup> When Ayirangini runs away from her parental home and runs to Reginald's house, the latter is described as reading a book by the philosopher Henri Bergson.<sup>107</sup>

In **Ayirangini**, both Ayirangini's seducer Percy Ratnayake who shamelessly deserts her after violating her physically, and Reginald who marries her under false pretences and abandons her without any pity for the innocent victim of male domination and tyranny, are shown to be morally

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104. **Ayirangini**, pp. 221-23.

105. **Ibid.**, p. 189.

106. **Ibid.**, p. 191.

107. **Upan Daa Sita**, p. 218.

inferior to Ayirangini, who, like Thomas Hardy's Tess in **Tess of the D'Urbervilles** (1891) and Leo Tolstoy's Maslova in **Resurrection** (1899) (both female characters of great nobility and purity ruined sexually and socially by their seducers and display a moral dignity and emotional integrity foreign to their male counterparts). There is clear evidence to show that Wickramasinghe around the time he composed **Ayirangini** was reading, or had recently read both **Tess of the D'Urbervilles** by Hardy and **Resurrection** by Tolstoy. In his Autobiography **Upan Daa Sitā** Wickramasinghe declared that it was after publishing **Soma** (and therefore before the publication of **Ayirangini**) that he started reading good works of European fiction: "I began to read good novels after the publication of **Soma**. I was directed to Thomas Hardy's fiction by the periodical **The Literary Guide**. After Hardy's novels, I read Tolstoy's **Anna Karenina**."<sup>107</sup> Although Tolstoy's **Resurrection** is not specifically mentioned here, the fact that Wickramasinghe read both **Tess** and **Resurrection** around 1923 is proved by the use of a quotation from **Tess** as the epigraph to chapter 3 of **Miringudiya** (1925) and another from **Resurrection** as the epigraph to chapter 11 of the same novel.<sup>108</sup> Significantly, the name of the ship in which the Dhanasuriya family left Sri Lanka for England was named "Tess D'Urbervilles."<sup>109</sup> There is little doubt, therefore, that Martin Wickramasinghe's theme of female emancipation was to a large extent the result of the influence of western fiction.

In **Ayirangini**, the assertion of the independence and virtuousness of women and the need for their recognition as individuals, is expressed in chapter 2 where the author presents, in his own words, a character sketch of Ayirangini: "Although she belonged to the aristocratic Kandyan nobility and was educated, Ayirangini did not differ from a rustic girl except in inborn gentility. She did not show the varieties of modern behaviour and habits of town girls. Her inherent virtues were not obliterated under the varieties of artificial, external style and fashion."<sup>110</sup> In short, Ayirangini is depicted as a rustic Sinhala girl; she is the ideal woman still uncorrupted by westernisation; she had a natural behaviour "unconcealed by the crude veneer of variegated western customs, habits and modes of behaviour."<sup>111</sup> Her virtues, her superiority to her two male counterparts Percy Ratnayake and especially Reginald Ranasinghe, are brought out throughout the story; for example, when Reginald first proposes marriage to her, at the beginning she consist-

108. Epigraphs to chapter 3 and chapter 11 of **Tess of the D'Urbervilles** by Thomas Hardy and **Resurrection** by Leo Tolstoy respectively. **Miringudiya**, pp. 383 and 429 respectively.

109. **Miringudiya**, p. 401.

110. **Ayirangini**, p. 193.

111. **Ibid.**, p. 194.

ently refuses to marry him and advises him to forget her, showing her nobility of character, her lack of selfishness and her genuine and deep love for Reginald.<sup>112</sup> It is not Ayirangini but Percy and Reginald who are exposed during the course of the plot as morally inconsistent and opportunistic, Reginald underestimating his own sexual lapses and misdeeds, but overestimating the one and only sexual lapse of Ayirangini (something beyond her control), and Percy too showing himself as a hypocritical opportunist, abandoning the girl he had seduced but returning to her and offering to marry her in his own selfish interest. Ayirangini retains her moral dignity by telling Reggie "Marrying me is an obstacle to your happiness. You will repent later Reggie"<sup>113</sup>: a forecast that comes true ironically later on in the novel.

