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Anthropological gleanings of the work of Martin Wickramasinghe

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ABSTRACT

Martin Wickramasinghe is a prominent figure who contributed to various academic spheres in Sri Lanka. Many who define Martin Wickramasinghe only as a creative writer disregards the fact that he was an expert who contributed to a Sri Lankan approach in anthropology. This qualitative research paper analyzes the role of Wickramasinghe in emphasizing the anthropological paradigms in Sri Lankan society during his period. The main objective of this analysis is to provide a comprehensive insight about the impact and contribution of Martin Wickramasinghe's work to develop anthropology as an academic discipline in Sri Lanka. For this research, we utilized his publications related to anthropology and culture and analyzed the content which underlined important anthropological characteristics. His 'Sathwa Santhathiya', 'Sakaskada', 'Mānawa Vidyāwa Ha Sinhala Sanskruthiya', 'Buddhism and Culture' are some renowned works that were applied for this study. Wickramasinghe read widely the works of Darwin, Spencer, Huxley as well as the ethnographies of scholars like Malinowski, Ruth Benedict. One of his major views was that Sri Lankan culture was undermined by the conflict with Western culture, and that Buddhism is one of the institutions that protected it from collapse and disappearance. He comparatively expressed his ideas about diffusionism, one of the significant ideas in cultural anthropology, as an ordinary process which takes place in every society. Wickramasinghe related the ideals of democracy, humanism, socialism, religion, and culture to the context of Sri Lanka. This research concludes that Wickramasinghe's interest in anthropology came at a time when anthropology was not popular in Sri Lanka. He has used his knowledge and ideology from records on anthropology to express critical views on the socio-cultural divisions of Sri Lanka, although he cannot be defined as an anthropologist.

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1. Introduction

Martin Wickramasinghe was born to a family of the village headman class in the Southern Province, Koggala May 29, 1891. His formal education was at the village school and lasted less than five years. At the age of fourteen, he was forced to leave his native Koggala for Colombo and distant Batticaloa in search of employment. Wickramasinghe taught himself not only Sinhala and English but Sanskrit and Pali languages as well. His first book was published at the age of twenty-three and he wrote over eighty books and innumerable articles and papers on culture and civilization of the Sinhala people. The language of his writings is derived not from the texts with its heavy dependence on classical Pali and Sanskrit literature, but on the idiom of common speech learnt in the villages of the Southern Province. Wickramasinghe has been famous in Sri Lankan literature due to his creative writing. His works discarded the romanticism and the anti-western feeling with which the early Sinhala novels had been written and concentrated instead on events in real life. Several of his novels have been turned into film such as *Gamperaliya*, which won the Indian Golden Peacock award for the best film produced in the year 1964.

Through his writings, he consistently opposed dogmatism, casuistry, elitism, and oppression in any form, be it cultural, religious, political, or social. Martin Wickramasinghe had been writing more than 50 years, producing 96 books, in addition to all the articles he had written to newspapers and journals. Wickramasinghe stated in *Upadasita* (1961), "without receiving any formal education in any leading school or from academics, I developed my mind through life experiences and by reading books." Wickramasinghe died on the 23rd of July 1976. His work has been translated and published in English, Hindi, Tamil, Russian, Chinese, Romanian, Dutch, German, French and Japanese languages. Though his formal education was only up to grade 5, the

knowledge he gathered from 'his Universities', as Gorky called it, brought him recognition from modern day universities. His library had over thousands of books, and he would have read all of them. It would not have been reading for the sake of reading, but reading to gather knowledge, as seen in the notes he had made on the books.

