

## **Critical Theory and Sinhalese Creative Writing in the Twentieth Century: An Attempt at Documentation\***

K. N. O. DHARMADASA

Sinhalese literature which had since its early days been under the shadow of Indian literary theory and practice had its first encounter with something outside this sphere of influence during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when, especially in the maritime provinces, it came into contact with the literature of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This impact, however, did not produce any far reaching results at that juncture for, the centre of Sinhalese literary activity was the landlocked kingdom of Kandy where during the eighteenth century a revival of the classical tradition took place after a period of cultural decline. The vogue of the day thus was a harking back to classical models. Soon this movement spread to the maritime provinces as well.<sup>2</sup>

After the establishment of the British Raj in 1815 the political and administrative centre being shifted to Colombo, the South Western coast became a major cultural centre as well. With the replacement of the old political order by the new, the barriers of inhibition against Western influence gradually eroded away, and new factors affecting literature appeared in the social fabric. Thus, although the overall educational policy was the creation of a class of English educated, the expansion of mass education in the vernacular as well led to the growth of a sizeable reading public in Sinhalese<sup>3</sup>. In order to meet the demand of this new reading public a spate of newspapers and periodicals appeared beginning in the 1840s<sup>4</sup>. The new literary clientele was in disposition a radically different type from the earlier. Attachments to the traditional order were gradually losing their hold and the individual

\* This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Ceylon Studies Seminar on July 7, 1976.

1. For the Sinhalese Christian literature see Rt. Rev. Dr. Edmund Peiris, "Sinhalese Christian Literature of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries" JRASCB, xxxv, No. 96, Pt iv, 1943, pp. 163-179.
2. P. B. G. Hewawasam, (1966) *Matara Yugaye Sahityadharayan Ha Sahitya Nibandhana*, Colombo, pp. 19-108.
3. R. Obeysekera, (1975) in *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics*, Colombo, pp. xxxi-xxxiii.
4. Ven. Kalukondayawe Pragnasekara, (1965) *Sinhala Puvatpat Sangara Itihasaya*, Vol I, Colombo.

was exploring the potentialities of his new self. The Christian missionaries stepped into reap the benefits of this transformation. In their zeal to "reclaim the deluded victims of idolatrous superstition" they embarked on a war of salvation using among other weaponry, mass media such as newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets. The press was their monopoly until the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

In the eighteen fifties a nativistic reaction arose from among the ranks of Buddhist monks which by the end of the century developed into an effective counter to Christian expansionism<sup>6</sup>. Part of this reaction was the "modernization" of the tradition of Sinhalese-Buddhist education and literary activity. New centres of Buddhist and Oriental learning sprang up in Colombo and the suburbs, the foremost among them being Paramadhammacetiya (founded in 1849 at Ratmalana) Vidyodaya (founded in 1873 at Maligakanda) and Vidyalankara (founded in 1875 at Peliyagoda). These proved to be the forerunners of many similar institutions in the provinces. Spearheaded by the new literati a journalistic campaign was launched by the Buddhists to defend their religious and cultural heritage. And the Christians on their part continued with their war of proselytization through the press, among other things. Apart from such religious motivation there were other literary pursuits which aimed at mere entertainment<sup>7</sup>. Another significant outcome of this literary interest was the appearance in print of the classical works of Sinhalese literature<sup>8</sup>, making them available for the general reader. The novel, the new genre that appeared in the nineteenth century was introduced as a tool of the Christian missionaries. By the early decades of the twentieth century, however, the Buddhists had entered this field in a big way<sup>9</sup>. Also, the nationalist propagandists came to use *nurti*, a form of operatic drama imported from North India during the second half of the nineteenth century with much effect.<sup>10</sup> The foremost literary figures of the day, Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946) the novelist, and John de Silva (1857-1922), the dramatist, upheld the virtues of the Sinhalese-Buddhist tradition as against Christianity and Western culture<sup>11</sup>.

5. K. Malalgoda, (1973) "The Buddhist-Christian in Ceylon, 1800-1880," *Social Compass*, xx, 2, pp. 171-200.

6. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, (1974) "A Nativistic Reaction to Colonialism: The Sinhalese-Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka," *Asian Studies*, Vol. xii, No. 1, pp. 159-179.

7. Ven. Kalukondayawe Pragnasekara, (1965 & 1966) *Sinhala Puvarpat Sangaya Itihaya*, Vols. I and II deal with the period from 1840 to 1900.

8. K. D. P. Wickramasinghe, (1965) *Nutana Sinhala Sahityaya*, Colombo, pp. 9-54.

9. A. Rajakaruna, (1972) *Sinhala Navakathave Arambhaya*, Colombo, pp. 1-55 and (1970) *Sahitya Ruciya Ha Navakatha Vicaraya*, Colombo, pp. 103-112.

10. W. P. Wijetunga, (1966) "Sinhala Gita Natakaya" in P. Wijetunga ed., *Savaralipi Sahita Sinhala Nrtya Gita*, Colombo, pp. xi-xxiv.

11. See K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.* Wilmot P. Wijetunga, *op. cit.* and E. R. Sarath chandra, (1950) *The Sinhalese Novel*, Colombo, pp. 92-112.

Although such new developments had occurred in Sinhalese literature by the early years of the twentieth century there was no major change in the outlook of the writer or the critic. This can be ascertained from the literary ideology as expressed by the above two stalwarts and from what could be deemed the manifestation of the critical art at the time—the literary controversies. Sirisena claimed in one of his numerous novels that “from all our books a little over one lakh of copies have been sold. None of these works contain empty prattle. Although they may be counted as ‘new fictional stories’ we have never written a book which does not direct the human mind towards the noble and the righteous doctrine”<sup>12</sup>. And according to de Silva the main aim of his plays was “to propagate once again the Sinhalese music that has gone into abeyance, to depict the ancient customs, dress, ornaments etc., to censure the evil habits among our people today, to re-create the national awareness that was there of yore and to foster a love for the Sinhalese Language among the younger generation who now find it distasteful”<sup>13</sup>. Thus in essence the traditional aim of literature—that of edification—was kept in continuity.

Beginning from the 1850s and running for a period of about seventy five years there were a series of controversies carried on mainly through the periodicals, (sometimes books and pamphlets were also used), covering a variety of subjects: intra-religious (within the ranks of the Buddhists), inter-religious (between the Buddhists and the Christians), literary and academic (on literature and certain other scholarly interests of the day such as astrology) and caste (among the different caste-groups vying with each other for superiority of status)<sup>14</sup>. The controversies may be considered as reflecting the emergence of a questioning spirit, symptomatic of a society which had embarked on the processes of modernization. This was the opportunity for the display of their erudition by the Sinhalese literary elite of the day, comprising mostly those educated in the new seats of oriental learning. Bringing about an unprecedented public involvement of the educated class, the controversies seem to have created in the society at large an active and lively interest in scholarly activity<sup>15</sup>. Of particular significance are those controversies which may be categorized as literary. They in the

12. Translated from The Introduction to the novel *Sucaritadarsaya*, (1926) Colombo.

13. Translated from The play *Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe*, (1906) Colombo.

14. Malalgoda, *op. cit.*; K. D. P. Wickramasinghe, *op. cit.* Chapter 3; Sarathchandra *op. cit.* pp. 43-51 and P. B. Sannasgala, *Sinhala Sahitya Wamsaya*, Colombo, pp. 736-744.

