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Rhythms of Paradise hosts first Sinhala Literary Panel discussion celebrating the Cultural Legacy of Martin Wickramasinghe



Dulanaka Jayasinghe, Research Assistant of the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute moderated a panel discussion, on 14 January, 2024 on the title Martin Wickramasinghe's Impact on the Cultural Legacy of Sri Lanka, at the Rhythms of Paradise festival in Koggala. The series of events organised in Koggala under the overall Galle Concerto 2024 banner was aimed at showcasing Sri Lanka's cultural heritage and highlighting the nuances that weaves together Sri Lanka's unique cultural heritage. This session is also the first panel discussion included into Galle Concerto event line to focus on Sinhala literature with the view of complimenting the Galle Literary Festival.

The session was held against the backdrop of the late author's ancestral home and his final resting place as a fitting tribute to the nature and community that inspired his work and to promote the Martin Wickramasinghe Folk Museum as a hub in attracting

both domestic, as well as foreigners, given that several of his books, besides English and Tamil, has been translated to 7 foreign languages-Bulgarian, Chinese, Dutch, French, Japanese, Romanian, and Russian. This event served as a platform in celebrating his life and work, and in fostering intellectual dialogue and enhancing awareness of the renowned author's national and international contributions. This session presented

Professor Sandagomi Coperahewa, Professor & Head of the Department of Sinhala of the University of Colombo speaking on the profound impact of Wickramasinghe on the Sinhala language, emphasised that the contemporary Sinhala language owes much of its development to Wickramasinghe's literary contributions, making him the foremost figure in this transformative process. He said, a century ago, the Sinhala language was notably underdeveloped, especially in its written form. An avid reader of international writing since his youth, in 1934 Wickramasinghe authored an important work on Darwin's Evolutionary Theory and engaged in discussions on various contemporary debates. This task required an elevated language proficiency, and it was Wickramasinghe's practice as a journalist that facilitated the introduction of advanced language elements. Notably, he tackled a broad spectrum of topics, unlike anyone before, leading to the modernization of the language. Wickramasinghe recognised the fluid nature of language and advocated for embracing change as an essential aspect of linguistic evolution.

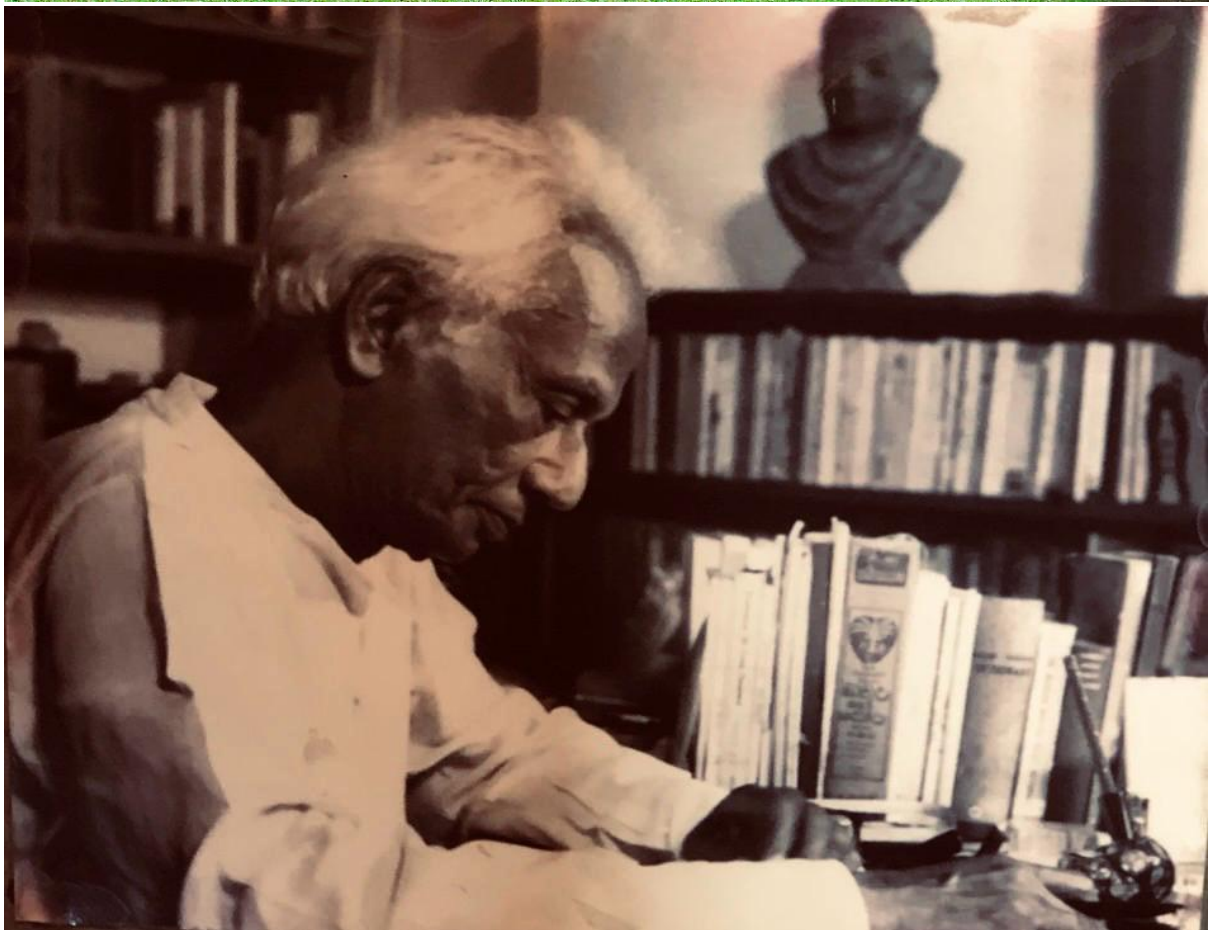
While focusing on Martin Wickramasinghe's literary legacy, Professor Sarath Wijesooriya, Professor at the Department of Sinhala of the University of Colombo noted that Wickramasinghe's literary roots extended deep into his worldly experiences. Following his father's demise, he embarked on a journey marked by intellectual fervour, first securing a job at a shop and allocating a portion of his inaugural salary for a subscription to an English magazine covering evolution. Initially deemed too young for a subscription, he was granted membership to the Literary Guide- another magazine published by the same institute, an alternative that opened portals to the world literature. Through this opportunity, Wickramasinghe explored the complexities of humanity, contemplating the nuanced representation of real-life experiences. Wickramasinghe's literary odyssey is anchored in a commitment to realism, a philosophy shaped by the study of the human condition. He later underwent a transformative shift, emerging as a sophisticated writer influenced by Western traditions—a testament to his modernised thinking. Wickramasinghe's assertion, 'one should be disgusted by the sin but not the sinner,' encapsulates the core tenets of realism, acknowledging the inherent imperfections of humanity.

