CHAPTER 6

“GROPING AMONG SIGNPOSTS”:
POEMS OF E. V. RAMAKRISHNAN, ANITA NAIR
and
C. P. SURENDRAN
I had once asked my father,

‘Where were you when they fought

for freedom?’ He said, ‘I did not

particularly hate the British.

Then there was your mother sick

and dying. I had my work in the temple

that kept me busy.’ ...

…………………………………………

…………………………………………

I might as well keep my answer ready

for my son’s ‘Where were you when . . .’

‘It felt good when the price of edible

oils came down because I had too many

mouths to feed. Then, you see, I had my

work in the college that kept me busy.’

(“Where Were You When”; BEM 1-7, 10-15)

E.V. Ramakrishnan’s poetry is characterized by an unrelenting ironic

stance, even while there is a distinct discomfort with his present city-life in

Gujarat. Quite often, he seems to be uneasy with his chosen language of

expression too. Sprinkled over the loss of faith in human relationships, the

absence of a coherent self, the skepticism over a devouring commercialized
civilization are the difficulties in constructing an India/ Kerala out of his own lived experiences, through verse. There is a silent longing to reach the “palm-shade” of his village in Kerala and perhaps to his mother-tongue too.

A talented poet, in fact, unique in thought and style among the Indian English poets, Ramakrishnan has not received the critical attention he deserves, though his poems have earned a special niche for him in the realm of modern Indian English poetry. Ramakrishnan has been writing poems and stories since the 1970s in the then leading journals like P.E.N. and Chandrabhaga. Later, perhaps realizing the importance of translation as an artistic form constitutive of social reality, he switched over to it. But, it is commendable that he makes it a point not to ignore the Muse completely. He has three poetry collections to his credit--Being elsewhere in Myself (1980), A Python in a Snake Park (1994) and Terms of Seeing (2008).

Unlike his fellow-travelers, Ramakrishnan does not indulge in the orgy of passion and his experiences do not pull him back to the closed world of the self. Rather, he has the view of an "insider-outsider", looking both inward and outward, mapping the vulnerability of his self and the fragility of our socio-political frameworks. His poems bring into the purview the distortions of the inner and the outer "simulated" environments.

In the case of the two women poets already discussed, how important the recuperation of their past in the matrilineal set-up of Kerala as an affirmation and a re-definition of their present identity in a different cultural
and social milieu has been fairly well detailed. “Grandmother” becomes a major link with the past in both the poets. While Das addresses the gender issues in the Kerala society through her own unsatisfactory and traumatized relationships, Alexander has attempted to "shelter space" through an intense longing towards her "grandmother’s garden" in Tiruvalla with all her female orientations revolving around it. On the other hand, Ramakrishnan is wholly concerned with his linguistic pre-occupations as a bilingual writer and translator. There is no grand ancestral home, be that of his grandmother or grandfather that he constructs imaginatively to negotiate the inadequacies of his present life. In other words, he does not look "backward" to a grand ancestor/ ancestress for his resurgence. Then what could serve as a link that can bind him to his past? First of all, nowhere does he express an imaginative return to his "past" though he may have expressed his love and affection towards the village-life in Kerala. Even if such a bridge is needed, it is the linguistic medium that becomes the crucible for all his cultural encounters.

In the delineation of the cultural aspects of a region, its primary language and its encounter with the colonial language are equally important. The language that Ramakrishnan has "consciously adopted" for his poems itself carries many associations with Western experience, and so can never be innocent in practice.

The opening poem “Landscape 1973” of his first collection, BEM, seems to scan the physical topography in the first glance; it becomes the
landscape of his writing itself. He clearly states the inadequacy of the "supplanted language" to give vent to his inner thoughts and feelings as "words, like huge cathedrals, / stammered in silence" (4-5). While his mother-tongue is systematically destroyed by enslavement, he cannot give proper expression in the more "privileged" language either, as the foregoing lines denotes:

   Somewhere a life collapsed,
   a syntax broke,
   the petals of a flower withered; (6-8)

Consequently, even the thoughts waiting to be transcribed seem to have lost their focus roaring in “their confused speed”. Expressions like “hijacked planes” (2) and “The river twitched” (9) are to be read metonymically and not metaphorically for extracting the full significance of the poem. The poet explicitly brings in the futile attempt to interrogate: “… the ‘appropriateness of an imported language’ to describe the experience of a place in post-colonial societies” (Ashcroft 23).

The text of the poem explores in its theme and form, the conceptual dimensions of living in another place other than his home-village in Kerala and the tensions and issues traversing the act of writing in an alien language other than his mother-tongue, Malayalam. Rather, the subject of the poem becomes its own process. No more radically subversive questions are raised. The problem is something more than a mismatch between language and
landscape, perhaps the perceived lack of authenticity of the spoken
Word/World.

Ramakrishnan’s poems are characteristically of the 90s though not
strictly self-reflexive. They are explicit, frank, strongly individualistic,
nostalgic but not sentimental and he is able to keep a stoic stance without
despair and delirium. Many a time, his poetry touches and scorches. This is
quite evident when he honestly (not shamefully) admits that he cannot escape
the firm pull of his region/culture, no matter where he resides, what language
he writes in: “I Cannot Discard My Past” taken from BEM states:

I cannot discard my
past except by sustaining
a brain-injury. My familiar
world fits me
like a well-stitched
shirt which I cannot
grow out of. (1-7)

Here, this male poet comes in the line of the earlier discussed women
poets. He seems to imply that the past creeps into his "present consciousness"
and they are strangely fused together. It seems that all these Indian poets
writing in English cannot get away from the subterranean regional flows,
unless risking a "brain-injury". Even when they have been away from the
region in which they were born and brought-up (for a limited period), they
cannot escape its gravitational pull. Life has been static in a life outside Kerala, with no possibility for growth. The hollowness of the polished lifestyle in a city outside Kerala is brilliantly brought forth through the image of the "well-stitched" shirt.