15. Indicative of this is the fact that most newspapers and periodicals of the day seem to have eagerly promoted controversies. Also, when some controversies were transferred from the printed page to public platform there were large gatherings to witness them. As examples I wish to cite the *Panadura Vadaya* (1873) and the final scene of *Kukavi Vadaya* (1928).

long run contributed to the emergence of a truly modern critical outlook on literature.

The early literary controversies are a clear index of what concerned the Sinhalese literary elite of the time. Thus, beginning with *Sav Sat Dam Vādāya* (over the words "sav sat dam" in a poem written sometime back) carried out during 1854-1855 in the periodicals *Sāstralānkārāya* and *Satalaba Sangarā* the major literary controversies of the time were, *Sidat Sangarā Vādāya* (over the 13th century grammar *Sidat Sangarāva*) of 1889 carried on through *Satya Samuccaya* and *Lak Mini Pahana*; the *Jānakiharana Vādāya* (over the edition of the Sanskrit poem *Janakiharana*) of 1891 in *Lak Rivi Kirana* and *Satya Samuccaya*; *Nā-Kara ṇā-kara Vādāya* (over the use of the letters dental *na* and cerebral *ṇa*) of 1902 in *Sarasavi Sandarasa*; *Varangana Vādāya* (over the use of the word *Varangana* in a contemporary poem) of 1904-05 in *Lak Mini Pahana* and *Dinapātā Pravurti: Kav Mini Kondola Vādāya* of 1905-1906 in *Sinhala Samaya*; *Gutti'a Vādāya* (over the edition and paraphrasing of the 15th century poem *Gutti'a Kāvya*) of 1907 in *Viduliya*, and *Bentota Kavi Vādāya* (over the prosodic flaws in a contemporary poem) of 1923-1924 in *Kav Kirula*. As the titles themselves indicate, the concerns of the scholars who took part in these controversies were rhetoric, prosody, grammar and the meaning of words. There was little or no interest in the aesthetic quality of the content.

It was in the last of this series of controversies, *Kukavi Vādāya* (over plagiarism by some widely acclaimed classical poets) of 1925-1927 in the newspaper *Swadesa Mitrayā* and ending in a public debate held in January 1928<sup>16</sup>, that the above mentioned scholastic concerns came to be replaced by an examination of the quality of the content. Munidasa Cumaratunga (1887-1944), a Sinhalese teacher and later an inspector of "Anglo-Vernacular" schools<sup>17</sup>, who subsequently left government service to be a free-lance writer and leader of a puristic movement<sup>18</sup>, initiated the controversy with a letter written to *Swadesa Mitrayā*. Maintaining that originality was the most important feature of good literature he took to task several classical Sinhalese poets, among whom was Ven. Sri Rahula, a much esteemed scholar-poet of the fifteenth century, for heavy dependence on Sanskrit works for poetic thought.<sup>19</sup> The manner in which some of the traditionalist scholars proceeded to defend their national idol is indicative of the fact that adher-

16. J. Weerasekara, 1938 ed., *Kukavi Vādāya*, Co'ombo, (second edition 1963).

17. Not of English schools as stated by R. Obeysekere, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

18. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, (1972) "Language and Sinhalese Nationalism: The Career of Munidasa Cumaratunga," *Modern Ceylon Studies*, Vol. 3 (2), pp. 125-143.

19. J. Weerasekara, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

ence to tradition was considered all important, even if it meant borrowing ideas from earlier works<sup>20</sup>.

It is apparent that Cumaratunga's stance was approved by a considerable section of the Sinhalese literary clientele of the day, especially those of the younger generation. In fact *Kukavi Vādaya* proved to be the spring-board for Cumaratunga to embark on a dynamic career as the originator of a powerful cultural movement supported mainly by the youth<sup>21</sup>. Conversant as they were with other literatures through education and via the mass media the younger generation no doubt was eager to venture beyond the confines of a literary tradition that had long been tapped dry. Also modernization in the social and economic spheres would have contributed to the promotion of a questioning spirit. And the *Kukavi Vādaya* contributed in no small measure to dispel deep-seated inhibitions against criticizing the classics<sup>22</sup>. The impact of the controversy on the development of modern Sinhalese literary criticism cannot be underestimated. It generated an immense enthusiasm in the learned circles<sup>23</sup>, and undoubtedly impressed upon the would be literary artists the importance of cultivating originality and creativity.

Another significant aspect of the *Kukavi Vādaya* was the bringing into Sinhalese literary criticism criteria drawn from western literature. Before this James D'Alwis (1823-1878) writing in English had made assessments of Sinhalese classics using western literary criteria freely.<sup>24</sup> But, these writings in the English medium did not have an impact on the Sinhalese readership. During the *Kukavi Vādaya*, however, the validity of using western criteria was debated in the Sinhalese press and thereafter some critics writing in Sinhalese proceeded to use these criteria in evaluating classical Sinhalese literature. Thus the *Kukavi Vādaya* may be considered a turning point in the history of Sinhalese literary criticism. In December 1926, during the height of the controversy, Martin Wickramasinghe (1891-1976) writing under the pseudonym 'Vijita Manuwarna' stated that "Shakespeare, the great European poet, displayed his unparalleled creative

20. For example see contribution of Pundit D. M. Samarasinghe, in Weerasekara ed., *op. cit.* pp. 30-34.

21. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

22. It needs mention that Cumaratunga was not the first to do this. By the time he started *Kukavi Vādaya* other scholars such as Ven. Hikkaduwe Sumangala (1827-1911), W. F. Gunawardene (1861-1935) and Martin Wickramasinghe had already inaugurated this trend. For details see Ariya Rajakaruna, (1968) *Sampradaya Ha Sihina Lokaya*, Colombo, pp. 252-258 and 262-265; and Martin Wickramasinghe, (1966) *Upan Da Sita*, Maharagama, pp. 187-188.

