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## Masters Theses

### Re-envisioning a Discipline: Martin Wickramasinghe's Contribution to Comparative Literature

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## Abstract

This thesis, "Re-visioning a Discipline: Martin Wickramasinghe's Contribution to Comparative Literature," explores the comparative approach of Martin Wickramasinghe, the pioneering twentieth-century Sri Lankan novelist, literary-cultural critic, and journalist. Wickramasinghe drew on Sinhala folk and classical, Pali, Sanskrit, and Western literary traditions, especially those of England, and Russia. His comparative approach had two main principles: First, literary concepts do not belong to any literary culture on the basis of their origin. Second, any concept that exists in a given literary culture can be "remoulded" and incorporated by another culture. The rejection of the notion of origin-based ownership of literary concepts and the reformulation of literary concepts as phenomena that may be circulated among literary cultures create a hierarchy-less base for comparison. In creating his comparative approach, Wickramasinghe problematized the binaries of local and metropolitan, village and city, and national and international. I examine his comparative approach by analyzing, first, his re-interpretations of the concepts of reader and *gr myat* (vulgarity). For example, Wickramasinghe challenged the elitism of Sanskrit literary theoretical conceptions of the reader and vulgarity. Second, I discuss how he "remoulded" different literary concepts in his theoretical writings and fiction. For example, he created a concept of realism that drew on classical Sinhala narratives as well as Western literature and theory.

In this thesis, I place Wickramasinghe's comparative approach in conversation with postcolonial scholarship such as that of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Simon Gikandi, Revathi Krishnaswamy, Gayathri Spivak, and S. Subramaniam. Wickramasinghe's comparative approach provides us new insights on how to compare different literary cultures without ascribing hierarchical values to these cultures. He rejected the binaries of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka and, instead, situated himself in a liminal position. His writings illumine how Pali, Sanskrit, and European metropolitan literary traditions all impacted Sinhala literary culture in different historical periods. Wickramasinghe focused on *how* Sinhala literary culture appropriates literary concepts from other literary traditions rather than on the *traditions* themselves.

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