Novel '*Leela*' (1914) and '*Shastriya Lekhana*' (Academic Articles) (1919), an anthology of essays on literary criticism, are the beginning of his literary career of Sri Lankan society. Subsequently, he began a crusade to raise literary ideals for the Sinhalese reading community with work such as '*Sahityodaya Katha*' (Literary Stories) (1932), '*Vichara Lipi*' (Literary Criticism) (1941), '*Guttala Geetaya*' (The Song of Guttala) (1943), and '*Sinhala Sahityaye Nageema*' (Landmarks of Sinhala Literature) (1946) in which he appraised the traditional literary heritage according to a set of rules of perilous principles formed by creating the best in Indian and Western traditions of literary criticism. Wickramasinghe also wrote in '*Bhava Karma Vikashaya*' (Evolution of Bhava Karma) (1967), "I do not know Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit, or English. I do not have any knowledge of Abhidharma or philosophy. I am not a pundit. I have not studied or received a degree from any university. I have not written any research studies to seek post graduate qualifications. I have no wisdom gained through meditation. I believe I have developed an intuition by seeking to meditate by reading literature and scientific philosophy. But this belief could be due to my ego only." (Abeyasinghe, 2009, p.21). In the way he introduced Gorky and Tolstoy to the Sinhala readers, and the Western novel from around 1918, he also introduced the short story. His first short story '*Abhirahasa*' (Mystery) appeared in the *Dinamina Newspaper* in 1924. Martin Wickramasinghe encouraged young writers to publish their short stories in newspapers. That is how G. B. Senanayake was discovered by him, and he published G. B. Senanayake's first short story collection, '*Duppatun Nethi Lokaya*' (A World

Without Poor) in 1945 at his press. His novel, 'Viragaya' (Devoid of Passions), is one of the most psychologically astute and critical novels ever produced by a Sri Lankan. In it, Wickramasinghe conveyed details about the complexity of the human body and mind, through the main character in 'Viragaya', Aravinda, who struggles with the normative customs and ethics of conventional human life.

In one of his prominent works "Revolution and Evolution" (1971) he stated that the mission of the writer has two aspects: writers must consider the social and the natural environment of their own country and at the same time, the writers must reconcile their views of national environment with the vision of the universal aspects of human freedom, socialism and humanism. Wickramasinghe was a keen student of scientific works on evolution, and he had long been a sympathizer of the evolutionary understanding of the universe. According to Tissa Balasuriya (1975) if the people of Sri Lanka have a social awareness and a political option in favour of a democratic, humanist socialism, writers like Martin Wickramasinghe might have made a great contribution to the cultural preparation of the people for it (Balasuriya, 1975, p.68). In this study we examined the anthropological influence gained by Wickramasinghe through his readings of various scholars such as Marx, Haegel, Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, Malinowski, and Benedict. According to the statements of David Jackson (1975) Wickramasinghe's most fruitful idea in essays and studies is that Sri Lanka occupies a unique intellectual position, benefitting from both Eastern and Western thought and is capable of applying both ways of knowledge towards a broader view of human themes than is possible with other students or cultures, in most cases (Jackson, 1975, p.63).

To conduct this study, we applied a few of his renowned works which underscore the tactics of socio-cultural anthropology. *Mānawa Vidyāwa Ha Sinhala Sanskruthiya*

(Anthropology and Sinhala Culture), Buddhism and Culture, and *Sathwa Santhathiya* (Animal Continuity) were critically analyzed under this study. The main objectives of this analysis are to inquire and provide an understanding about the work done by Martin Wickramasinghe on behalf of Sri Lankan anthropology and to explain the anthropological importance of Wickramasinghe's work. The research problem is whether Martin Wickramasinghe can be defined as a Sri Lankan anthropologist. This paper emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the anthropological perspective of Wickramasinghe's work.

2. Materials and Methods

Martin Wickramasinghe was born to a family of the village headman class in the Southern Province, Koggala May 29, 1891. His formal education was at the village school and lasted less than five years. At the age of fourteen, he was forced to leave his native Koggala for Colombo and distant Batticaloa in search of employment. Wickramasinghe taught himself not only Sinhala and English but Sanskrit and Pali languages as well. His first book was published at the age of twenty-three and he wrote over eighty books and innumerable articles and papers on culture and civilization of the Sinhala people. The language of his writings is derived not from the texts with its heavy dependence on classical Pali and Sanskrit literature, but on the idiom of common speech learnt in the villages of the Southern Province. Wickramasinghe has been famous in Sri Lankan literature due to his creative writing. His works discarded the romanticism and the anti-western feeling with which the early Sinhala novels had been written and concentrated instead on events in real life. Several of his novels have been turned into film such as *Gamperaliya*, which won the Indian Golden Peacock award for the best film produced in the year 1964.