23. See Weerasekara, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 179 and 189.

24. James D'Alwis (1852) Introduction to *The Sidat Sangarava*, Colombo, and M. Y. Gooneratne, (1968) *English Literature in Ceylon 1815-1878*, Colombo, pp. 114-152.

genius not in descriptions of cities or pleasure gardens, replete with simile and metaphor, but in characterization. And among the Sinhalese poets, the foremost place among those who have displayed their genius in characterization and descriptive power should be given to Ven. Sri Rahula<sup>25</sup>. Cumaratunga, however, did not agree with 'Manuwarna'. He declared that the poet creates character whilst engaged in depicting the emotions of people. "But" he said, "characterization is only a minute fraction of what comprises poetic genius", Cumaratunga then proceeded to show how in those instances where 'Manuwarna' saw Sri Rahula's genius in characterization the latter was in fact indebted to Sanskrit sources.<sup>26</sup> In any case, although Cumaratunga was rejecting certain traditional views on literary evaluation he was not prepared to accept wholesale the literary theories of the West. Replying another article by 'Manuwarna', Cumaratunga ridiculed "those who are waiting to learn Sinhalese from an English book brought from Australia".<sup>27</sup>

Cumaratunga believed that the heyday of "genuine Sinhalese" ("Helese" in his own words) culture was in the remote past—before the generally accepted beginning of Sinhalese history in the sixth century B.C. when Aryan settlers from North India colonized the island. His opinion was that the genuine Sinhalese culture became submerged under Indian influences after this date. Thus he took upon himself the mission of resuscitating the lost traditions in language and in literary and the other arts. A considerable section of the Sinhalese youth of the day were attracted to Cumaratunga's movement which came to be named *Hela Havula* ("the genuine Sinhalese fraternity"). And during the thirties and the forties there was vigorous activity from the group—organizing literary associations, delivering public speeches, and producing poetry, fiction and critical writings most of which appeared in the group's official organ *Subasa* ("the good language"). Among the outstanding *Hela Havula* writings are Cumaratunga's own poem *Piya Samara* (1935), collection of stories and essays *Prabandha Sangrahaya* (1938), treatise on literary criticism *Virit Vakiya* (1938), and the treatise on music *Hela Miyasiya* (1941). Another major writer of the group was R. Tennekoon (1900-1963) whose best known work is the poem *Vavuluva* (1940). The great drawback of the *Hela Havula* literary movement was its puristic linguistic philosophy which made the group's writers adopt

25. *Dinamina*, 25 December, 1926. Reproduced in Weerasekara ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 212-223. "Vijita Manuwarna" was the pseudonym Wickramasinghe used in writing to newspapers during the 1920s. See Sumana Saparamadu. "Martin Wickramasinghe Sirita" in Anon. ed., *Martin Wickramasinghe: Koggala Maha Pragnaya*, (1975) (MWCMP) Dehiwala, pp. 86-101.

26. J. Weerasekara ed., *op. cit.* pp. 116-124.

27. *op. cit.*, p. 86.

an archaic language. Thus their writings could appeal only to an exclusive readership, and the movement never had a popular appeal. With the removal of the dynamic leadership of Cumaratunga with his death in 1944 the movement has been on the path of gradual decline.<sup>28</sup>

About five years before the beginning of *Kukavi Vādāya* Martin Wickramasinghe had criticized Sri Rahula and several other classical writers for being imitative of classical models in a collection of literary essays named *Sāstriya Lēkhanā* (1919). The works of these Sinhalese poets, he maintained, did not therefore portray the society in which they were living.<sup>29</sup> And, writing the introduction to *Gāhāniyak*, his first collection of short stories, he stated that in these stories he sought to examine "the internal psychological and external social pressures which condition" the actions of characters<sup>30</sup>. Here we see Wickramasinghe bringing into the field of Sinhalese literary criticism two novel concepts, "depiction of society" and "characterization", borrowed no doubt from his experiences of nineteenth century English literature. These two themes occur and re-occur in his later detailed evaluations of classical Sinhalese literature in *Sinha'a Sāhityōdaya Kathā* (1932), *Vicāra Lipi* (1941), *Guttala Gitaya* (1943) and *Sinhala Sāhityayē Nāgima* (1946). In these works Wickramasinghe draws the reader's attention to the social conditions and the emotional life of the characters depicted in a selected sample of Sinhalese classics. It was a venture into a so far unseen aspect of the classics. In introducing a classical work the traditionalist scholars adhered to the formula: name of the work, intention of compilation, author, size of the work and its uses<sup>31</sup>. And, as was shown above, critical evaluation consisted in the search for excellence or flaws in grammar, prosody, rhetoric and similar scholastic concerns which interested only the literati. Wickramasinghe's breakthrough created an immense potential for a new look into the classics, kindling a fresh interest in their study, with the possibilities of a wider public appeal.

This pioneer contribution of Wickramasinghe had a special significance in the field of poetry. The critical apparatus employed by him was a synthesis of Sanskrit and western literary criteria. From among the large mass of Sanskrit critical theories<sup>32</sup>, he was able to discern three basic concepts

28. For details of Cumaratunga's career and the *Hela Havula* see Dharmaradasa, *op. cit.*

29. *Sāstriya Lēkhanā*, pp. 24-25. quoted by S. G. Samarasinghe, (1958) "Martin Wickramasinghe: Jivana Caritaya Pilibanda Keti Vistarayak", *Samskruti Wickramasinghe Ankaya* pp. 97-120.

30. Quoted by R. Obeyesekera, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

31. For example see *Prastāvanāva* to Rev. Welivitiye Sorata ed., *Dahamsonda Kava*, (1928) Colombo.

32. G. Vijayawardhana, (1970) *Outline of Sanskrit Poetics*, Varanasi.

which were in agreement with what may be deemed the best in modern western literary criticism. These were *rasa* ("aesthetic relish") introduced by Bharata (2nd century), *dhwani* ("suggestion") upheld by Anandawardhana (9th century) and *aucitya* ("appropriateness") advocated by Ksemendra (11th century). These three theories according to him "are modern enough to be criteria for the evaluation of contemporary prose and verse. The basis of the critical system shaped by great critics during the last thirty or forty years was formed by tenets not dissimilar to these"<sup>33</sup>. However, it was not these theories that directed the course of the mainstream of classical Sinhalese poetry as represented by compositions such as *Muwadevdāvata* and *Sasadāvāta* (12th century), *Kaṁsilumina* (13th century) and *Kāvyaśekhara* (15th century). The learned poets who composed these turned for inspiration to the ornamentalist school of Sanskrit poetry led by theorists such as Bhamaha (7th century) and Dandin (8th century). Wickramasinghe was able to show that by the adherence to a formalist and conventionalist tradition our classical poets produced only poor poetry. These classical works he compared with the creations of the Sinhalese folk poets who were not constrained by such a tradition. He pointed out the originality, freshness and spontaneity characteristic of these works of poets with little book learning. He was also able to show how in depicting human emotions the folk poets display a finesse which is found wanting in the works of the learned poets. It was truly a revolutionary stand that Wickramasinghe took. A comparison of this nature was diametrically opposed to accepted views and the traditionalist scholars treated Wickramasinghe's views with contempt.<sup>34</sup> These scholars were only adhering to the tenets they were trained to uphold while Wickramasinghe had gone beyond the tradition, to the west, and developed a new outlook on literature.

While Wickramasinghe was thus evaluating classical Sinhalese literature E. R. (Ediriweera) Sarathchandra (b. 1914), a lecturer in the Oriental faculty of the University of Ceylon,<sup>35</sup> made a critical survey of the modern Sinhalese novel and the short story in a book entitled *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* (1943). The two were personal friends and at this stage Sarathchandra in his literary pursuits derived much inspiration from Wickramasinghe<sup>36</sup>. This collaboration proved to be the foundation of a truly modern critical apparatus which emerged in the forties and the fifties.

33. *Kāvya Vicāraya*, (1954) Mount Lavinia, p. 1.

34. M. Wickramasinghe, (1961) *Upan Da Sita*, Maharagama, p. 225.

35. Established in Colombo in 1942 (on the foundations of the Ceylon University College - an affiliated institution of the University of London) and shifted to Peradeniya in 1952.

