CHAPTER 7

SUMMING UP
Whether one prefers to write in her native language or the “imposed” or “imported” language, the post-colonial literatures appear distinct in that the writers mine their traditions--their ethnic or religious myths, beliefs and aesthetic outlook. When they write in the colonial language, the influence of local tradition or sensibility becomes particularly important since they are not communicating solely with an audience who come from the same background as the author. While English language allows them to have a wider audience, there is always the danger that they may resort to a pseudo-tradition in order to make the work distinctive. The tradition would be without pitfalls only if it is not “invented”. Instead of filtering all their experience and its mediation through a conceptual apparatus, their literary texts are expected to hear the multilingual resonances in the worlds they purport to inhabit. But, quite often, when they communicate this way, they unpack the relationship between the “rural” and the “urban”. In India, the writers in English are familiar with a social milieu limited by the cultural politics of colonization; and, in order to stamp their authenticity, they have to attempt to step beyond that limitation. Otherwise, they produce only the user-friendly, “sick” India of the bestsellers.

The post-independence Indian poets writing in English have freed themselves from the shackles of linguistic touchstones of their colonizers and
created poetry based on colloquial terms and tenor. Nissim Ezekiel, who came from India’s tiny Bene-Israel Jewish community, created a voice for Indian poets writing in English and championed their work. Thereafter, a generation of exiles also sprang from the Indian diaspora. Still, renowned critics like Srinivasa Iyengar have expressed their dissatisfaction at the redundant themes of Indian English poetry, most of which are satiric, ironic, anti-romantic and anti-spiritual. This area is continuously passing through phases of experiment as far as form and content are concerned. As Bruce King explains: “Experimental poetry, foregrounds technique, new concepts or explores uncommon experience. It usually neglects the common world and environment or treats it in strange, unconventional ways” (13). A study based on how the detailed consciousness of the Indian poets writing in English is informed by the regional realities hopes to map out new terrains in this field.

In the previous five chapters, an attempt is made to discuss various important issues with regard to the politics of language against the backdrop of the Empire writing back as well as to synthesize the views and perspectives of Malayalam poets--native and diasporic; men and women; writing in English. Their voices are individual and distinct but they retain strong cultural moorings. They share, in common, a reconciliation of the regional realities/images with the English language in which they write. The study is attempted putting the cultural tradition and the history of Kerala in the framework of Cultural Studies and Post Colonial theoretical assumptions.
While “Trans-Culture kids” like Meena Alexander exhibit palpably deep, often, romanticized feelings for their childhood in Kerala, Kamala Das presents quasi-fictionalized memoirs of her grand ancestral home. E. V. Ramakrishnan and C. P. Surendran give us vignettes of the post-independent, slightly urbanized or sophisticated Kerala. Anita Nair, a fantastic story-teller and a maverick writer, rediscovers and reconnects her regional culture through lots of strong symbols like toddy, coconut juice and the awe-inspiring aboriginal God, *Muthappan*.