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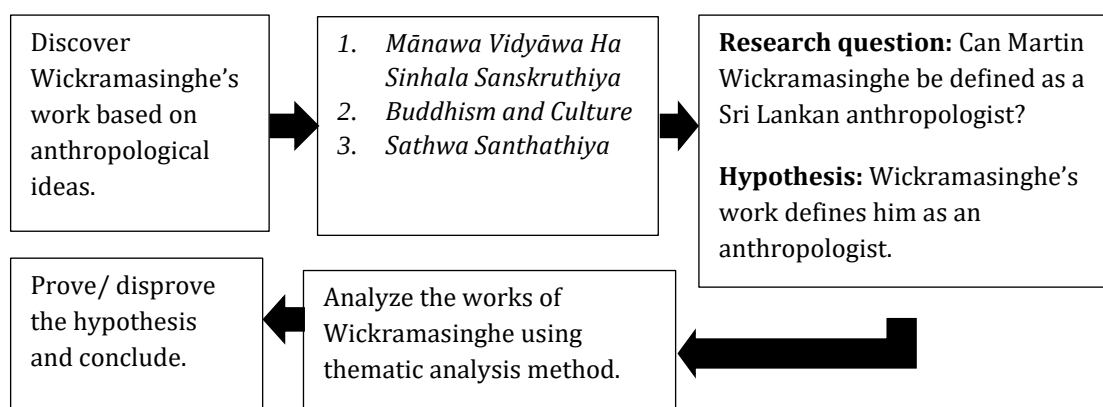


Figure 1. Research framework

3. Results and Discussion

Wickramasinghe is a keen figure of scientific works on evolution, and he has long been a sympathizer of the evolutionary understanding of the universe and of human society. He understood the role of the writer more directly in relation to the creation of social awareness which could bring about desirable social changes. He saw the importance of cultural preparation for social revolution and the psycho-cultural changes that should follow a social change in favor of the oppressed masses. In *Mānawa Vidyāwa*

Ha Sinhala Sanskruthiya he highlighted following areas.

- Culture and anthropology
- Irrigation system and Sinhala civilization of Sri Lanka
- Evolution of culture
- Conflict of cultures
- Nature of a society
- Ignorance and culture
- Obscenity and Sinhala culture
- Language and culture
- Human and religion

Wickramasinghe introduced Charles Darwin and his relationship with anthropology to

ordinary readers of Sri Lankan society at that time. According to Wickramasinghe, real anthropology begins with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution; To be more precise, with the publication of 'Origin of Species' in 1859. Wickramasinghe also mentioned E.B. Tylor, as one of the founding fathers of cultural anthropology. He declares that the publication of 'Primitive Culture' in 1871 marks the beginning of the study of culture systematically.

“නියම මානව විද්‍යාව පහළ වූයේ වාල්ස් ඩාවින් පරිණාමවාදය විද්‍යාත්මක මතයක් කරනු පිණිස තමා විසින් පසක් කොටගන්නා ලද ප්‍රමාණ ඵලවූණින් (Origin of Species) නැති පොත පළ කිරීමෙන් පසු ය.....සංස්කෘතිය විද්‍යාත්මක ලෙස උගැන්ම ඇරඹුණේ 1858න් පසු ය. සර් ඊ. බී. ටයිලර් ආදී මනුෂ්‍යයන්ගේ සංස්කෘතිය (Primitive Culture) මැයෙන් පොත ලියුවේ 1871 දී ය. සංස්කෘතිය විද්‍යාත්මක ලෙස විමසීම ඇරඹුණේ ටයිලර්ගේ පොත පළ කිරීමෙන් පසු යයි කීම අසාධාරණ නො වේ” (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 7).

Among the various ideas of Wickramasinghe, he emphasized the meaning of culture as a character of a particular human category. He saw ethnology as a synonym of cultural anthropology in *Mānawa Vidyāwa Ha Sinhala Sanskruthiya*. According to his ideas, Sri Lankan culture was weakened by the conflict with Western culture, and Buddhism was one of the institutions that protected it from collapse and disappearance. The other is the Hindu influence. He comparatively expressed his ideas about diffusionism as an ordinary process which takes place in every society and changes or adjusts the culture according to new components which protect a particular culture. Wickramasinghe presented how man has adapted culturally, somewhat deviating from an ethnocentric point of view. In particular, he argues that the very existence of a culture depends on transformation. He has focused on the fact that Sri Lankans should not be culturally isolated and must acquire other cultural elements, that shaped them.

“සංස්කෘතික මානව විද්‍යාව වූ කලී මානව විද්‍යාවෙහි උපාංගයකි. එය මානව චරිත විද්‍යාව හෙවත් නර වංශ විද්‍යාව (ethnology) නමින් ද හඳුන්වනු ලැබේ” (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 57).