Ayirangini also represents the New Woman when she breaks away from her parents and seeks refuge with Reggie, but here the author makes her behave unrealistically especially in view of Ayirangini's traditional upbringing; the same violation of the principle of realism is found where Ayirangini leaves her parental home at midnight to seek asylum in the bachelor household of Reggie, not once but twice. Again, Ayirangini's moral stature, her superiority to the man, and her spiritual integrity are demonstrated in chapter 6 where, on their wedding night both husband and wife reveal their respective secrets. Here, Ayirangini forgives Reggie magnanimously for his immature, youthful sexual misdemeanours without demur, but Reggie, in complete contrast to her, is infuriated to hear that his wife too has committed the same (or less grave) misdeed, and refuses point blank to forgive her for it.<sup>114</sup> Ayirangini's subsequent life after Reggie runs away to India in cowardly escapist fashion also shows her nobility of character; she neither goes back to Reggie's parents nor to her own, but instead lives all by herself, showing her independence and self-respect and self-confidence.<sup>115</sup> Her strength of character is also demonstrated clearly by her refusal to give in to the tempting offers of her former seducer Percy; Percy is severely satirised and caricatured for his sudden and hypocritical change of dress and attitudes; he has changed into 'national dress' and is the Vice-President of the Society to Boycott Women! When Percy proposes to her in an utterly unprincipled manner, Ayirangini shows her honesty and lack of opportunism by hurling a book at him and injuring him in the face.<sup>116</sup> Finally she drives him away, categorically rejecting his love and ordering him never to visit her any more. "Don't come here again! The greatest help you can give me is that!"<sup>117</sup>

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112. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

114. *Ibid.*, Chapter 6, p. 224-25.

115. *Ayirangini*, p. 232.

116. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

117. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Ayirangini is so morally upright that she does not accept Percy's help even when she is seriously ill. "I don't want your medicines I don't!" she tells Percy.<sup>118</sup> In the final chapter, when Reggie and Percy shoot at each other, she jumps in front of Reggie and receives the pistol shot meant for Reggie, and sacrifices her life for the sake of her love and her integrity, once again showing her sincerity and depth of love. Thus in **Ayirangini**, even more than in **Soma**, the main female character has been deliberately created as a symbol of purity, steadfastness, consistency, self-sacrifice and chastity, showing Ayirangini as superior to both the main male characters, Reggie and Percy.

#### Part IV

The present study of Martin Wickramasinghe's second and third novels, viz., **Soma** (1920) and **Ayirangini** (1923) has brought out several important points with regard to the evolution of Wickramasinghe's fiction and to his maturation as a novelist, while at the same time throwing light on certain matters of general interest such as the manner in which all writers, however talented they may be, have to follow and imitate the prevailing tradition in their chosen literary field before they can express their own "individual talent", an idea expressed by T. S. Eliot in his well-known essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The present essay has brought out another aspect of the evolution of Wickramasinghe's growth into maturity as a novelist which may or may not be a universal dictum and invites further research that in the case of Wickramasinghe's novelistic fiction, its evolution (and **ipso facto** the growth of the author into maturity) did not take place in a direct and straight line, i.e., progressing from bad to good, but followed a more uneven, meandering path, each succeeding novel showing progress and advance in certain respects and directions (either of theme or technique, sometimes of both), while showing retrogression and retreat or static continuity in others.

