

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

**SARATHCHANDRA WICKRAMASURIYA**

*Department of English  
University of Peradeniya*

**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, whereas 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 Chittraa** (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.