“සිංහල සංස්කෘතිය විනාශ විය නො දී රැකගත යුත්තේ එහි අංගෝපාංග වෙනස් වනු වැළැක්වීමෙන් නො වේ. එහි විශේෂ අදින ස්වරූපයට හානි නො වන සේ අංගෝපාංග වෙනස් වන්නට සැලැස්වීමෙනි...අංගෝපාංග ඇතුළු කිරීමෙනි...” (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 95).

“අනික් සංස්කෘතීන්ගෙන් නොයෙක් දේ උකහා ගැනීමෙන් සකස් නො වූ, වෙනස් නො වූ සංස්කෘතියක් ලොව කිසිම රටක නැති ය. තනි විමත්, කොන් විමත් නිසා සකස් නො වූ සංස්කෘතියක් ලෙස හැඳින්විය හැක්කේ අප රට වැද්දන්ගේ සංස්කෘතිය යි...” (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 87).

One of Wickramasinghe's most notable points is his comparative view of cultural change. He noted that culture is constantly changing. His proposals to preserve the independence of culture are also important here. In *Mānawa Vidyāwa Ha Sinhala Sanskruthiya* he mentioned the importance of the preservation of the Sinhala language to conserve Sinhala culture.

“අපගේ සංස්කෘතියෙහි ස්වාධීනත්වයන් මෝස්තරයන් රැකගත හැක්කේ අපේ භාෂාව බැහැර නො කොට එය ලෝකයේ අනික් දියුණු ජාතීන්ගේ බස්වලට නො දෙවන දියුණු බසක් කරනු ලැබීමෙනි....” (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 76).

Wickramasinghe expressed culture as the character of humanity. He also revealed the interrelationship between religion and culture and the religious practices of the rural people in the social machinery of the time as a part of the culture. He noted that it was not the religious learning that influenced the behavior of the rural Buddhists, but the culture that was molded by the religion. One of Wickramasinghe's strong contentions was that there is no religious discipline without

worship or practices. He observed that in ignoring the practice of worship, one cannot achieve good or socially acceptable behavior. These theories reflect Wickramasinghe's views on religion. One of the significant interests here is the cultural change that Wickramasinghe manifests from an anthropological point of view, and the religious adaptations associated with it.

“ගම්මල බෞද්ධයින්ගේ හැසිරීම කෙරෙහි බලපවත්වන්නේ ඔවුන්ගේ ආගම් දැනුම නො වේ. ආගම අනුව සකස් වුණු සංස්කෘතිය යි...” (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 178).

“මිනිසුන් තබා දරුවන්වත් හික්මවත්ව ගන්නා පන්සිල් පද ඇතුළු ඔව්දන්වලට හැක...” (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 182).

Wickramasinghe stated in his Buddhism and Culture (1964) that the Buddha was not a philosopher nor was he a founder of a religion with dogmas and rituals. He also mentioned that Buddha was the greatest and most original, and intellectual mystic India has ever produced. Through this book, he emphasized the following areas with an anthropological understanding which he gained by reading various academic publications.

- Religious aspect of Buddhism
- Buddhist stories and modern psychology
- Tantrism in Sri Lanka
- Sri Lankan cultural problems and anthropology
- Basic aspects of Sinhalese culture
- Cultural conflict

Wickramasinghe pointed out the ritual called ‘Tantric’ comparatively with other customs structured in different societies. His writings on Tantric cult underline the curiosity of Wickramasinghe’s readings about various cultural materials. His thoughts on magic highlight the anthropological influence which he achieved by reading western and eastern work.

“Magic and sex mysticism is only one aspect of Tantric cult. The other aspect is highly

metaphysical. The philosophical basis of Buddhist Tantrism is Buddhist metaphysics as developed by Mahayanists, and that of Hindu Tantrism is Vedantic metaphysics” (Wickramasinghe, 1964, p. 34).

Wickramasinghe was one of the pioneers who contributed to the beginning of anthropology as an academic discipline in Sri Lankan universities, like Dr. Nandadeva Wijesekara. He has been widely criticized by Sir Ivor Jennings for not starting a Department of Anthropology at University of Ceylon. Wickramasinghe also commented on Jennings' failure to start an anthropology "department as following.

“If he had established a department of anthropology at the beginning, he could have contributed a disciplinary knowledge to create a more tolerant and unsnobbish atmosphere at the university campus. This knowledge and atmosphere, I believe, would have spread to the schools, curbing the narrow national and religious sentimentalism of the people who were responsible for recent racial riots” (Wickramasinghe, 1964, p. 46).