With regard to the gradual evolution of Wickramasinghe's fiction, the present essay has shown clearly that his long fiction, unlike that of almost all other Sinhala novelists (both before and after him) showed very rapid and significant evolutionary change.<sup>119</sup> These rapid changes from novel to novel show Wickramasinghe's intelligence as well as his flexibility in exploring and adopting readily new concepts of the **genre** he was working in (novelistic fiction) itself, as well as attempting experimentation and innovation in

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118. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

119. The two other considerably prolific novelists of the early 20th century, Piyadasa Sirisena and W. A. Silva show little or no evolutionary growth in their work in spite of their long practice of novelistic fiction.

the craft or techniques of novelistic fiction. Unlike Piyadasa Sirisena, M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva, his principal predecessors and contemporaries, Wickramasinghe constantly and untiringly engaged in innovation and experimentation in respect of both themes as well as techniques of long fictional narrative in Sinhala, as brought out earlier in the present essay. As the present writer's study of Wickramasinghe's maiden venture in long fiction **Leila** has already demonstrated,<sup>120</sup> he started writing novelistic fiction in the tradition of the foremost novelist at the time, Piyadasa Sirisena, and imitated the latter novelist's novel of propaganda. The detailed analysis of **Soma** and **Ayirangini** in the present paper shows that Wickramasinghe was perspicacious and resilient enough (as well as self-critical and modest enough) to judge the nature of his achievement at each respective stage of evolution and ready to learn from his own mistakes. These three early works of his juvenilia, **Leila**, **Soma** and **Ayirangini** show clear evidence of Wickramasinghe's intelligence and powers of apprehension, the presence of a keen and acute mind constantly, actively at work, from the very inception of his work in long fiction, a quality which led inevitably to Wickramasinghe's later achievements as the greatest novelist in his native language.

While **Leila** showed Wickramasinghe treading a completely erroneous path in writing propagandist fiction, the two novels analysed in the present study show how he quickly retraced his steps and adopted the slightly more advanced notion of the novel as pure and unadulterated entertainment. It shows a definite but yet only a slight advance, for while in **Leila** Wickramasinghe had not even yet realised the basic difference between literature and propaganda, between creative and scientific writing, in **Soma** and **Ayirangini** after a single initial mistake he took the crucial and essential step of clearly distinguishing between literature and scientific and critical writing.

As shown in the discussion above, **Soma** and **Ayirangini** represent Wickramasinghe's **second** phase of novel-writing: that of the novel as pure entertainment, or in the usual terminology employed in the criticism of long fiction, the well-known and highly popular genre designated the sentimental romantic melodrama. The sentimental romantic melodrama had been introduced and developed by Wickramasinghe's predecessors to a considerable extent by the time Wickramasinghe entered the world of Sinhala fiction. The prototype for this form in Sinhala was provided by M. C. F. Perera in six melodramas written between 1906 and 1911<sup>121</sup> and especially in **Mage**

120. For details regarding the article referred to, see footnote 7 above.

121. For the titles and dates of publication of M. C. F. Perera's 6 novels, see note 39 above.

**Pembari** (1907), which seems to have been one of the important formative influences on **Soma** as already shown above. The form of the sentimental romantic melodrama had also been successfully practised (perhaps with even greater success than M. C. F. Perera) by W. A. Silva in his first novel **Siriyalatha** (1909). As shown earlier in the present study both **Soma** and **Ayirangini** in their plot structures show the use of almost all the main ingredients of sentimental romantic melodrama; in both there is clearly found what is considered the most characteristic feature of melodrama, "an insistence upon incident."<sup>122</sup> in both novels can also be seen the deliberate stringing together of melodramatic scenes and effects; "the violent or sensational seems to be used for its own sake without adequate reference or motivation of character or to other elements in the story."<sup>123</sup> Moreover, both novels seem to fit closely Eric Bentley's definition of melodrama expressed in the following quotation: "Is not working on the audience's capacity for pity and fear the alpha and omega of the melodramatist's job?"<sup>124</sup>

These melodramatic and sentimental effects naturally result in the use of the typical situations of the popular melodrama, viz., "goodness beset by badness, a hero beset by a villain, heroes and heroines beset by a wicked world."<sup>125</sup> Both **Soma** and **Ayirangini** seem to fit the above definitions and descriptions of "popular romantic melodrama". In both novels are also clearly evident other typical features of melodrama, "particularly that notorious device: outrageous coincidence", or "the long arm of coincidence", as Eric Bentley calls it. The inevitable concomitant of melodrama, "the vulgar rhetoric" in which melodrama is normally couched, has been shown to be omnipresent in both the novels under study.