Similarly, in “Groping among Signposts” from APSP, the small town that the poet inhabits is equally hostile as his imbibed language and creates only “the illusion of space” (4-5). He shows how acculturation and assimilation of a new town and new language stifles one’s convictions as he carries his “doubts and fears / the way migrating people carry their gods with them” (21-22). Ramakrishnan means to say that one cannot escape the cultural influence of his region even if he opts for a different social and linguistic milieu:

I stand before the wailing
wall of my mother-tongue and pray for words

that do not come, this foreign language
biting its needle deep into the spiral grooves
of my tongue. (11-15)

The metonym of "India" as a homogenous unit fades in an unsuccessful attempt to re-establish “home”, as the foregoing lines denote: “this town is tied to my mind / like a post-box tied around a tree’s waist” (16-17). Though acutely aware that he has been “evicted” from “the rented rooms of [his] poems, he is still tempted to “walk the bylanes gathering an
unlawful / crowd of words” (23-25). The poet attempts to construct a metaphor of symbolic network, a dream web, “Maya” (Rushdie 211) with cross-cultural divides where the "subjects" stand alienated within their "home".

Another poem of BEM, “A Matter of Language” directly confronts the dilemma of authenticity that is faced by those "writing" in a post-colonial culture. Deceptively simple on the surface, the poem, in fact, questions the manner in which a dominant discourse circumscribes the expression of one’s self in the postcolonial world. While he envies those who “have / a language of their / own” (2-3): the child which

can point to things,
the girl who looks
down when you look
at her, the yellow
duckling wobbling
on its thin little
legs. (3-10)

The concluding lines “I carry the sword / of silence / sheathed in words” (11-13) arrest the reader. They demonstrate the act of appropriation by which such dominant formations are subverted and the appropriated subject itself is liberated from its "marginal" position. Often the title reaches beyond logocentric norms to metonyms of plurality which imply metaphoric
expansion. The “silence” “sheathed in words” itself becomes a telling voice, as the fictive, illusory spaces the characters create for themselves and others are punctured. But they are constructs of multiple voices which impede rather than reveal meaning.

Ramakrishnan is very sensitive to words--no word is a word in the void and every word has its own site, its own cultural milieu. At times, an image becomes intensely and entirely Indian as exemplified by the title poem of *A Python in a Snake Park* which becomes a metaphor for India itself.

A patriarch of premonitions,

he once guarded the herbal

limits of a lush green empire

with his legends. (1-4)

The paradise of “lush green empire” is no more a reality but somewhat like a beautiful fairy tale and “The river / in his past is now a maimed / elephant” (4-6). The poet astonishingly brings in the changed social reality of India/Kerala and hints that there is no alternative other than acclimatizing to and assimilating the westernized, urbanized native landscape. “Caught in the glare of history” (10), the patriarch “retraces his path” (11), finding no way to cultural progression. Further, the poem becomes the site of interrogation of the political reality of various linguistic practices in India. The poet un-emphatically brings in the shock of replacement of human language by the mechanical sound of the printing machine:
a peasant whose dialect
is being erased by the newsprint. (12-13)

The imperial oppression through a control over language that is explained in the introduction of *The Empire Writes Back* becomes doubly ironic in a world without “language”. "The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities" (7).

Paradoxically, the "python" is patiently waiting for the *dies irae* though “the final transgression” though the “summer sun’s focusing lens” “peels off” [his skin] “like plaster” (14-17). He longs sincerely for a repatriation, though a retrogression in terms of civilization, “to the submerged land / of his nomadic ways” (19-20). He cannot be at ease with the luxury and polish of the urban landscape/foreign language and like Alexander, he nostalgically reminisces of his rural Kerala roots.

The fragmentation caused in India by the influx of foreigners and the profound historical change it meant for its people is embedded in the multi-layers of the poem. It is a subtly constructed view of the culture which will be contrasted, in retrospect, with the changing values and attitudes with which Ramakrishnan comes in contact. Further narrowed, the poem becomes an account of the urban setting of a consumerist society that is struggling to gobble up traditional values and gets choked in the process. The enlightenment that the poet tries to pass on to the readers prompts him to
probe deep into the intricacies of his own roots and tradition that need re-
interpretation in a language that the modernized Kerala/India may not be able
to comprehend. In this sense, the poem is about a gap, a psychological abyss
between two cultures. The words not only add to the local color, but also
become proximal to a structuring which may bring some reference point to
this abyss.