“What is most essential at this stage is a Department of Anthropology at the university provision for comparative Religion. If we had such a department for the last ten years, we could have solved many of our linguistic and cultural problems without generating intolerance and breeding fanatics” (Wickramasinghe, 1964, p. 51).

Wickramasinghe comparatively explained the importance of studying anthropology utilizing Western nations. He underlined those Western countries are solving their racial, religious, and language problems with the development of anthropology. Wickramasinghe mentioned the dedication of biological anthropology to refuse the concept of the colour bar pertaining to human skin color. His opinions underscore the attitude he received without any ethnocentric perspective by engaging in anthropological writings.

Wickramasinghe proposed the use of anthropology to solve social linguistic problem as well. Wickramasinghe addressed the importance of preserving the Sinhala language to elevate Sri Lankan culture to the world. According to Wickramasinghe, a language is not a gauge of social status, but a means of transporting facts which carry culture from one generation to the next. He reveals that what is said in one language cannot be precisely said in another.

"A thorough knowledge of anthropology is necessary for those who attempt to solve the linguistic problem which is really a cultural one" (Wickramasinghe, 1964, p. 50).

In *Buddhism and culture* (1964), Wickramasinghe attempted to look into the cultural conflict using the classic holistic approach found in anthropology. In particular, he highlighted the anthropological significance of concepts such as religion and culture. Wickramasinghe elaborates on the impact of religion to cultural conflicts. He also commented on the basic elements and aspects of Sinhalese culture. There are similarities and differences between Hinduism and Buddhism. Wickramasinghe made the justification using concepts such as animism proposed by Tylor while depicted the evolution of primitive religion.

"During Buddha's time occultism and animistic beliefs were aspects of natural science in India. Occultism and magical practices were an integral part of Ayurveda-the science of medicine. Buddha rejected all these sciences and referred to them as 'tiracchāna' vidya or animistic sciences" (Wickramasinghe, 1964, p. 65).

Sathwa Santhathiya is a book written by Wickramasinghe accentuating the physical/biological anthropological ideas such as human evolution, biological evidence that prove the evolution, origin of Earth, evolution of social norms and values etc. Without utilizing any complex language, the text underlined the main objective of

Wickramasinghe, as he attempted to provide the anthropological knowledge in simple terms for general public to make it easier to understand. His writing pattern was quite different and more academic in this book compared to his other publications. This is known as the first Sinhalese book to reveal the ideas of human evolution in which he primarily categorized the following types of topics:

- Evolutionism
- The living world and the inanimate world
- Origin of the Earth
- Biological evidence for human evolution
- Similarities between humans and other animals
- The evolution of human intelligence
- The origin of social values and norms
- The birth of science and philosophy

This book can be described as providing a basic understanding of scientific discoveries in the Western world to the Sri Lankan readership, in particular, the results of Wickramasinghe's spontaneous readings on biological knowledge of genes, cells and others. The most important feature here is that Wickramasinghe wrote a profound scientific paradigm such as evolution that could be read even by the average villager.

"මීට අවුරුදු විස්සකට තිහකට පමණ පෙර ගමක තතුන්, දැන් තතුන් විමසන කල ද පරිණාමවාදයෙන් දැක්වෙන ධර්මතාව වටහාගත හැකි ය. පැරණි ගමෙහි දික් ඉස්තෝප්පුව, දික් සාලය, අනතුරුව තවත් සාලයක් හා කාමර දෙකක් හෝ තුනක් ද ඇති ගොඩනැගිලි වී ය. සරමක් හැඳ සරමක් කරට දමා ගැනීම එකල ගමේ ධනවතාගේ ඇදුම වී යන කුඩා ළමයින් සෙලුවෙන් ඔබමොබ දුවමින් සෙල්ලම් කරනු දක්නා ලදී. ගවයෝ සුලභ වූ හ. කිරි සුලභ විය. මෙසේ පැවති ගම ක්‍රමයෙන් වෙනස් වීමෙන් වර්තමාන ස්වරූපය ගත්තේ ය. දැන් ගමෙහි පෝටිකෝව තොරණ ආදියෙන් යුතු අලුත් පන්තයේ ගෙවල් වෙයි." (Wickramasinghe, 1934, p. 17).