The sentimental deification of romantic love, especially "eternal love" as it is called in the sub-title of **Soma**, and characters sacrificing their lives for its sake, are again common and hackneyed features of melodrama; this theme too is pursued avidly in both **Soma** and **Ayirangini**, especially the former. The two novels also appear to be intentional and deliberate exercises in sentimentality, attempts to raise the emotions and feelings to an artificially exaggerated level, trying to squeeze out the last drop of emotion and feeling mechanically from each emotional or pathetic situation. In almost every respect, therefore, **Soma** and **Ayirangini** both unmistakably belong to the **genre** of popular sentimental romantic melodrama of the lowest type.

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122. A. Nicoll, **The Theory of the Drama**, London, 1923, p. 88.

123. Cleanth Brooks and R. P. Warren, **Understanding Fiction**, New York, 1943, p. 606.

124. Eric Bentley, **The Life of the Drama**, London, 1965, p. 200.

125. **Ibid.**

While belonging to the same broad fictional **genre** of romantic melodrama, however, **Soma** and **Ayirangini** show important differences between them indicating gradual evolution from the first to the second. The main evolutionary advance in **Ayirangini** when it is compared with **Soma** is that while **Soma** may be described as unadulterated melodrama, **Ayirangini** is not; it is adulterated by the presence of some realistic, true-to-life elements that are not characteristic of the ordinary run of romantic and sentimental melodrama. For example, while Soma the heroine in the earlier novel remains pure and chaste, not losing her virginity until she marries her fairy-tale lover, Ayirangini is a victim of seduction at the outset and not the "pure woman" that the melodramatic heroine has necessarily to be. Ayirangini's loss of her virginity while still young and immature enables Wickramasinghe to introduce into his novel a serious theme that does not normally enter trite and commonplace melodrama, the theme of female chastity and purity and the condition of the woman in a male-dominated society. This new and serious theme was without doubt the result of Wickramasinghe reading some serious Western fiction embodying the same situation (a woman's seduction and its serious effects on the woman's future life) like Tolstoy's **Resurrection** and Thomas Hardy's **Tess of the D'Urbervilles**. This makes **Ayirangini** not a pure melodrama, but a slightly diluted and adulterated form of it where an attempt has been made to introduce serious themes and attitudes into a form that is not appropriate for them. Thus **Ayirangini** as a novel conveys a curious feeling of incongruity, serious content forced into a fictional form that is inappropriate to its effective expression.

The difference between **Soma** and **Ayirangini** is best understood by a comparison of their respective heroines and their behaviour in each respective novel. Soma is the typical and conventional heroine of melodrama (but even here, Wickramasinghe's heroine is different from the stock character of the "pure" young woman of sentimental melodrama, for Soma has been guilty (realistically) of a moral lapse during her immature years: she has exchanged love-letters with a young man called Sextus during her schooldays). Ayirangini, on the other hand, is not a "pure" woman especially in the background of Sri Lankan life and culture, where seduction and rape are condemned as blemishes in a woman which will bring inevitable social ostracism and ineligibility for normal marriage. Although Wickramasinghe had (as shown earlier from his very first novel **Leila**) shown an unusual interest in, and sympathy for women, it was in **Ayirangini** that he was able to create a woman who really became a victim of male domination and tyranny and therefore invoked the reader's sympathy. In **Soma** in other words the heroine was morally at fault, guilty; in **Ayirangini**, on the other hand, she was a victim of seduction under coercion, and hence not at fault, it being outside her control. Ayirangini, naturally, deserves more sympathy than Soma on the part of author and reader.