The theme is further carried on to the second poem in the collection,
“To a Writer in Exile” which is addressed to the Gujarati poet, Adil Mansuri,
who, in the wake of the anti-reservation agitation in Gujarat during 1985,
decided to migrate to the U. S., disgusted with the communal violence in
Ahmedabad. Like many poets of the nineties, "city" becomes the topos,
metaphor and spatial equivalent of the Self’s condition for Ramakrishnan too.
He perceives the city as a site where “the other barrier” is explored. It is
indifferent to its inhabitants who themselves have no emotional attachments
and offers little comfort and shelter to them. It is in a state of permanent flux
with its dreariness of daily life, though, without occluding its charms. The
city is often synonymous with man’s predicament, dragging his life all along
with the end uncertain. In fact, he posits an altogether fresh definition of it:

for the city is an unfinished

novel, the end always imminent,

but the narrative, like a coroner’s

report on a mass suicide, drags on: (10-13)
Ramakrishnan arrests the reader with his ironic pen-chant. Though, lines as “yesterday’s / obituaries get down to the pavement” (18-19) may look like a dispassionate outsider’s reaction, there are undertones of his realization that he is an inseparable part of the scene of horror and hypocrisy. This is how he succeeds as an insider/outsider. The irony reaches its maximum:

A crippled postman
go around, carrying letters
addressed to dead people. (25-27)

The poet gives great value to the commitment of a writer, as the epigraph of Brecht clearly underscores; that in times of dark, “why were the poets silent?” The angst of dislocation does not escape Ramakrishnan’s vision too: even if the renowned Gujarati poet opts for a change in place, his pain of “severity” as well as his feel for “his” people will remain the same. It is conveyed in a telling image:

as acute and real as the pain
an amputee feels in the lost limb (34-35)

“Mending shoes” displays a fine picture of a southern village where the cobbler sits under the neem tree mending the shoes. Ramakrishnan’s keen introspection and strong intention are coupled to reveal his panoramic vision. His style assumes an ironic, polemical tone in:

The pan-shop radio splutters into sudden
life: Gorbachev has resigned. Yeltsin
assumes control of the new Commonwealth. (5-7)

These things are of no importance to the cobbler. Now that the speaker has “trespassed” into “the plains of Deccan” from the “palm-shade” of his “village”, “the worn-out joints” have to be mended (9-12). The desire to return to his “home” in order to restore, to recuperate “a sense of shape” (10) proximates with Alexander. The trespassing is to another language too, whereby he finds his syntax worn-out and broken.

Through the tip of his needle, the highways
of the homeland are stitched back into a map
of return journeys, ready for use. (13-15)

The pan-shop radio spluttering into sudden life is a telling vernacular metaphor which disguisedly works to its cultural placement. There are still other words which are left unglossed and foreground the continual reality of cultural distance. It is more than juxtaposing and the words stand for the latent presence of the Kerala culture. And poetry has the advantage of not having a long contrived plot which may have got stilted with such continuous usages. Moreover, this apparently casual usage sometimes serves to reveal a complex social structure.

One of Ramakrishnan’s strengths is his fine sense of time and place. This is both rooted and mobile, geographic as well as political. His vision is panoramic encompassing its sweet mythology, nature, art and the poet is bent over his enterprise. For instance, a re-reading and a de-glamorization of myth
has been advocated in “Aswathama to Krishna”, taken from *APSP*. The poem is a serious probe not only into mythology but also into the psychic depths of the postcolonial "subject". Aswathama is the anti-hero and the archetype of the sinful sufferer of the modern times. The poet has etched him for one thing, to satirize the ridiculous disproportions and contradictions that the "subjects" are dragged into. Aswathama emerging out of the long trial and painful experience, undergoes a process of transmutation and is able to look at his inevitable curse with detachment:

From this distance
in time I crave no forgiveness: I keep
faith because I have known pain,
pain that brings shame which in course
of time brings freedom. (3-7)

The "subject" was reluctant in the beginning to get adapted to the "supplanted language" which brought shame along with it. But, the gradual discarding of this "shame" energized the post-colonial text and has, more than anything, released language from the myth of cultural authenticity.

On a different level, Aswathama is the epitome of the cursed Indian lot caught in the vestibule of a power-drunk civilization from which there is no exit and hence he ridicules the situation itself:

It takes so little
to wreck a human life. Krishna, I am
grateful, for when you took away my
convictions, you also destroyed my weapons. (13-16)

The poem can be interpreted in terms of the vexed concepts of
ambivalence and hybridity as the analyses of Aswathama’s predicament probe
the case of indigenous minorities and become the manifestation of unbroken
colonization. Aswathama and Krishna are divided into fixed biologically
determined "types" and this human variation become central to the imperial
discourse that the poem subtly uncovers. They are deployed to posit the view
of the apparently inescapable polarities of a power-structure. Aswathama gets
blistered in the biological and essentialist meshes and his feverish wandering
is portrayed as an important vehicle of colonial representation. Having lived
through generations, he has come to a new way of seeing the world.
Aswathama offers a narrow psychic space through which radical
transformation may occur. Aswathama’s situation deals with the problem of
transmuting time into space and, pitifully, an acceptance of difference on
equal terms does not replace a dominating cultural encounter.

Many of Ramakrishnan’s poems spring out of the native rhythm of
Kerala. “Festival Nights in Malabar” bears the signature of a typical carnival
in a Kerala village. The significant articulation owes to his lived experience
in Kerala. The poem is a cumulative index of his keen observation of minute
details and the words move with a remarkable stateliness of grace and
exuberance. There are the under-currents of simple humor and one cannot
help giving accolades to his power of keeping a purely insider-outsider’s view in the lines:

Yet there is enough

Darkness for those who seek it.

……………………………………

…on such nights,

when the temple elephant runs amok

the man killed in the stampede is always

the one who keeps away from crowds. (7-8, 10-13)

What is striking about his poems is not the total absence of women from his "narratives". Definitely not; rather we may find them in the process of being constructed as a general "Kerala woman" whose "homogenous" history could be easily traced. “A Speech Heard at a Feminist Seminar in Payyannur” splendidly buttresses this point.