Wickramasinghe applied zoological, geological, biological, anatomical, embryological, and paleontological

knowledge to describe various topics in this publication. One of the significant characteristics is the comparison. His arguments underlined the anthropological influence which he utilized for this work. When considering the 12th chapter, origin of science and philosophy, Wickramasinghe attempted to apply both Western and Eastern ideas. Wickramasinghe's readings on Buddhism contributed to its academic nature.

“බුදුන් වහන්සේට පෙර උපනිෂද් කාලයෙහි ද, මෙබඳු ප්‍රශ්න විචාරමින් ලෝකයේ අග මුල සෙවූ, ආධුනික දාර්ශනිකයන් බහුල වූ බව උපනිෂද් ග්‍රන්ථයන්ගෙන් ඔප්පු වෙයි. ලෝකය හා සත්ව ගණයා පහළ වූයේ කෙසේ ද? ලෝකයේ මුල කුමක් ද? ලෝකයේ මුල් ආත්මය නම් එය කෙසේ දැනගත හැකි ද? මරණින් මතු සත්වයාට කුමක් වන්නේ ද? යනු විසින් අනු වැසියන් විවාල ප්‍රශ්න හා ඒ ප්‍රශ්නයන්ට උපනිෂද් දාර්ශනිකයන් දුන් පිළිතුරු ද වඩාත් පැරණිය යි සැලකෙන හැම උපනිෂදයකම පාහේ දක්නා ලැබේ” (Wickramasinghe, 1934, p. 183).

According to Balagalla (1975) Wickramasinghe's Sathwa Santhathiya is also a challenge to some scholars who claim that an 'underdeveloped language' like Sinhala is not strong enough to explain modern scientific facts. It demonstrates how the terminology required in modern scientific philosophical and critical writing can be adopted to Sinhala and how a logical linguistic rule can be shaped.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is accurate to state that anthropology is not a popular subject in Sri Lanka as compared to other social sciences. But in Western countries such as the United States, and England, the situation is quite different. Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution, on the one hand, led to the collapse of traditional ideas about the origin of man and human-centered ideas about culture. In this context, Martin Wickramasinghe attempted to develop this field in Sri Lankan society. His critiques on Sinhala culture and

society which were written from an anthropological point of view cannot be easily dismissed because they were published in a time when not only anthropology, but also other social sciences were not so popular in Sri Lanka. In this research we explored the anthropological gleanings of Wickramasinghe's work through his three publications named *Mānawa Vidyāwa Ha Sinhala Sanskruthiya*, *Buddhism and Culture*, and *Sathwa Santhathiya*. One of the main elements found in the analysis is the language of Wickramasinghe. Wickramasinghe has presented profound concepts in anthropology in an accessible manner. Quality aside, it is commendable to have a scientifically innovative subject read to the people of that time.

It can be concluded from this study that Wickramasinghe's work does not prove to be scientific or refute the research work as compared to the books published by other anthropologists. Wickramasinghe has commented on many topics in anthropology, but he has not presented them as an anthropologist but as a cultural critic. We conclude that Wickramasinghe did not look at society and culture as an anthropologist. While there is no debate as to Wickramasinghe's ability as a novelist, literary critic, and a veteran writer, researchers who associate Wickramasinghe's work with anthropological research should re-examine whether he can be directly referred to as an anthropologist. There is no evidence that Wickramasinghe conducted a subjective research through an anthropological point of view. He was known in some quarters for his disinterest in Western customs. It proves that ethnocentric ideas have not been completely eradicated from Wickramasinghe thoughts. He also equates ethnology with cultural anthropology, proving that Wickramasinghe did not fully comprehend the ideas and concepts of anthropology. Therefore, it is more apt to have described him as a critic, a writer and a human being who looked at his

society and culture through his own experience than an anthropologist.

Through the works of Wickramasinghe he presents his own unbiased ideas about Sinhala society, Sinhala culture and Buddhism. Self-opinions that were acquired via reading Western and Eastern books would have affected Wickramasinghe to produce these types of publications. Although he did not bid to present the main concepts of cultural anthropology separately, it is commendable that Wickramasinghe has made a comparative analysis of certain features of Sinhalese society and culture through the above-mentioned works. We propose that it is more appropriate to refer to him as a broad cultural critic who has critiqued his own culture through his life experiences than an anthropologist. Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say that Martin Wickramasinghe holds a special place in Sri Lanka as a voice for the establishment and development of anthropology.

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