Thus it was in **Ayirangini** and not in **Soma** that Wickramasinghe for the first time expressed his important and mature attitude to the female sex bringing out the tyranny of the male in modern (especially contemporary Sri Lankan) society. Through **Ayirangini** he showed the suffering that women are forced by circumstances to undergo, especially because of their physical weakness in spite of their moral strength. It was also in **Ayirangini** that Wickramasinghe was able to show the innocence and sense of purity, chastity, the moral dignity and self-respect of women, which could emerge only after she had been irreparably wronged (through seduction). Thus while **Soma** demonstrated little "individual talent" and was almost totally "merely conforming" to the prevailing tradition, in **Ayirangini** the author is attempting to break away from the shackles of the romantic tradition of M. C. F. Perera and W. A. Silva. In other words, during the process of his composition of **Ayirangini** Wickramasinghe felt a sense of dissatisfaction with the melodramatic form he was still employing, and attempted to change or break the conventional form to express his new theme. The attempt was, of course, only partially successful. Hence his next evolutionary step was to abandon the form of romantic melodrama altogether, a slow weaning which is represented by Wickramasinghe's next two novels, **Seetha** and **Miringudiya**.

In **Ayirangini** Wickramasinghe was therefore trying to adapt the form of melodrama for his own purposes instead of using it slavishly and non-creatively. Instead of following the hackneyed form of melodrama to express the equally hackneyed theme of "everlasting love", in the transitional work **Ayirangini** for the first time in his work Wickramasinghe concentrated on the exploration of a serious theme (that of female dignity, emancipation and chastity). This change from trivial hackneyed interests and themes to a serious preoccupation with important human problems, especially the personal relationships of men and women, marked an important turning point in Wickramasinghe's development as a novelist. This important change is to be attributed not to any local influence but to the beneficial effects of the influence of good western fiction. With regard to the influence of the western novel on Sinhala fiction, it may be pointed out here that while the reading of western novels had little or no beneficial effects on W. A. Silva, it had a salutary effect on Martin Wickramasinghe.

**Soma** and **Ayirangini** also differ from each other in the quality of the writing with regard to the depiction and satirico-critical exploration of Sri Lankan life and culture. The criticism of Sri Lankan society and its mores, especially the disparity in standards of sexual morality as applied to men and women, the application of relatively lax standards to the sexual behaviour of men than of women, a feature of the vastly differing traditional attitudes to men and women persisting in the backward Sri Lankan society from ancient times, and clearly embodied in classical Sinhala poetry and prose.

Unlike in **Soma** where the author's satirico-critical attitude to the contemporary social mores is quite vague and uncertain, in **Ayirangini** it is eloquent, direct and well-marked, made such especially by the changes in circumstances of the chief female character.

Thus it may be asserted that in **Ayirangini**, for the first time in his fiction, Wickramasinghe turned his attention to the serious consideration and analysis of the state of contemporary Sri Lankan society turning to one of its weakest and most decadent aspects, the absence in our society of the recognition of the equality of the sexes. Though still imperfect as a work of art, therefore, **Ayirangini** marks an important turning point in the author's evolution as a novelist, in a way that the earlier novel **Soma** was not; i.e., between **Leila** and **Soma** the difference is on the surface and relatively superficial and on the level of plot construction, whereas between **Soma** and **Ayirangini** the difference is more radical, a difference in seriousness of theme and the treatment of it. Consequently **Ayirangini** is superior to **Soma** as a work of art and shows greater demonstration of the author's "individual talent" than its predecessor **Soma**. To put it slightly differently, the serious attempt at analysing personal relationships, particularly the marital relationships between men and women, is found (though at a much lower level of seriousness than in Wickramasinghe's mature works such as **Gamperaliya**, **Kaliyagaya**, **Yugantaya** and **Viragaya**) in **Ayirangini** in a way it is not in **Soma**; in short, in **Ayirangini** we witness Wickramasinghe definitely turning from a puerile preoccupation with romantic melodrama to more mature and serious interests characteristic of his maturity. **Ayirangini** contains the seeds of the author's later development as a serious novelist.