On a superficial reading, the latent parochialism of the “women writers of Kerala” (1) under the shining veneer of feminism is pilloried in the poem. Though there is an uncloned frankness to leap unpretentiously into the falsities of women writers of Kerala, we cannot help noticing the bias that Ramakrishnan evinces throughout the poem as he renounces his faith in the whole of women writers. Exploring deeper, the poem attests to the way in which the woman-figure gets recounted in "triumphant" terms in the modernized Kerala milieu. The opening line of the poem, “I know nothing of
women writers of Kerala” (1) mercifully draws our attention to the fact that no attempt is made in recuperating the obscured female Subject-agent in the creative history of Kerala. Neither the colonial modesty nor the modern female education has liberated women of Kerala uncritically. The poem aptly probes enquiry on the change in the social status of Kerala women. K. N. Ganesh observes remarkably:

The changes in the physical and mental condition of women are not reflected in their material conditions of life…Why does this happen?...One important reason for this is the social stuntedness caused by incomplete industrialization in Keralam… In Keralam where women’s education and technical training have developed to a remarkable extent, this control is made possible through traditional social norms. Caste, religion and other ritualistic beliefs influence women strongly. Chastity and morality are effective ways of controlling women’s reproductive potential…These (marital) obligations appear as the latest versions of feudal norms. (237-39)

The distortion of the progressive movements in Kerala under colonial conditions, in fact, leaves space for the infiltration of subservience from women. Consequently, the "revolutionized" and "modernized" Malayalee sensibility fails to "liberate" women successfully.
The dichotomous deployment of tradition/modernity binary can be well explained with a juxtaposition of the poem under discussion and another poem “An Evening in a Kerala Village” taken from *BEM*. The latter poem carries a geographical tag and mirrors the indigenous culture that existed before the “invasion”. While “The red village path”, “the bangles of / . . . village girl” and “green vigilance of coconut- / groves” (1-6) are more than mere reportage of landscape, they inevitably function as enabling signifiers so that the social and cultural reality of Kerala can acquire legitimacy as a subject of literary discourse. The lines “here I broke / the bangles of my first / village girl” (3-5) have strong undercurrents of the feudal structure with the lower-class women being exploited at random. Obviously, the “girl cutting / grass” (16-17) “scratching the elbow / with her sickle” (21-22) point to the lowest stratum of the social pyramid with her weapon and means of livelihood being the same, the sickle. In actuality, both the poems hark to the same goal--with their obvious shades of colonialism/feudalism, they appear to be retarding forces. As of now, "women of Kerala" needs to be constructed, being enframed in many terms as Ramakrishnan himself suggests ironically--the eloping wife, the bed-sharing actress and the altogether world-renouncing nun.
My first wife left me to marry someone else.

My second wife has renounced the world to become a nun.

…I also sleep with the main actress.

For each new play I insist on a new actress

for the lead role. (4, 6-7, 9-11)

It is the history of flawed women that lies at the centre of the narrative strategy adopted in the poem. Apparently the poem rather limits the possibilities of revealing the gender-power in Kerala society; in other words, the account given by the poet offers only spurious visibility to the conspicuous presence of Kerala women in creative endeavors. But the lines sharply point to the power-play operating in the theatre between the male director and the female actress. In this sense, this could be read as an acerbic comment on male chauvinism as well.

This could also be contrasted with the Kerala women poets’ constant appeal to their ancestry (as detailed in the previous chapters) and retrieval of the "matrilineal system" before the arrival of modernity in Kerala. However, this system again, was centered on the experience of upwardly mobile groups, to the exclusion of others, say, the Dalit women of Kerala. Regarding the Kerala women’s "gains" and "rights" with modernity, J. Devika remarks:
Even if situated within the highly economistic terms…to identify ‘gains’, it will probably be a story of the mobilization(s) and struggle(s) of differently-situated groups of women-workers in trade-unions and political organizations on behalf of ‘general’ or class-based interests, which often barely concealed deep masculinism, and with little ‘gain’ to the women themselves.

(121)

Ramakrishnan’s poem has hinges of the question whether the above-mentioned "gains" of Malayalee women enhance the enlargement of women’s life-options. However, his satiric comment on “an august audience” of feminists does not seem to occlude even the non-elite women. It is a homogenized, lop-sided view of Malayalee women that has come to work in his account. Thus, it becomes obvious that when a male poet hailing from the same geographical milieu attempts to interrogate the women’s issues, a reductive stand has been taken instead of a redressing one.

The poem, “A Holy Bath on the Day of the New Moon” from BEM has significant regional reverberations in which the innocence and devotion of the villagers plunging into the river undressed is contrasted to the “inhibitions” that the poet has to “shed” (11) while taking bath in public.

There is a holy

man chainsmoking beedis, (14-15)
The image as well as the term “beedis” has been immediately thrust into the reader’s consciousness, mainly by the term’s vernacular undertones. Its placing in the text of the poem itself establishes its meaning, while its function in it looks a little ambivalent. It might have been inserted to signify the "differance" and works ethnographically by its very presence. As the poem progresses, the differences are rather internalized.

“An October Poem” examines the devastation that comes along with a natural calamity that befalls a village annually. The poet satirically remarks:

Stone-gods
were as tight-lipped
as water-taps. (7-9)

The trope is useful for demonstrating the dynamics of power, the man-made gods, gods of society-the politicians, being silent in times of agitation. Further, Ramakrishnan’s usual stand against large scale industrialization of villages in Kerala is suggested through the dry "water-taps".