36. As acknowledged by Sarathchandra himself. See his "Martin Wickramasinghe Samarum Satahan Kipayak" in Anon ed., MWKMP, pp. 38-40.

Sarathchandra's *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* was the first major work evaluating a facet of modern Sinhalese literature. In it he traced the history of the Sinhalese novel and the short story, making critical comments on noteworthy works, using criteria employed by modern English critics. Of major significance were the critical judgements on the works of the most popular fiction writers of the day, Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946), the champion of the Sinhalese-Buddhist cause and W. A. Silva (1892-1957), the composer of entertaining tales.<sup>37</sup> If Sarathchandra was too severe in his estimation of contemporary writings the application of such rigorous standards could be justified on the grounds that it was necessary to give the emergent literature proper direction and guidance. It needs to be noted that the book was written in English. Sarathchandra later revealed that by this strategy he expected to draw the attention of the English educated class to Sinhalese literature. As these were the only people who in the context of the times were equipped with a sensibility suitable for the creation of a modern literature, his motive was to induce them to produce creative and critical works in the Sinhalese medium.<sup>38</sup>

Vindicating the stand taken by Sarathchandra several noteworthy contributions in fiction appeared not long after. Wickramasinghe's own *Gamperaliya* (1944) was the first realistic novel in Sinhalese approximating in theme and content the standards set by major novels in western literature. And G. B. Senanayake (b. 1913), again from the English educated class<sup>39</sup>, produced *Duppatun Nāti Lōkaya* (1945) and *Paligānima* (1946), two collections of short stories characterized by a mastery of technique and a sensitive delienation of human problems. Following upon these pioneering endeavours came a period of intense creative and critical activity. In the field of criticism Wickramasinghe came out again with *Sāhitya Kalāva* (1950), *Kāvya Vicāraya* (1954) and *Banakatā Sāhityaya* (1955) in Sinhalese and *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture* (1952) in English with several essays on literary topics. When compared with his critical studies in the thirties and the forties these four works mark a change in his critical stance. It was shown above how in his earlier works he had contrived a synthesis between modern western literary theory and certain concepts found in classical Sanskrit critical tradition. In his later studies there is a clear shift to Buddhist Pali literature for standards of literary excellence. This was the first time that the Sinhalese reader was made aware of the beauty

37. *Modern Sinhalese Fiction*, (1943) Mount Lavinia, Chs. iii and iv.

38. E. R. Sarathchandra, (1950) *The Sinhalese Novel*, Colombo, pp. 21-22.

39. Having received an English education he learnt Sinhalese by self-study. See his "Wickramasinghe Samaga Patra Kantoruvehi" in Anon. ed., MWKMP, pp. 250-254.

of Pali compositions such as found in *Thera Gatha*, *Theri Gatha* and the *Jatakas*. The realism, spontaneity and economy of expression found in them was contrasted with the hyperbole and ornate conventionalism in Sanskrit literature and the Sanskrit inspired creations of the classical Sinhalese poets. Again, drawing attention to the creations of Sinhalese folk poets, Wickramasinghe pointed out that the vitality and charm of their compositions had affinities with the exquisite poetry of Pali literature<sup>40</sup>. As advice to modern writers interested in developing Sinhalese poetry he declared, "there are only two courses open to them for breaking the monotony and deadening influence imposed by superficial tradition: to seek inspiration from an intensive study of Sinhalese folk poetry for developing new forms and instilling freshness and originality into modern Sinhalese poetry; or to study for inspiration what is best in western literature<sup>41</sup>." It needs be mentioned that these words proved prophetic with regard to subsequent developments in Sinhalese poetry. With the failure of the popular poetry of the day—the creations of the Colombo School—to stand up to the rigours of modern criticism two new trends emerged in the late fifties: one led by Siri Gunasinghe which derived inspiration from modern western poetry and the other led by Gunadasa 'Amarasekara adopting a synthesis of Sinhalese folk and classical poetic traditions<sup>42</sup>.

Like Wickramasinghe, G. B. Senanayake also came to perform the dual role of creative writer and literary critic. Following upon his collections of short stories he produced *Navakatha Kalava* (1946) on the art of fiction, *Vicara Pravesaya* (1954) an examination of the qualities of good literature and *Batahira Sresta Navakatha* (1955) a critical introduction to great novels in western literature.

Sarathchandra in 1946 writing the introduction to the Sinhalese translation of Gogol's "The Marriage" made the first critical survey of Sinhalese dramatic tradition<sup>43</sup>. This study covered the period up to the nationalistic plays of John de Silva. Subsequently the popular drama of the forties characterized by "copious sob-stuff, multiple murders" and "aphrodisiac jokes" was subjected to severe criticism by Wilmot P. Wijetunga, a proctor and journalist<sup>44</sup>. At the same time the University Drama

40. *Sahitya Widyaya*, pp. 75-76, 94-114 and 115-139 and *Banakatha Sahityaya*, pp. 9-88.

41. *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture*, p. 52.

42. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, "Literary Activity in the Indigenous Language" in K. M. de Silva ed., *Sri Lanka: A Survey*, (1977), pp. 434-446, London.

43. *Kapuva Kapoti*, (1946), Colombo, Introduction.

44. "The future of Sinhalese Drama" in Ananda Tissa De Alwis ed., *Souvenir of the Festival of Arts*, (1949) Colombo, pp. 12-16.

Circle under the guidance of Sarathchandra and several other teachers tried to foster a better taste among theatre goers by presenting translations of good dramatic works in western literature<sup>45</sup>.

In the field of poetry B. A. S. (Siri) Gunasinghe, another teacher at the University, in his "New Note in contemporary Sinhalese Poetry"<sup>46</sup> exposed the triviality inherent in the popular poetry of the Colombo School. The criteria Gunasinghe used in this study were derived mainly from English "practical criticism". He was followed by Ariya Rajakaruna, then an undergraduate of the University who in "Nutana Sinhala Kavyaya; Vicaraya Ha Itihasaya"<sup>47</sup>, made the first detailed critical study of contemporary poetry. The last instalment of Rajakaruna's study was devoted to an examination of the free verse form (*Nisandas*) which by the mid fifties had become fashionable especially in the University circles.

The new critics in their endeavour to censure bad art and to promote a better taste deriving inspiration from what may be deemed best in modern western literature, had to face a strong wave of criticism from the traditional literary elite. This literati having had an education in the classical languages, Pali and Sanskrit, in the Buddhist *Pirivena* institutions maintained that western criteria were not applicable to Sinhalese literature which had its own tradition, aims and set of values<sup>48</sup>. In this context the new critics had to prove that the best in oriental critical tradition did not conflict with the standards of good literature in the west. Wickramasinghe's *Sinhala Sahityaye Nagima* (1946) itself was an answer to these charges. Quoting extensively from the Sanskrit critical works he illustrated that the traditionalist critics who worked almost solely with the concept of *almkara* (the ornamental image) failed to grasp the full significance of a literary work. As referred to above he showed that for this purpose one has to utilize the concepts *rasa*, *dhvani* and *aucitya*, which in fact agreed in essence with criteria used in modern western criticism. Moreover his appreciation of the beauty of Pali literature which the traditionalist scholars so far failed to perceive was another proof of the validity of his stand.