Emeritus Professor Asanga Tilakaratne, Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Colombo highlighted Martin Wickramasinghe's engagement with religion, positioning the author as an early and influential critic in this realm. Wickramasinghe's critique, particularly of religion, is acknowledged as a powerful undertaking, recognising the inherent sensitivity of such discussions. Notably, his critical

examination did not descend into ridicule; instead, it reflected a thoughtful analysis. Despite his critical stance, Wickramasinghe embraced the Buddhist religion, emphasizing the nuanced distinction between merely having a religion and being conscientiously aware of it—an aspect he adeptly navigated. Wickramasinghe's keen interest in the Jataka Stories underscores the depth of his exploration into Buddhism. Approaching these narratives through a psychological lens, he coined the term "People's Buddhism" to characterise the Jataka Stories. His significant work, *Bawtharanaya*, stands as a pivotal exploration of the life story of the Buddha. The lens through which Wickramasinghe examined religion can be delineated into three key perspectives: Naturalism, positing that the world operates according to the laws of nature; Humanism, emphasising a human-centric approach to religion; and Empiricism, advocating for reliance on empirical evidence. At the core of his perspective was the urging to perceive the Buddha as a human being, advocating for a more intelligent and critical approach to the analysis of religious phenomena. In essence, Wickramasinghe's approach transcends mere criticism; it seeks to foster a profound and insightful understanding of these intricate and sensitive topics.

Professor Praneeth Abeysundara, Professor at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura discussed Martin Wickramasinghe's early and thorough engagement with culture and anthropology. Notably, Wickramasinghe contributed valuable articles to the Vidyodaya University's anthropology magazine, with a specific focus on the Sinhala language. The backdrop of the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots prompted Wickramasinghe to advocate for the teaching of anthropology to Sri Lankans. His reasoning was grounded in the belief that anthropology could serve as a tool to mitigate the harmful effects arising from religious, ethnic, and caste differences, promoting a more harmonious society. His comprehensive writings covered diverse aspects of daily life, including instructions on house construction, insights into material culture, dietary practices, fisheries, children's games, and lullabies. Overcoming significant challenges, Wickramasinghe produced a body of work that contributed significantly to the understanding of Sinhala culture. Despite his deep engagement with Sinhala culture, Wickramasinghe's advocacy and writings demonstrated a humanistic perspective, steering clear of any form of racism. In essence, his work underscored a commitment to preserving cultural diversity and fostering a broader sense of shared humanity.

The discussion later explored a diverse array of topics, which included Wickramasinghe's rejection and opposition to myths and beliefs, his efforts in elevating the standard of the Sinhala language and the dignity of Sinhala literature. Additionally, the discussion also delved into the present cultural crisis faced by Sri Lankan society, with a focus on how the legacy of Martin Wickramasinghe could serve as a guiding force to navigate through these issues. The event served as a much-needed platform, bringing together communities of scholars, literary enthusiasts and students who gathered to pay homage to the enduring legacy of the Sage of Koggala.





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