“To Grandfather-God”, a catching poem in APSP, operates in two comparable and overlapping forms of dominance- patriarchy and imperialism. “God of tender fronds, sour toddy / and deep ravines, you walk with / the ascetic pride of a beast” (1-3), possibly the Muthappan of Parassinikadavu in north Kerala, stands for the Father Right who sends tremors of fear through his “solitary gaze” (10-11). He is not a person but an institution, a mindset, a practice, a hegemony.
For those who live on
disputed lands, history is reprisal. (8-9)

Even if history is a teleological metaphysics of presence, “associated
with a linear scheme of the unfolding of presence” (Derrida 85), the
underprivileged has no history. Every society has its own questionings and its
own forms of resistance. Grandfather-God is a cultural construct through
which the Keralites constantly retaliate, and various rituals associated with
him are cultural frameworks internalized from generation to generation.
However, the poem ultimately posits changing agendas and assumptions,
different priorities and concerns in the operation of patriarchy in Kerala
society, with the Grandfather-God’s “footsteps” succeeding to "lace all our
open spaces” (11, 14). The poem examines the pull between the regulatory
systems of institutionalized perceptions and the separate narratives which
voice the "other", those outside the systems and yet exist within it.

The reconstruction of the cultural value within a radically altered
dynamics of power relations is evident in another poem, “Umbrella” coming
in BEM. The poem is about an umbrella “made / of palm-leaves and bamboo
sticks” (2-4) that his father used to carry “in all / seasons” (9-10). While it is
recurrent in his mental frame as a family relic, it symbolizes a particular
milieu, form of life in Kerala. Father’s umbrella standing “in the corner of the
room” “like an exclamation / mark” (10-12) and the son now standing in “the
shop’s veranda” (14) longing for an umbrella could point to the "desire" for
the inevitable return of the lost cultural values, which modernism and colonialism merely supplanted. It signifies an active deployment of a symbol to regenerate and reactivate an alternative practice in the historical present. The trope stands for the historical potency of the supplanted and denigrated native culture though it may not have succeeded in fully exploring its anti-imperialist potential.

Though Ramakrishnan does not advocate any ancestral figure as such for the revitalization of his poems, a dominant father-figure is noticeable on a random scale. But, this can, in no way, be a conscious device. The reverence and awe towards such a figure that is lingering in his consciousness is beautifully captured in the lines:

From the compact space of childhood

father’s face is a horizon

that can be crossed only once:

(“To My Son on His Tenth Birthday”, 1-3, APSP)

“Horizon” and “crossed only once” further accentuate the sense of splendor that remains as a halo round his father’s house. It is equally notable that the poem is addressed to his "son", the male child. But the poet does not try to resurrect his father and is as well aware of the transience of all mundane things:
Nothing lasts in the vicinity
of the body, not even the ceremonial
gestures of inheritance. (8-10)

This, again, is in sharp contrast to his regional female verse compatriots, who are ineluctably caught up within their delusions of grandeur, though they deploy them for different purpose.

In another poem from the same collection, “Father’s Last Night”, Ramakrishnan treats filial love with dignity, eschewing easy irony. All elaborate, painful rituals of death are etched in detail with the cremation of his father. Through them, we get a peep into the cultural shades of the region he hails from. As per the belief of the Hindus in Kerala, when the parents die, it is their first-born "son" who would lit the pyre. If they do not have one, it is the grandson who has to observe this duty:

More logs of wood

were piled on the body. I, his first-born

lit the pyre. (9-11)

“The logs of mango wood”, burning “like camphor” breathe an air of sadness along with the inescapable cultural ambience.

While his earlier volumes probe the content of ordinary lives from the perspective of a concerned, sensitive individual, his recent collection, Terms of Seeing displays different perspectives of viewing the socio-political and even environmental problems in India. As usual, disasters of
industrialization/commercialization become his favourite theme, and the form, understatements and self-reflexive comments.

There are fifty poems in the collection arranged in four sections. The title poem examines ideologically the fact that nothing we see remains the same when we "see" it again. The terms of reference will change dramatically and the line between the viewer and the viewed gets blurred in the process of seeing and the subject and object get reversed. The young boys on their return from school, peep into the well and towards the end of the poem, it is the well that begins watching them so that its “riveting gaze pierced us and even went beyond us (5)”. We get reminded of Meena Alexander’s icons of the well and the girl looking into the well-water. But, Ramakrishnan does not deploy it as an attempt at self-discovery.

The poem invites our attention to the poet’s masterly skill in handling the images related to his home-village and seeing the world from different perspectives, based on that platform. The first three stanzas take us back to the poet’s school days. Then the poem acquires a serious note with the turtles moving with "monastic grace" (11). A shaft of sudden light "falls at an angle on their shaven heads" (12), tilting the sun into the sea.