Sarathchandra's *Sahitya Vidyava* (1949) was another answer to the charges made by the traditionalists. It was an introduction to some basic

45. Thus mention may be made of *Kapuvā Kapōti*, 1945 (translation of Gogol's "The Marriage") *Veda Hatana*, 1953 (translation of Moliere's "Le Malade Imaginaire") and *Kalakirima*, 1955 (translation of Chekov's "Ivanov").

46. *The Observer Annual*, 1950, pp. 70-75.

47. Serialized in six instalments *Samskurti* from iii (4) 1955 to v (4) 1957.

48. E. Sarathchandra, (1948) "Translators Note" to Martin Wickramasinghe, *Sinhalese Literature*, Mount Lavinia, and E. Sarathchandra (1973) "Sinhalese Language and Literature" in K. M. de Silva ed., *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon. Peradeniya*, Vol. III, p. 353.

concepts which may be used for literary evaluation. Although these concepts were drawn from modern western literature Sarathchandra in illustrating them used passages from Sinhalese classics. This was no doubt to demonstrate the validity of these concepts in the evaluation of good literature, whatever the background. In the preface to the *Sāhitya Vidyāva*, Sarathchandra stated that although the criteria he had adopted were drawn from contemporary western critics they were "not very different from the ideas of oriental aestheticians". In the second and third revised editions of this work (1952 and 1955 respectively) Sarathchandra turned more and more to the Sanskrit tradition for concepts and technical words while retaining his basic standpoint on the features of good literature. Even in the fourth and last edition of the work (1965), which is a complete rewriting of the book, Sarathchandra maintains in essence his original views on good literature although he has replaced much of what he has said in the earlier edition with new material.

As was shown earlier the modern critics in the forties and the early fifties applied themselves to classical literature as well as contemporary poetry, fiction and drama. They also turned their critical vision on the newly emergent Sinhalese film which from its very infancy had come under the influence of the South Indian formula<sup>49</sup>. As would have been natural the promotion of a better taste in other arts was to have an effect on this field as well. The new critics moreover got down to the task directly. Thus Sarathchandra writing an article entitled *Sinhala Citrapatiya Jatiyata Agauravayaki* ("The Sinhalese film is disgrace to the nation")<sup>50</sup>, became one of the pioneers along with several others such as Amaradasa Weerasinghe and Gananath Obeyesekere who subjected the Sinhalese movie melodramas to severe criticism<sup>51</sup>.

A noteworthy contribution to the campaign of fostering higher standards in artistic taste was made by the quarterly journal *Samskruti* ("Culture") inaugurated in 1953 by a group of graduates and undergraduates of the University. This journal carried on a persistent campaign against the sensational art and the commercial culture fostered by the newspapers, the radio, and the film. It attempted to promote instead a finer sensibility capable of appreciating good art both from the Sinhalese tradition as well as from other parts of the world. And one of its avowed aims was to initiate the modern Sinhalese reader into an appreciation of

49. *The Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Film Industry*, (1965), Sp. ii, pp. 67-68.

50. *Samskruti*, (1954), Vol. ii (1), pp. 11-21.

51. A. Weerasinghe, "Prema Tarangaya Vicaraya", *Samskruti*, (1953), Vol. i (1) pp. 62-65; and G. Obeyesekere, "Gami Samskrutiya Nasimata Udav Vena Citrapatiyak-Kala Handa" *Samskruti* (1953) Vol. (2), pp. 46-50.

his folk cultural heritage. Wickramasinghe's appreciation of Sinhalese folk poetry was mentioned earlier. Sarathchandra in 1952 wrote after intensive field-work *The Sinhalese Folk Play*, the first systematic study of the dramatic art found in Sinhalese ritual and folk theatre. Similarly G. B. Senanayake in his *Vicāra Pravēsa* (1954) did a lengthy appreciation of some folk poems<sup>52</sup>. This 'discovery' of a neglected aspect of the Sinhalese cultural heritage was indeed a repudiation of the charge levelled at the new critics that their movement was western and alien.

The movement for the establishment of serious literature was gathering force in the elitist circles at a time when literary taste at the mass level had been getting engulfed by a spate of commercial art which had virtually replaced by about the 1940s the religio-nationalist propagandist art of John de Silva and Piyadasa Sirisena. The "War-time taste" for the sentimental and the sensational had taken the upper hand and it soon entrenched itself in a society which by the 1950s found new affluence in the aftermath of the war and the subsequent windfall of the Korean boom. Thus, the novels of W. A. Silva (1892-1957) were providing the readers with "a kind of fantasy mechanism, to compensate them in their imaginative lives, for the humdrum nature of their real existence"<sup>53</sup>. And, the poetry of the so called Colombo School was depicting "an impossible dream-world, wherein one finds only moonlight, cool water, flowers, music and love"<sup>54</sup>. Also, the plays of the Jayamanna Troupe characterized by "copious sob-stuff, multiple murders and suicides, glamourized sexual promiscuities and drinking and gambling scenes" interspersed with "aphrodisiac jokes"<sup>55</sup> and a film shouldering "the unfortunate tradition" of the Jayamanna plays with the added disaster of the influence of South Indian Cinema with its formula of "sensational melodrama, low comedy, fights, songs and dances"<sup>56</sup> had become extremely popular forms of entertainment. It was such an art of "inane triviality" "sterilizing" the emotions and "standardizing the attitudes" of the masses<sup>57</sup>, feeding upon and fostering vulgar taste that the serious minded literary artist and critic had to contend with in his pioneering attempts during the forties and the fifties.

---

52. *Vicāra Pravēsa*, (1964), Colombo, pp. 54-78.

53. Sarathchandra, *The Sinhalese Novel*, p. 210

54. B. A. S. Gunasinghe "The New Note in Contemporary Sinhalese Poetry", *The Observer Annual*, (1950), pp. 70-75.

55. W. P. Wijetunga, "The Future of Sinhalese Drama" in Ananda Tissa De Alwis ed., *Souvenir of the Festival of Arts*, (1949), Colombo, pp. 12-16.

56. *The Report of the Commission of Inquiry on The Film Industry*, p. 68.

57. G. H. Bantock "The Social and Intellectual Background" in Boris Ford ed., *The Modern Age*, Penguin, (1963) p. 38.

The manner in which the English educated class drifted into the field of Sinhalese literature was discussed above. Formerly, the educational and social system had brought about a situation where the English educated upper and middle classes drew cultural sustenance from the west to the near complete neglect of the indigenous arts. And patronage to the latter had come from the Sinhalese educated lower middle class. Thus Sinhala literature of the period was reflective of the taste of this lower middle class clientele. The religio-nationalist novel and drama of the early decades of the century indicated an era when their taste was still controlled by tradition, especially in the wake of the nineteenth century revivalist movement. But, with the march of the forces of modernization as the years rolled by and in particular the sudden expansion of the economy after the forties, the traditional moorings appeared to have given way and a commercialized mass society was in the offing. This was the breeding-ground for the sentimental novels, poetry, drama and the film mentioned above. By the mid-fifties, however, the new critics had succeeded in holding this commercial mass culture in check. A major factor which facilitated their task was the change that had occurred in the Sinhalese readership in the meantime.