Yet this new and serious theme of female emancipation while it was a relevant defect of contemporary Sri Lankan society, was not original, but suggested to Wickramasinghe by his reading of western fiction, especially Hardy's **Tess** and Tolstoy's **Resurrection**. The background of **Ayirangini** and its characters are still not recognisably Sri Lankan but rather universal and common, like the problem of female emancipation that was its main theme. Wickramasinghe's next step in evolution had perforce to be the attempt to render Sinhala society and culture in its unique national identity, and to explore the personal and social problems unique to the Sri Lankan social milieu. This next inevitable step in Martin Wickramasinghe's development is represented by the two novels that succeeded **Ayirangini** viz., **Seetha** (1923) and **Miringudiya** (1925). Wickramasinghe himself acknowledged this fact when he declared later in life in his autobiography: "The real change in my work as a novelist is revealed in **Seetha**, written in 1923... I got my earliest training to choose and arrange in an orderly way my

own first-hand experiences of rural life and to present them in a harmonious pattern by writing **Seetha**."<sup>126</sup> He also said in the same autobiography: " I wrote **Seetha**, **Gaehaeniyak** and **Miringuwa** to escape from the practice of writing silly and naive stories.... by writing those three books I invented and moulded for my own use a fictional form and technique of writing that was capable of describing and recording my intimate experiences of the life of the Sinhala people."<sup>127</sup> Elsewhere he also said: "My novel **Seetha** was a mixed result of my attempt at constructing an original and personal story based upon my rural experiences."<sup>128</sup>

What stood in the way of Wickramasinghe continuing further in the same direction as **Seetha** and **Miringuwa** was the lack of support from his contemporary reading public: these two novels as well as Wickramasinghe's first collection of short stories (**Gaehaeniyak**, 1924) did not bring the author the recognition that he expected and fully well deserved, confronting him with a serious dilemma: should he continue to write fiction at all? As Wickramasinghe complained later: "All three of those books did not sell. Should I continue to write novels any longer? However popular they were, I could not bring myself to write a book like **Soma** once again..... What I had to do was to develop still further the form and style (of fiction) that I had devised and developed for myself untiringly and with great effort over a period of about 12 years. How could I stoop once again to the writing of third grade novels like **Soma**?"<sup>129</sup>

Faced with the serious dilemma of either continuing to write cheap sentimental romantic melodrama typified by **Soma** or not writing novels at all, it was not surprising that a man of integrity like Wickramasinghe (reluctantly no doubt) decided to renounce the art of long fiction altogether: "I decided not to write any novels in the future."<sup>130</sup> For a full two decades Wickramasinghe remained true to his decision (if we ignore here his ill-advised ventures into "historical romance" in the form of **Unmaada Chitra** (1928) and **Rohini** (1929) whereby he attempted to introduce a new type of the old familiar genre of romantic melodrama); it was only in 1944 (twenty years after **Miringudiya**) that his next important novel **Gamperaliya** was published. **Gamperaliya** (1944) was the first work displaying Wickramasinghe's real *metier* and undoubted "individual talent".

The study of the next phase of Martin Wickramasinghe's development as writer of Sinhala fiction which is to follow the present study will show how Wickramasinghe, eschewing all forms of slavish imitation of tradition and

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126. **Upan Daa Sita**, pp. 229-30.

127. **Ibid.**, p. 239.

128. **Grantha Vignaana**, p. 13.

129. **Upan Daa Sita**, p. 239.

130. **Ibid.**

local and foreign models, struck out on his own to discover his **metier**, his real individual talent, a kind of fiction with a typically Sri Lankan, Sinhala Buddhist flavour. The two works that followed **Ayirangini** showed Wickramasinghe turning definitely in this new, indigenous direction. **Seetha** (1923), and **Miringudiya** (1925) represent this third evolutionary phase of Wickramasinghe's career as a novelist; it was in this period that Wickramasinghe was clearly launched on a journey of discovery, attempting to set up his identity and individuality by creating original fiction. **Seetha** and **Miringudiya**, being the first attempts at this new type of writing, mark a yet another period of transition: the change from immature melodrama to realistic novelistic fiction. Being thus transitional, **Seetha** and **Miringudiya** not only contain vestiges of romantic melodrama reminiscent of **Soma** and **Ayirangini** but also the seeds of his mature realistic fiction which achieved its final flowering in **Gamperaliya** and its two sequels, **Kaliyugaya** and **Yuganthaya** (1957 and 1949 respectively).