Similarly, “The Day’s End” bodies forth a solid cultural signpost as the “ascetic look” of the common earthen pots on the pavement: "Comes from the surplus of sunlight / In someone’s childhood" (8-9).
Ramakrishnan’s keen introspection sometimes leads to memorable utterance as “when he muses on the old question of the putative foreignness of English for an Indian” (Naik 22):

Now I have troubles with my landlord, my vision and my spellings. (“Poem”; BEM, 15-17)

In fact, the cultural ethos of Kerala has a certain dynamism which inevitably calls for more inclusive linguistic variants that would sharpen the Malayalam literary sensibility. As Ramakrishnan strongly believes: “The need for new forms is felt when existing forms are incommensurate with the experiences of the community” (“Translation”…8). Up to a reasonable extent, his imagery articulates these postcolonial thoughts significantly, with the "refugee" and the "fugitive" shooting up in his poems every now and then. However, his portrait of the artist as a "dislocated" individual is different from his contemporaries, who are not sure of their moorings, tradition, background or language. Though he does not bemoan the present situation, there is no alleviating factor of breakthrough as such, either. In other words, the poet’s attempt to inscribe the "difference" through some subtle changes in language fails due to the strong absence of an alternative pre-colonial metaphysics. Obviously, he merges with his fellow-writers in recoiling to his familiar "voice" and milieu like the "prodigal son":

...
Like
a criminal who attempts
an unsuccessful
break, I am
returned
home. My little
wife waits, Easter-
like. A pagan
from an alien
home, I am
rehabilitated in the Christmas
of her night.

(“Fugitive”, BEM, 4-15)

C. P. Surendran works on an altogether different plane and the
quantum of his output bears the signature of his distinctive individuality. In
fact, as Dom Moraes observes: “His is not the kind of poetry that can be liked,
for it is amiable, but I suspect that Surendran himself would be slightly
offended if people liked it in that sense. He would be equally annoyed if they
did not respond to it at all” (10). There is a somber note in the verse of
Surendran whose early poems appeared in Gemini II: Selected Poems with an
introduction by Dom Moraes. As the poet himself admits, the collapse of
Communism and the failure of the Naxalite movement led him to a personal
crisis, resulting in a feeling of "intellectual dereliction" which was compounded by "emotional displacement" caused by his first wife, Usha Zacharias’ walking out of his life (Poolani 2). He had to save himself writing poems—“I became well as I wrote” (3). In his first independent collection, with a surprising title—*Posthumous Poems*—published in 1999, Surendran writes in the introduction that “these poems are a way of belief” (4). As M.K. Naik rightly observes: "Surendran is naturally obsessed by thoughts of alienation, nihilism and death. He sees himself as the Alfa and Omega of ‘No’. His is a face scared to look into the wide, wide… nothing” (24).

Surendran is a rebel and a self-exile though he does not want to admit it and believes himself to be "compassionate" (Poolani 1). The mind is identified as the sole province or territory of poetry. He is fierce and abrasive as the distillation of a sorrowing spirit is spilled over his poems. The first poem in *Gemini II: Selected Poems* is almost a postcolonial response captured in a unique statement as follows:

My poem sounds the same in English or Chinese or even Assyrian.
My poem is the silence
that hangs in the air
between the two of us. (“Of Semi-Domestic Animals” 31-38)

This silence is the dynamic silence which opens up new visions and revisions. Its politics plays out in the interstices of his "poem". “Roots”, from the same collection is a live tableau of his perceptions of the Kerala landscape. Moreover, Surendran is a master of startling images and has created a “Surendrean” landscape of words:

Here amid the potholes and the
pot-bellies
on the lacks of buffaloes,
behind incestuous water-taps,
You must seek
my unspent childhood
my unadulterated roots. (5-11)

The lines have a stringent intimacy of tone and have an authentic stamp of his "spent life" in Kerala. In his uncommon coinages like "unspent" childhood, "unadulterated" roots and "incestuous water-taps", there is a sophisticated poetic sensibility at work. It is interesting to note that, while he considers the present city-life to be devoid of morality or as "incestuous", the happier childhood in Kerala was "unadulterated". While this poetic craft shows Surendran as a poet of the modern times, the way he celebrates the past aligns him to the Kerala women- poets in English selected for this study. The
poet startles us with unusual juxtaposition of images abounding in a specifically regional color:

............................................................

when girls with jasmine
in their hair
revealed patches of sweat
in their armpits, (13-16)

In presenting the realities of his social milieu, Surendran makes realism his *forte* rather than indulging in abstruse image-hunting. There are certain usages typical of Surendran as:

Days punctuated with day-dreams
Nights annotated by barking dogs. (23-24)

Such avalanche of images strike us being unusual, but the sense is often sacrificed at the altar of sound. Surendran telescopes the febrile intricacies of the relationship of lovers with vigorous images. He plots a psychograph of love in “Annunciation” and he sees himself as an object in this insouciant world where love becomes an anathema. Love is equated to “dread coal”, “Bituminous or anthracite; but shining stone / In deep disguise” (2-4). But the fierce images are robbed of their shock value in the last lines with a note of resignation.

Like my love. If it is to be, it must burn
And be no more. (16-17)
The self-exile syndrome is rampant in his *Posthumous Poems* also and his preoccupations remain essentially the same--explorations in the closed world of the self. The poems continue to be nihilistic in tone with a plethora of images associated with death and alienation. In the section titled “Malabari”, Surendran evinces an eye for colors as: “Each speech rhymes in green” (“Out of my Window” 2), “Leaves plunge yellow and brown / stem the oozing much with rotting colors / flakes of smoky blue light slip” (4-6), “holds sepia / close to green” (12-13), “space shot with yellow” (“Inspiration”, 1), “All is green outside by feet;” (“Piscina”, 2), “Grey brevity their sole spirit” (“Geriatrics, Geriatricks”, 3). His imagery articulates his black thoughts and loneliness becomes a pervasive metaphor which is taken to the primordial “silence” which the poet so passionately craves for. For example, the poem “Back”, classified under the “Malabari” poems, has a lot of domestic images underscoring his loneliness and frustrations:

The kitchen

Has grown colder by a lightyear…

........................................

........................................