The growing interest of a vigorous section of the English educated class in Sinhalese literature coincided with the spread of mass literacy in the wake of the drastic educational reforms of the forties: namely, free education and the decision to switch-over to the *Swabhasa* medium. The subsequent years also witnessed a rapid expansion of tertiary education. And Sinhalese Literature was one of the most popular subjects at the University and University entrance levels. The graduates, undergraduates and the aspirants to University education, as could be expected, were influenced by the literary ideology promoted by University teachers such as Sarathchandra and Gunasinghe. In this manner emerged a new readership which in contradistinction to the earlier one had an academic interest in literature. Moreover, as the standard of English education was still maintained at a high level in the school system—the medium of higher education being English until 1961—the new readership was linguistically equipped to keep in touch with world literature, the appetite for which had been whetted by the writings of the new critics.

It needs be noted that although the new literary movement was essentially a product of the English educated class it had by the mid fifties come to use Sinhalese in the main as its communicatory medium. This factor discernible in the writings of Sarathchandra, Wickramasinghe and those of the *Samskruti* group is indicative of the rapport that has been

established with the popular readership. With a large educated literary clientele responding to its call the new literary movement emerged triumphant by the late fifties. In fact it is to the credit of these pioneers that they succeeded in improving the taste of a rapidly expanding mass of youthful readers in a broad spectrum of the arts. If not for their intervention the tide of commercialized art which was rising in the mid forties would have completely engulfed the cultural scene.

A modern artistic sensibility thus gained a firm hold and the Sinhalese audience was now ready to appreciate three major artistic creations: Wickremasinghe's novel *Viragaya*<sup>58</sup>. Sarathchandra's play *Maname*<sup>59</sup> and Lester James Peiris's film *Rekhava*<sup>60</sup>, which coincidentally appeared in 1956. By this time several new writers had joined Wickramasinghe and Sarathchandra. Mention has already been made of Senanayake, Gunasinghe and those of the *Samskruti* group. Another creative writer who joined in the fifties was Gunadasa Amarasekara—poet, short story writer and novelist. In the fifties and the early sixties writers of this group dominated the creative and critical scene<sup>61</sup>. And, as the University at Peradeniya was identified as the disseminating centre of the new literary ideology, the group came to be termed "The Peradeniya School", or (by those who were adversely affected by the movement) *Peradeni Kalliya* ("The Peradeniya Horde")<sup>62</sup>.

During the late fifties and the early sixties there was a voluminous output from the writers of the Peradeniya group. Special mention should be made of Siri Gunasinghe's collections of poetry *Mas Le Nāti A'a* (1956) and *Abinikmana* (1958) and Gunadasa Amarasekara's novel *Yali Upannemi* (1960), as they became subsequently the centre of a literary controversy. In Gunasinghe's poetry which is reminiscent of Pound and Eliot, the subject matter, language, sentiments and attitudes all appeared to suggest a strong determination to shock his audience into a complete breakaway from tradition. And in the novel *Yali Upannemi* Amarasekara presented, with obvious influences from Gide and Lawrence, a theme centering upon sex. Depicting the search for physical and spiritual fulfilment by a youth who had undergone the traditional Buddhist upbringing, the novel included among

58. For an estimation see Ediriweera Sarathchandra, "Viragayehi Dakvena Katha Kalava" *Samskruti Wickramasinghe Ankaya*, (1958) pp. 44-51.

59. R. Siriwardena, "The Drama of Ediriweera Sarathchandra" in C. R. Hensman ed., *Ceylonese Writing: Some Perspectives*, Part two, (1964) pp. 107-115.

60. P. Coorey (1970), *The Lonely Artist* Colombo, pp. 83-86.

61. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

62. For example in writings such as L. M. A. Sliva (1959); *Vicara Vivaranāyā*, Colombo, Vansanatha and Desabandhu, (1961), *Sāhitya Kollaya*, Colombo.

other things the sexual seduction of the hero in his teens by a lady-teacher, his oedipal musings in boyhood, accounts of his homosexual relations and long descriptions of his adventures in the underworld of prostitution. Bold ventures as those of Gunasinghe and Amerasekara into domains which were traditionally characterized by strong taboos did not bode well for the new literary movement, as we shall presently see.

The triumph of the new literary movement, it so happened, coincided with the upsurge of ethno-religious nationalism in the mid-fifties whose political manifestation was the change of government in 1956. Thenceforth ensued a period of cultural revivalism under state patronage through the newly created Department of Cultural Affairs. This was the time when with much emotional fervour, English the language of the erstwhile colonial master was replaced by Sinhalese as the official language of the country. The nationalist ideology of the day sought to turn tables upon the western oriented elite who appeared to be still enjoying political and cultural dominance. And the new literary movement, obviously indebted to the west for its ideology, and bringing forth works which were distinct echoes of western counterparts, became a convenient target for attack.

An "anti Peradeniya" movement was soon launched and its most prominent activists were writers whose works had suffered severe criticism at the hands of the new critics. An organization named *Sinhala Sāhitya Mandalaya* was launched in 1962 and it published a journal named *Sinhala* which became the chief platform to air anti-Peradeniya views. The charges levelled against the Peradeniya School may be conveniently summarized into three major themes. Firstly, the frank depiction of sex in the novels and poems of writers such as Gunadasa Amarasekara and Siri Gunasinghe was portrayed as going against the very basis of Sinhalese culture<sup>63</sup>. One critic went so far as to declare that the Peradeniya writers were afflicted by sex mania<sup>64</sup>. Another insinuation was that the Peradeniya writings "debased" and "vulgarized" the language: the critics taking great pains to find grammatical mistakes and confusions in meaning in the works of major Peradeniya writers<sup>65</sup>. A more serious allegation was that the Peradeniya group formed a literary cabal, bound together by the intention

- 
63. K. B. Sugathadasa, "Nutana Sāhitya Vivecanaya" in V. Gunatilaka and A. Karunaratne ed., *Nutana Sinhala Gadya Sāhityaya*, (1961), Colombo, pp. 5-9; and Alav Isi Sabihela, "Acarya Siri Gunasinghege Hevanalla", *Sāhityaya*, I, (1962) pp. 28-33.
64. Sri Chandraratne Manavasinghe, (1962) "Sāhityaya Yanu Kumakda?", *Sāhityaya*, I, pp. 17-19.
65. D. D. N. Weerakoon, (1962) "Handunavuva" (Introduction) to *Suāvā*, Colombo, D. V. R. de Silva (1962), "Basa Makana Sarasaviya" *Sāhityaya*, I, pp. 25-27 on Gunasinghe, Saathchandra and Amarasekara and K. B. Sugathadasa, *Upan Dā Sita Vikramaya*, (1965) Colombo, ed. Wickramasinghe.