In the case of female voices, Das and Alexander are already established among the Indian English poets while Anita Nair is widely known as a novelist. All the three poets are educated and belong to middle class/upper caste; still when it comes to the gender issues, they do not restrict their portrayal to the exploitation of urban women alone. All of them are “unhappy with the submergence of gender issues under the eloquence of the grand narratives” (Vijayasree 38) and the “grandmother” inevitably emerges from their subliminal cultural systems. While Das apparently seems to approve of and replant or relocate the lost matrilineal and joint-family system in Kerala, she critiques and challenges its oppressive practices too. Circumscribed both mentally and physically by generic, familial and economic ideologies, Das presents her persona as the type of countless Keralite women. Her poems elucidate the actual as well as symbolic subjugation and “silencing” of Keralite women in an orthodox Hindu
household. At the same time, she is imprisoned in the nuclear family structure of an urban society as well. Apparently, Nair women led a life of “primitivistic innocence” (Elias 22) free from the restraints of matrimony in the matrilineal system. But this does not mean that they were completely a happy lot. We are given idealized pictures of this system of inheritance as an indigenous safeguard against exploitation of women. Das presents such a way of life in almost Utopian terms. Even for male writers in English from Kerala like Menon Marath, *Tharawad* is an escapist abode, uncontaminated by any evil. Grandmothers personify the dormant vitality of such households. But Das effectively brings in these female figures or matriarchs in poems like “Nani” as so overpowering and domineering (often without any scruples when they had to deal with low caste/class maids). Nonetheless, Das shows passionate commitment to her *Tharawad*. The “corridors” in the poem titled the same are the symbols of free movement in the joint-family system once prevalent in Kerala. But she has brought out the pitiful state of Nair women inside the orbit of even licit sex. In many a poem, Das juxtaposes them with symbols of enclosure and incarceration as well that she experienced in the city-life of Calcutta. Through such skillful juxtaposition of life in Kerala and an out-of-State life, she underlines the barriers to the Keralite woman’s articulation of an independent self. In fact, Das documents female exploitation and oppression across all classes and castes, in her poems. In other words, she bares it open that the caste as well as class system retains its
own set of gender inequalities in the Kerala social context. In some of the poems, she presents “Radha” as her poetic persona that, often, turns out to be a key-figure in the Indian mythology.

Alexander, a diasporic writer, though settled abroad, visits and revisits Kerala in innumerable ways. Her poems relate the conflictual composites between her region of origin and her present cosmopolitan “site”. The seismic discontinuities of Alexander’s existence are caught up in FL:

Sometimes I am torn apart by two sorts of memories,…A life embedded in a life…Rooms within rooms, each filled with its own scent: rosehips, neem leaves, dried hibiscus leaves that hold a cure, cow dung, human excrement,…Another memory invades me: flat, filled with the burning present, cut by existential choices. (29-30)

When she is writing about the quaint life in a Marthoma house in Tiruvalla, in the southern part of Kerala, the geographical and cultural frontiers that are spanned add up to the entire lure of the setting. This house with its mystery-filled garden and its well is the microcosmic world. Similar to Das, Alexander is presenting a matrilineal, rural background of which the Keralites were most familiar. But both the poets succeed in giving a potent yet unobtrusive description of everything they want the reader to know about such a system. They do not appear to recycle such matriarchs, but only try to show how urban domesticity strives to fix women in motherhood and placid
contentment, failing to give them a choice. Grandmother offers Alexander an effective tool for counter-discourse. She is not the self-abrogating, passive and dependant woman simply “kneeling” “before the household gods”. Looking into the well-water is a way of destabilizing and subverting the patriarchal underpinnings of her present life.

Though Nair does not show any disenchantment with the Tharawad, she is more of a modern Nair woman. Along with strong female personae, Nair presents Muthappan, “Mostly A Man. Sometimes A God” as the embodiment of male power principle. As one of the numerous manifestations of masculine divine power, Muthappan contributes to the constitution of a larger patriarchal culture, reassuring the phallic power. Still, He seeks the “woman” to quench his thirst ultimately; “With toddy that bubbles / Unable to still time” (60-61). The poem, quite magically unravels how the subaltern woman remains an aporia, a silence in all discourses that Gayatri Spivak is deeply concerned about. Nair’s timing is precise, her target is just right. She too emerges as a comrade to the other two women-poets with a poem titled “The House Is Waiting” on the grand old ancestral house; “How old, no one knows” (22). [This] “long shadow of an empty house” (87), almost co-exists with Das’s “three hundred years old” (“Blood” 7) dilapidated Tharawad; and Alexander’s house of “a thousand doors”. There is an eloquent silence about all these empty “houses” that speaks volumes to its granddaughters. But, there is an obvious absence of a grandmother-figure in Nair’s house. While
retaining the ancient house—a symbol of the feudal structure, in her consciousness, Nair has successfully stepped out of the grandma pull. She belongs to the second generation of postcolonial poets and perhaps this distance in time accounts for her detachment from such a “linking figure”. Still the exotic hold of Kerala landscape is embedded in her consciousness as she has mentioned in an interview: “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 appetizing smell of coconut oil at some hotel” (Chanda 1). Consequently, there are numerous glimpses of Kerala in the canvas of her poetry.