But the stove

Doesn’t light and the tap refuses to turn

Stealth stifles the air; the house conspires. (4-5, 8-10)
“Piscina” is a poem with rich cultural undertones typical of the orient. The “fish” is synonymous with human life, battered by the cyclic pressures of pain and remnants of happiness.

...the pale, pale
Floss of fish, which dart and eat through
Two destinies. (4-6)

The lines vividly portray the tension between two clashing attitudes – the attitude of traditional world of superstition and the modern world of scientific skepticism and rationalism. The following lines clearly evoke both “Malabari” and “English”, rural and urban landscapes simultaneously clearly bringing in the slow urbanization of Kerala.

At Feroke, where the river meets the sea
All is green outside by feet. (1-2)

“Like the two fish-speaking waters of Malabar” (13) suggests the two cultural worlds that he inhabits and that the conceptual cultural framework of references is not only Oriental, but alien and borrowed. The fishes that “congregate under water” (7), with “their stillness” “like a staunch prayer” (8) get “separated” when “cat-blobs of rain fall and claw / The surface” (9-10). Once they are subjected to “the field of the other”, they collide and get apart; their wholeness is lost. Surendran admits that writing in English is commercialized these days. And if books are published abroad, one can earn crores of rupees, and worldwide recognition comes free (Poolani 2).
Anita Nair was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book — *Satyr of the Subway* — a collection of short stories, published in 1997 that won great acclaim and earned a fellowship for her from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Equally successful was her second book, rather her debut novel, *The Better Man* (2000), the story of a retired Government officer--Mukundan Nair--who returns to his Kerala village, only to get entrenched in the morass of the past. It is inevitably about a repressed man who still hasn’t thrown off his father’s shadow which is “typical of a lot of Indian men” (Chanda 1). In the successive year arrived her third book, which she calls “a novel in parts” (2), *Ladies Coupe*, and its “structure seems to lend itself to metaphor” (2) since the whole thing is about journeys women take in their own lives.

It is always interesting when a novelist/short story writer makes a jump from prose to verse. This is more so when the general trend of the period is vice versa, perhaps believing that “poetry doesn’t sell in this country” (Iype 2). In that sense, this is a bold step on Nair’s part who tries to reconstruct the memories of Kerala in her works. It is an imaginary homeland for her since she is not able to leave this "village", visiting it at least once in six weeks: “Although it is in no way an idyllic, rural place. It’s not at all what people think a village is--a place of placid contentment. It is real, it is very dark. But topographically it is beautiful” (Chanda 1).

Her debut collection of poems, published in 2002, with a catchy title *Malabar Mind* and a striking cover design of a full bottle of toddy crowned
with a red hibiscus has the most authentic feel of the region she hails from. As with her fiction, her poetry is quite accessible without any trace of obscurity and has a strong sense of locality. As Michelle Reale opines: “While the poems can be said to be rooted in place, indeed, Malabar is the theme here, the images often transcend the physical landscape and quite often make the transition into the metaphysical as well” (3). As part of the second generation of post-colonial Indian poets, her poetry emerges from the metropolitan experiences reflecting a formal assurance and urbane fluency. There is something as amorphous as nostalgia for this "imaginary homeland" and a different state of being. "I love Kerala for what it is. My sense of identification with the State heightens every time I overhear a conversation in Malayalam or when I inhale the appetising smell of coconut oil at some hotel” (2). No wonder she has titled the collection *Malabar Mind* since she clearly brings in that with all the different landscapes and mindscapes she has explored, Kerala exists as an inevitable state of mind for her.

“The nuts and bolts of verse” come tumbling out, spilling into the pages and arresting the reader. In the title poem, Nair evokes a sense of the region of Malabar by “intoning the many names it has been called by over the centuries, giving the poem an almost mantra-like sound” (Peele 3).

Malibar

Manibar

Mulibar

Munibar
Malibar
Melibar
Minibar
Milibar
Minubar
Melibaria
Malabaria

A significant note is added towards the end of the poem that after independence, Malabar was no longer recognized as a district and the region was divided to form the northern part of what is today called Kerala. Though Malabar has no geographical boundaries, no presence on a map of India, it still exists as a state of mind, continuously informing her poetic sensibility.

The gradual urbanization of Kerala with its changing political milieu is hinted in the lines:

Politics is a way of life
Belong to a party
For an identity
The Congress or the RSS
The Muslim League or the Communists (69-73)

Along with the political changes, the changed social milieu of Kerala is also vividly brought through poetic personae like Nayadi who is attracted by the comforts of an urban life and still pulled back by tradition:
Nayadi knee deep in slush

Tractors and buffaloes his companions. (76-77)

While Nair is able to maintain purely satirical tone in such lines, the various dimensions of Malabar as her state of mind startle us as in the lines:

In Malabar, they cannot forget,

Sometimes the soft breeze smells of blood. (26-27)