of guarding each others interests<sup>66</sup>. University teachers in the circle were accused of helping their associates by prescribing their books to students and by setting examination questions almost exclusively on their writings<sup>67</sup>. Faced already with this adversity the Peradeniya School suffered a further and more severe reversal in the sixties when Wickramasinghe, who was in fact one of its founding fathers<sup>68</sup>, "defected" and turned critical of Sarathchandra and others in the University. Wickramasinghe in spite of his modernism all along upheld what he termed "The immaculate Sinhalese culture"<sup>69</sup>. Now he alleged that Sarathchandra, Gunasinghe and other writers associated with the University blindly imitated "decadent" American and Japanese novels of the Post-war period and thus promoted a cynical disregard of Sinhalese culture<sup>70</sup>. The "defection" of Wickramasinghe was followed by the "recantation" of Gunadasa Amarasekara. Writing what he termed a "confession" he "disowned" much of his earlier writings—especially those which because of their frank depiction of sex had provoked much antipathy towards the Peradeniya School. Amarasekara admitted in his confession that they were mere simulations based on "undigested stuff" from western literature<sup>71</sup>. Thus by the end of the sixties the Peradeniya School was in disarray. The *volte-face* of Wickramasinghe and Amarasekara seemed sufficient proof of what the critics of Peradeniya already maintained. A controversy ensued in which the remaining Peradeniya writers were on the defensive.<sup>72</sup> Apart from the personal elements which were brought into the controversy the most pertinent literary problem that was disputed was the validity of "cultural" criteria in evaluating a work of literature: Wickramasinghe and Amarasekara holding the view that cultural criteria were imperative while Sarathchandra, Gunasinghe and others continued to maintain that there were universal standards of good literature.

66. See V. Desabandhu, (1861), *Sahitya, Kollaya*, Colombo.

67. Alakesvara, "Peradeni Sarasaviyehi Sisyan Bilibama", *Sahityaya* 1, (1962), pp. 43-46

68. Although Wickramasinghe's literary career began much earlier than the founding of the University his writings mark the beginning of the new literary movement which subsequently became the Peradeniya School. In spite of the fact that Wickramasinghe later denied having ever belonged to the group (see his "Lokhye Mula Sevimeni Ma Lekhakayeku Vuye" in G. Witana ed., *Navalokaya Wickramasinghe Upahara Kalapaya* (1971) pp. 33-41) others of the Peradeniya School consider him to have been one of them. (See Sarathchandra, *Asampurna Carika Satahan* (1967), Colombo, p. 160.) The critics of Peradeniya also agree with them on this identification. (see L. M. A. Silva, *op. cit.*, V. Desabandhu, *op. cit.* and Alakesvara, *op. cit.*)

69. H. L. Seneviratne (1958), "Nirmala Sinhala Sanskrutiyak" in *Samskruti Wickramasinghe Ankaya*, pp. 76-85.

70. Wickramasinghe, *Sinhala Vicaa Maga*, (1964), Colombo, p. 129 and *Navakaranga Ha Viragaya* (1965), Appendix 2 on "Peradeniya literature and Sinhalese culture".

71. "Gunadasa Amarasekarage Papoccaranaya", *Silumina*, 7 June 1969.

72. For details see K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

A change in the socio-political situation may again be considered the background to the next phase in modern Sinhalese literature. The political trends set in motion in 1956 suffered a setback in 1965 with the return to power of the UNP. Being considered rightist and pro-western the UNP was soon confronted by a syndication of the leftist, nationalist and anti-western forces. Inspired by the contemporary literature in Russia and China, which had been available locally in English and Sinhalese translations from the late fifties, a movement arose with the ideology that the writer should reflect and provide leadership to the socio-political aspirations of the people. The major premise with which this theory of social commitment began was the literature of the fifties and early sixties when the Peradeniya School allegedly presented a bourgeois view of life imitating the "decadent" and "capitalist" art of the west and post-war Japan. The Peradeniya writers were considered to be upholding the maxim "art for art's sake" and their writings were depicted as unrelated to the problems of the common man. It was urged that this "ivory tower" attitude be replaced by the call for an "art for the people" which would encourage the people in their "struggle against imperialism, neo-colonialism and capitalism"<sup>73</sup>.

Meanwhile there had been another change in the composition of the readership and this was again to have repercussions in the literary field. As would have been apparent in the discussion on the literary movements of the forties and the fifties the critics as well as the reading public had the advantage of having access to world literature because of their bilingual education, with English playing a major role in the school curriculum. But as the culmination of a process set foot in the forties education up to the University came to be imparted in the *Swabhasa* medium by 1960<sup>74</sup>. Meanwhile during the heyday of Sinhalese revivalism in the late fifties the study of English came to be neglected, resulting in the gradual closure of the existing window to world literature. Simultaneously there was a rapid expansion of higher education—three more universities being opened during the period 1958 to 1964. The unprecedentedly large educated class which came into being consequently was of a radically different type from that of the forties and fifties. This new potential readership comprised a youth whose intellectual horizons were limited by what was available in the *Swabhasa* medium. Faced as

73. K. Jayalath, *Sahitya Kalava Ha Janatava* (1967), Colombo; and G. Witana "Samajavadi Yatharthaya Ha Sinhala Navakathava" in Palitha Gurusinghe ed., *Sri Lanka Visva Vidyalyaya Sangarava*, (1969), Colombo, pp. 24-26.

74. From 1946 onwards the *swabhasa* policy was introduced in the schools step by step till in 1960 the first batch of students in the *swabhasa* medium entered the University.

they were with the problem of passing examinations in a highly competitive society where occupational opportunities were fast drying up, they had neither the inclination nor the ability to appreciate serious literature, let alone keep contact with literature available in the English medium. Two main trends emerged in the literary world as a result of this situation.

Firstly, the above mentioned politically motivated literary ideology which emerged during the sixties found a ready response from among the mass of the readership. It had an irresistible appeal for the educated youth of the day who unlike their counterparts in the forties and the fifties faced a future of uncertainty, employment opportunities becoming sparse during the early sixties itself. In this context the new ideology calling for revolutionary changes in the socio-political system seemed to provide them with a goal to strive for.

Secondly, to cater to this readership whose literary taste had received little opportunity for development, there emerged a sentimental novel characterized by its invariable theme of a teen-age love story<sup>75</sup>. The titles of these novels are an index to the content: e.g. *Golu Hadawata* ('The dumb heart'), *Mulu Hadin Mama Äyata Pem Kota* ('I, having loved her with all my heart'), *Adara Ganga Galana Däsa* ('The eyes from which flow the river of love'), *Sanda Eliyen Sihina Mava* ('Having created dreams out of moonbeams') and *Mamat Pem Kalemi* ('I also loved'). A sub-variety of the same type has a political message—obviously thrown in for flavour. The bulk of the novels of Karunasena Jayalath, by far the most popular novelist among contemporary youth, fall into this last category.