In the footnote to her title poem, Nair admits: “Though Malabar has no geographical boundaries, no presence on a map of India, it still exists as a state of mind” (29). During the colonial era, Kerala was made up of three distinct provinces: Malabar, Travancore and Cochin. While Malabar, the northernmost province, came under direct British rule, Travancore and Cochin were princely states. Direct rule in Malabar reinforced landlord domination over sharecroppers and tenants. In Kerala, while the population grew, there was no corresponding industrial growth and so these landlords found their position considerably strengthened. Since most of the landlords were upper caste (Namboothiris and Nairs), and the tenant-cultivators and agricultural laborers below them were lower caste (Tiyyas, Pulayas and Cherumas), the reinforcement of landlord power left the caste hierarchy in
Kerala untouched. This is, perhaps, the most iniquitous in the whole of India. On the contrary, in sharp contrast to the policy followed in Malabar, the British set up coffee and rubber plantations on a large scale, facilitating the growth of a significant working-class population, in the two indirectly ruled princely states of Travancore and Cochin.

The male voices included under the topic are Ramakrishnan and Surendran. There are some more young poets like Jeet Thayil and Vijay Nambisan whose poems have been collected and published under the name *Gemini I: Collected Poems*, with a foreword by Dom Moraes. Since Surendran is taken as a representative of this generation of poets, poems of Thayil and Nambisan are not discussed in the study. Moreover, they have turned into full time journalists or columnists and seem not to pursue their poetic career much enthusiastically.

Spiced with a language abounding with regional reverberations, Ramakrishnan offers us unexpected new angles of vision, inventive ways of envisioning, quite often defamiliarizing the world we live in; especially in his latest collection—*Terms of Seeing*(2006). Though he is equally sensitive to the issues in the city he presently inhabits (he reacted strongly against the Gujrat communal carnage through many poems), his poetic sensibility does not evade the “palm shade” of Kerala. But, the villages of Kerala are not romanticized into a sylvan world of innocence as opposed to the soiled world of the city. The poem “Deception” under the collection speaks of how the
new urban migrant is capable of “sadness” (12) and is yet acutely aware of “the village as it always was” (14). Quite unlike the women poets, the village is not referred in grandiloquent terms, but as a place of deception. In still another poem, he scoffs at the naïveté of feminists in Kerala. There is a typical patriarchal stance adopted by the poet in this poem—of stigmatizing women. “Aswathama to Krishna” is almost a narrative about the deleterious effects of urban living, and a portrait of the dark, nocturnal side of the City. Moreover, the distrust and hatred of Aswathama (the “Subject”) towards Krishna (“the Agent”) is irrevocable. Ramakrishnan is constantly exchanging ironic glances with his readers over the heads of his poetic personae. There is a perfect consortium of emotions in his poems but tackling the nuances of English language as a medium of creative expression is an ever-unresolved issue for Ramakrishnan. He admits frankly in an unpublished reflection on his poetry:

I feel that the idiom of Indian English has not adequately represented this basic dimension of the carnivalesque in Indian life… When I write poems like… ‘Mending Shoes’…, I am looking for an idiom that can articulate the sacred and the subaltern in our life, for, to me, both usually coexist (qtd. by Subramaniam 1).