Rich in local color, many poems of the collection have undercurrents that run beneath the seemingly idyllic surroundings of Kerala. The emotional texture in the poems varies from sensuous to the sorrowful and is accentuated by the thrills and tribulations of racial overstretch and migratory woes. Nair succeeds as a poet who stretches the geographical boundaries of imagination to accommodate the toddy shops in Malabar, the stressed drone of television newscasters during war time and the apathy of non-stick frying pans, all in the "landscape" of a single collection. The poet has proved herself fathoming the deepest recesses of human psyche, pulling it neatly on the inevitable canvas of Kerala. “Mostly A Man. Sometimes A God” is particularly impressive in this regard. Muthappan, the Grandfather-god is a strong cultural symbol of Kerala, and Nair deploys Him most tactfully to bring out the gender realities in Kerala. While the forehead smeared with “vermilion, turmeric and rice” (7) offers the aura of a God to his worshippers, “the brown silk of [his] skin” (8) makes him the “Man” with flesh and blood who honestly admits that “I drink deep of this forbidden mortal desire” (27). The operation of patriarchy
in her culture is splendidly brought out when the “Man” in *Muthappan*
suddenly retreats once His thirst is quenched by the coconut juice and the
Woman alike. Their interchangeability is attested through a telling image: “I
savor the life juice of the coconut palm. / Cup the baked earthen pot as if it
were your chin. / I wet my lips at your mouth” (24-26). The initial letters of
“man” and “woman” are capitalized throughout the poem perhaps to indicate
that they stand for Everyman and Everywoman. He gets transformed to the
divine guise soon with a complete denial of whatever was “Man” in him: “I
am no longer who you desired. / I am your protector. / The fierce god
*Muthappan*” (34-36). No word of the lines is a word in a void, but is a strong
“vehicle” of the gender realities in a specific culture. While he is “no longer”
the Man who had meekly admitted “Woman, I have shed my skin” (19), there
is a sudden reversal of roles—“who *you* desired”. The guilt of the forbidden
desire is to be born solely by the Woman as the Man is, by this time,
promoted to the position of a Protector/fierce god. Now he has become
inaccessible to her though it was She who had energized him to “speak”.
*Muthappan* declares his divinity as the “lord of the jungle” (38) who will
“provide and protect” (45) the people and “shall never forsake [them]” (55).
But he gets wearied by the role and the desire for Woman once again
overpowers him like that for warm milk and “toddy that bubbles” (60). While
the Man is sanctioned to take up the roles at his will, Woman is given no
choice but her task is to energize him like “drinks” enabling him to be
“Sometimes a God”:

Muthappan has spoken.

He no longer needs me.

…………………………..

I wipe away the guise of divinity.

Woman, I am once again who I was,

A man with skin and eyes

That seek yours. (66-67, 71-74)

Another striking poem of the collection, “Vulcan In Brindavan” neatly portrays the encounter of a Czech, named Paul with the Kerala culture. The way that the tourist comes equipped with “his solar topi / Mosquito nets, / insect repellents” (3-4) is a brilliant beginning, a fine etching of his unobtrusive notions of a tropical, backward country. Most ironically, Nair helps us to notice that now it is the foreigner, Paul the Czech who “explains” what is India/Kerala is to the Indians/Keralites. There are lots of “new knowledge” about “our” country that he “unravels” to us such as “Communism is a myth” (6), “Vedas are crap” (19), “Vatsyayana was a celibate” (20) and “Krishna’s colour [is] blue” (21)! The poem is charged with unmatched satirical flavour and Nair’s intellectual bravura is best manifested in the lines:

We discovered Kathakali

Seated cross-legged at Paul’s side
Paul wrapped our heritage with foreign awe
And gifted it back to us. (23-26)

*Kathakali*, the exacting, vibrant dance form of Kerala, in fact appeals only to a niche segment now-a-days and the words "discovered" is intentionally used to bring out the irony.

It is the poem “The House Is Waiting” that gets aligned to Kamala Das’s “Blood” and Meena Alexander’s “House of a Thousand Doors” as far as the major link with the past—the grand ancestral home—is concerned. No wonder, Nair is also enamored by the reverent, awe-inspiring silence and emptiness of the house:

That urged her on
To probe and seek
To bleed and stifle her pain (16-18)

As with Das, it is through the very antiquity that Nair also tries to highlight the legacy of her ancestral home. If Das’s *Tharawad* was “nine-hundred year’s old”, Nair keeps a diplomatic stand about her house:

The house is old.
How old, no none knows.
Nobody remembers.
But the house has always been there. (21-24)

“The mango blossoms,/The drying hay/And the rotting leaves on the ground” (45-47) are strong cultural signboards and we are ineluctably caught
up by the exotic details of the grand house in Malabar. She is haunted by this house, but she has no existence without it, either:

There was no escape

From the house

But at least she had this. (95-97)

Kala Krishnan Ramesh is of the opinion that “there is a crucial difference between being a poet of the ordinary and an ordinary poet” (1) and this is especially true in the case of Anita Nair whose poems evoke certain states of mind that we recognize immediately. Her words, images and sound patterns have an indiscriminate sweep, gathering everything that is mysterious as well as mundane into the flower-basket of Malabar Mind.

The three poets under discussion are quite different from one another in many ways: there are differences in gender, location and even generation. While Nair is acclaimed only as a novelist, the other two poets have yet to receive their due. While all of them retain distinct poetic sensibilities, they are inescapably haunted by the cultural elements of the region. If it is the “Saw-mill” that pulls Ramakrishnan back to his roots, it is the “unadulterated childhood” in the case of Surendran and “the house in waiting”as far as Nair is concerned. Ramakrishnan cannot escape the “double-lives” that the native and foreign tongues keep imposing on him. Similarly, Surendran is suspended between the two worlds—the “two fish-speaking waters of Feroke” groping in the darkness. Nair clearly admits that during daytime: “The house peopled
her strength/Filled her day and defined hopes” (“The House Is Waiting”; 85-86) and, “yet in the night a want unfurled;...The long shadow of an empty house”(87-89). “Groping among” cultural “signposts”, these poets turn nowhere else, but to their own regional roots for the constant redefinition of their poetic sensibility.