With the political change that occurred in 1970 when the United Left Front came into power with an avowed socialist programme, the politicized literary ideology seemed to have gained unrivalled supremacy. Some slogans of this ideology were accepted as guidelines by the Department of Cultural Affairs—the governmental patron of the arts. Since its establishment in 1956 the activities of this Department have been a major factor in the field of literature. Patronage to literary activity has been through the Council of Literature (*Sahitya Mandalaya*). The Council has published journals, collections of poetry and prose, organized an annual literary day where a seminar on a special topic was held and awards were presented to authors of the most outstanding literary contributions during the year. Similar to the Council of Literature there were several autonomous bodies such as the Arts Council and the National Theatre Trust

75. For this development Amarasekara tried to blame the Peradeniya School. See his *Contemporary Sinhalese Literary Scene*, (1971), Colombo, p. 4.

76. *The Review of Government Activities*, (1972), Colombo, p. 66.

working under the purview of the Department. In 1970 when a separate Ministry of Cultural Affairs was created these autonomous bodies were brought under the control of the Sri Lanka Cultural Council, which consisted of the Minister, the Secretary to the Ministry and the Director of Cultural Affairs. Under this set-up the machinery of patronage was centralized and uniformity of policy was assured. The Ministry declared that its policy was to 'take the arts to the people'. Moreover, it brought its activities in line with larger political, social and economic policies of the government. Thus, at the annual literary day celebrations of 1973 the theme of the speeches and the seminar was how literature should be utilized for national development.

Literature in this milieu was largely a reflection of the above mentioned official ideology. For example, A. V. Suraweera's *Heyyamaruwa* (1972), D. S. Ranawaka's *Labu Mala Swanda Nūta* (1972) and Madawela Ratnayake's *Aluta Genā Manamāli* (1973) were novels which contained the theme of the youth being inspired by socialist thinking, transforming the traditional economic and social structure. Martin Wickramasinghe, the veteran novelist, in his last novel *Bava Taranaya* (1973) presented a new biography of the Buddha. Therein the great teacher's transformation from a royal heir apparent to a philosopher mendicant was portrayed as having occurred largely due to his sympathy with the poor and the down trodden in society. As could be expected politics affected literary criticism as well. Thus, when a wave of hostile criticism arose against *Bava Taranaya* especially from the ranks of the monks and the Buddhist devotees, Wickramasinghe declared: "the monks and laymen who criticized the novel are, I believe, UNP stooges". According to him this opposition manifested itself probably because he "depicted Siduhat's and Buddha's characters as great sympathisers of the poor and the downtrodden who were victims of the caste-ridden oligarchy".<sup>77</sup>

In the meantime a warning was sounded by one critic, identified as belonging to the Peradeniya school, that literature under current circumstances was in danger of declining into a mere display of slogans<sup>78</sup>. However this proved to be a lone voice, for a whole host of other voices were raised against it, some insinuating that it was a covert attempt by the "anti-socialist" Peradeniya school to stage a come-back<sup>79</sup>. Furthermore, it was

77. "U. N. P. Bnikkus and Bhava Taranaya", *The Nation*, 15 February, 1974, p. 7.

78. W. Dissanayake, "Satan Patha Sahityayed Vadak Na", *Silumina*, 18, November, 1973.

79. K. Jayalath "Vicārye Alut Satan Patha; ak", *Silumina*, 25 November, 1973; Gunadasa Anarasekara, "Sah ya Satan Patha Avankada?" *Silumina* 2 December, 1973; Tissa Kariyavasam, "Alut Sahitya Parapura Nu ussanne Ay?" *Silumina*, 9 December, 1973; and Dadasala Jayanetti, "Nava Sahitya Parapura Mula Katanna Epa" *Silumina*, 23 December 1973.

claimed that when literature was in the process of development towards "socialist realism" the appearance of a propagandist type of work was quite normal, for it had happened even in Russia.<sup>80</sup>

It is of interest to note that the origins of the politicization of literature could be discerned in the writings of Wickramasinghe himself. From the early days of his literary career he has shown a deep concern for the human predicament in the context of social and economic inequalities. Thus in his first collection of short stories, *Gāhāniyak* (1925), the story "Kuveni Hami" depicts the tragic career of a village girl who came to the city as a domestic servant to be seduced by a young master. She later leads the life of a harassed mistress of a Malay labourer in a city slum and is finally sentenced to death for killing him in a fit of desperation. Again, in *Miringu Diya* (1925), one of his early novels, Wickramasinghe makes Vijita Manuvarna, the character who is used to mouth the author's opinions, castigate the *haute bourgeoisie* who organize a banquet for the winner dogs of a kennel show without any concern for the men who were starving in the street outside. Incidentally, these writings of Wickramasinghe appeared about ten years before the first Marxist political party was founded in the island. It is possible that his thinking was influenced by the early labour movement led by A. E. Goonesinghe, who by the 1920s had become a powerful figure in the island's political scene.<sup>81</sup> In any case this social concern was found even in his early critical writings. For example, one of his criticisms of classical Sinhalese literature has been that only upper class life is depicted therein.<sup>82</sup> Connected with this social concern is the humanism (*manava bhaktiya* "devotion to humanity" in his words) which has been a key feature in his literary criticism. Subsequently, in 1962 while writing a book named *Soviet Desayē Nāgima* (the Rise of the Soviet Land) he made specific references to "socialist realism" (*samaja satta yathartha vadaya*) thus introducing the concept to the Sinhalese reader.

Sarathchandra, the other leading figure of the new literary movement, continued to maintain in essence the same views on literature and the arts that he held at the beginning of his career. All along he had considered literature primarily as an aesthetic endeavour. In his view it is doubtful whether art could be utilized for purposes such as politics or economics without losing its aesthetic essence in the process. Thus, commenting on

80. W. A. Abeysinghe, "Sāhityaya Kāgevat Budalaya Nove", *Silumina*, 6 January, 1974

81. K. Jayawardene, (1972) *The Rise of the Labour movement in Ceylon*, Durham, N. C., pp. 191-210.

82. *Sahityodaya Katha*, (1932) Mount Lavinia, pp. 70-72.

the idea that literature should contribute towards national development, he declared that the concepts involved were incompatibles.<sup>83</sup> His attitude to the oft-repeated slogan that "art should be taken to the people" is that art is essentially a concern of those with the necessary aesthetic gifts and that it is their duty to educate the others and make them capable of appreciating serious art. In this manner, he says, people should be brought to art and not *vice versa*.<sup>84</sup> Such an elitist attitude could hardly be popular in the socio-political milieu of the early seventies. In any case Sarathchandra saw an all round decline in the arts at the time. He noted that the active involvement of the educated classes in literary activity and the concomitant catholicity of vision that was conspicuous during the fifties and the sixties was fast disappearing.<sup>85</sup> Whether one agreed with Sarathchandra's views or not his above observation could not be gainsaid. Drastic changes in tertiary education<sup>86</sup> resulted in a sharp decline in the popularity of Humanities subjects in the universities. With the concomitant loss of a readership with academic orientations, literature remained either a means of escapism or of political solipsism.

---

83. E. Sarathchandra, "Ek Novena Adahas", *Sarasav'ya*, 14 September, 1973.

84. This idea was expressed by him in a radio discussion.

85. In "Ek novena Adahas". See fn. 83.

86. By The University of Ceylon Act No. 1 of 1972 which was based on *The Report of the Committee on Higher Education*, (The so-called Jayaratne Report), (1971), Colombo