The metaphor of an all-invasive cacophony frequently imposes itself upon the fabric of the poetry of the youngest poet of this group—Surendran.
His poems often work as an amplifier for a babble of competing discourses. There is an entire section titled “Malabari” in the first collection of his poems —*Gemini II: Selected Poems*. He is trying to wring the essence of his “unadulterated childhood” in rural Kerala which is paradoxically “unspent”, in order to come to terms with his present chaotic urban environment. There are lots of cultural contradictions that he has to contend with, in this dispassionate search for virgin roots. Surendran is also a fragmented individual, memorably burdened with “double-consciousness” like Alexander. But, a more interesting observation could be that, Surendran, a young male poet, also “constructs” imaginatively “A house with a hundred doors. / And as many years old” (“Doors” 1-2) like the three women poets already mentioned. His “space” is inevitably configured inside this house; among these hundred doors. Once he steps out of a room to another, “[he] emerge[s] / Into the dread dark blue space” (12-13) and as the last door falls in place, “[he] will kneel and gaze like a lover, / Through the keyhole, / At the vacuumed air (16-18). The lines are charged with a lachrymose attachment towards his own “backyard” Kerala; the poet looking back “To face the place / You can’t open or shut” (24-25). Surendran’s recent comment in his blog becomes paradoxical in this context: “India’s future is in English; change of city names —Bombay to Mumbai, Bangalore to Bengaluru is terrible”. His language is commented as ballistic that he seems to be disturbed and angry.
But, while we get some glimpses of Kerala’s own harvest festival—Onam—in the novels of Menon Marath, for example, there is hardly such a strong cultural symbol explored by these poets. The following description from Marath’s novel, The Wound of Spring, offers photographic details of the exotic environment of a traditional tharawad:

It was the evening of the last day of Onam, the harvest festival of Malabar. In the dining hall the senior members of the Madathil tharawad sat down to dinner, on rush mats laid on the floor, in a rectangle round the traditional brass lamp and a kerosene lamp. (13)

In fact, festivals are so pared to the bones of a Malayali that no writer from Kerala can escape from their halo. Ramakrishnan’s “Festival Nights in Malabar” epitomises (though satirically) such a passion. Similarly, the houses of the “grand” grandmothers, if presented as permeated with turmeric and coconut oil, they would have served as stronger cultural signboards. However, it is the gendered social hierarchy in Kerala that seems to be the main target of critique as far as Das and Alexander are concerned. And their weapon also seems the same—relocation of matriliny. Nair is slightly different. Along with the reductive portrayal of woman as a subservient, self-sacrificing being, she dismantles the old mythologies of a tropical country, in poems like “Vulcan In Brindavan”.
One thing interesting to note is that none of these poets has chosen to remain within Kerala and they actually operate from India’s metropolitan centers (Meena Alexander settled even in another country). Accordingly, they are entrapped in an enigmatic task of striving to write “several worlds” that have no access to English, while living in a world written and understood in English. Subsequently, they inhabit more language-worlds than one and will have to run the risk of “essentializing the unknown”. To emphasize the exclusivity of these worlds, they leave certain regional words un-translated; there is no model that contains both worlds. Still, their attempt to redefine the cultural negotiations with their state of origin has mobilized certain variant feelings of collective belonging which already existed. In fact, “the twin impulses of separatism and unification have always existed in a sort of tension in all notions of location” (Vijayasree 41). Surendran clearly admits this tension in the lines: “Suspended/Between Two worlds/Of opposing fares” (“Cabbie; 20-22). Nair is equally frank in admitting: “Turn around and you will see what haunts me./The house.” (“The House Is Waiting”; 72-73). The poems of all these poets spring from the specific soil from which they emanate, retaining its folk and mythic character. At the same time, they are cosmopolitan in their attitudes, and English is their first language of creative expression. Along with the metropolitan experiences such as great momentum, violence, solitude and isolation, a persisting nostalgia for the fundamental region from which they hail, or a gravitational pull from its
“state of being”, is also inescapable from the consciousness of these Malayalam poets in English. Consequently, their poems become the endless sites of conflict where “the backward-looking impotence of exile and the forward-looking impetus to indigeneity collide” (Ashcroft 135).

Maximum care has been taken not to get the images interrogated slip into trivial exotica, but to be some indicators towards a splendid, vigorous culture. Still, the enquiry does not claim to be very innovative and there may be lots of cultural aspects missed out. But an honest attempt is made in the direction of linguistic and cultural negotiations and further studies are welcome to fill the gaps.