CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
There is an untenable position in the Indian Universities that literature is named only by the language in which it is written--like Malayalam Literature, Tamil Literature, Kannada Literature etc. In this context, the language of postcolonial literature is an important topic indeed and what this language taught by the colonizers “revealed” to as well as “shielded” from its users seems to be none the less important. It is true that language was a major tool of colonization and the reason for using the colonizer’s language for creative purposes by the postcolonial natives could be that they wanted to pay back in the same coin. Put differently, they used the same language as a tool of resistance and of subversion of the colonial order. E. J. Kalinnikova’s observation on the language of creative expression is highly relevant in this context:

…a creative endeavour entailing an original artistic attitude should engender the age-old social way of life and the cultural and historic experience of the people; no matter the language used, the regional or English, ‘India’s state language, the educated Indian’s second native tongue or a kind of Esperanto for all Indian states’. (178)

Even with the tremendous development of Indian English literature towards the end of the twentieth century, its right to be a literature at all is
insistently and acrimoniously questioned. The critics further suggest that these writers have a more “authentic” choice of their vernacular tongue. For the convenience of people, the Constitution of India has recognized 22 languages as its official languages. But, according to Ethnologue, India is considered to be the home to 398 languages. Still, there is not a single Indian language which is spoken across its length and breadth. Similar is the case with Nigeria where approximately 150 indigenous languages are spoken. Chinua Achebe, a staunch defender of the use of English in African literatures, has made the following observation (qtd. in Talib):

As you know there has been impassioned controversy about an African literature in non-African languages. But what is a non-African language? English and French certainly. But what about Arabic? What about Swahili even? Is it then a question of how long the language has been present on African soil? ...A language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself. (90)

Though, occasionally, Achebe shows some emotional attachment to his native language—Igbo—he contends that he could not have written effectively in it. Not because of its limited audience, but because of the fact that Igbo exists in numerous dialects--differing from village to village. Consequently, its written language would be, “in fact a haphazard combination of these dialects” (92).
While the word or concept of “Indian-ism” itself remains ambiguous in the present cultural scenario, attempting to demarcate a still new sub-field for study—“Kerala-ism”—has been really hazardous. In the present study, “Kerala poetry in English” has been construed as one of the branches of “Indian poetry in English”. Whether Indian English Writing is to be considered as part of English literature or Indian literature seems yet to be resolved. In this context, it is an issue equally serious whether “regional poetry in English” (the focus narrowed from largely “Indian” images into specifically “regional” ones) may be classified under Indian English Poetry or along with the regional literatures. In this study, it is aligned largely with Indian English Poetry precisely because the emphasis is in the direction of language—to show how the regional realities/cultural specificities get translated into an alien/colonial language.

It is widely known that “nation” figures as an important issue within the contemporary problematic of colonial discourse theory, and the inherent contradictions in the whole phenomenon of nationalism are getting pointed out by postcolonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon. In this context, attempting to relate the regional culture and its trans-creation into the colonial language may carry sufficient importance. Here, “language” becomes a signal that touches off a series of psychic and cultural associations—the whole creative process emphasizing suggestive depth and aesthetic distance of immense literary value. The regional cultures should not be seen as partial cultures or
marginal entities, but as instances of “cultural hybridity” that Homi Bhabha speaks of.

There are various aspects which are exclusive for any regional culture that correspond as well as contrast with the pan-Indian cultural tradition. For example, Gujarati Dalits are reported to have a long literary tradition right from the Middle Ages. A. B. Gaijan in one of his essays on Gujarati Dalit Poetry, attempts to focus on the Dalit poets of Gujarat who expose the hypocrisy and brutality of the upper castes in Gujarat and also try to uphold the Dalit identity (192). Indian literatures are being translated into English and reviewed and this is the only way in which the lovers of literature get access to the best of literature available in regional languages. In the Indian literary sphere, translated works from the regional languages are considered as important as those originally written in English. But, the regional literature is composed in the regional tongue, in a “genuine” way; they claim to have emerged “spontaneously”. The works translated into English from the regional languages may serve only as a medium to understand the Indian literature as a whole. At the same time, regional literatures are often being criticized for having a glaring flaw—that of insularism. “The world portrayed in them tends to shrink into itself and often refuses to merge with the common world outside. As a result, the reader experiences a sense of ‘other-worldliness’ in his confrontation with it” (Viswanathan 54). Suppose these writers in regional languages take the other stand; even when they try to
incorporate the culture of the “other” and often fantasize crossing into it, the images do not undergo the process of defamiliarization. For example, the renowned Malayalam poet, Vailopilly’s popular poem—“Maninadam”—has some descriptive lines about the warfront of Rome. Though the theme or the setting is intended to be “foreign”, the image of the pan-Kerala festival of Mamankam is ushered into the memory lane of any reader familiar with such a milieu. Consequently, translations wouldn’t serve the purpose of understanding the foregrounding of regional cultures and the simultaneous defamiliarization of these images that happens when written originally in the colonial tongue. Such an enquiry seems to be quite novel and deserves a deep study.

Various cultural aspects of Kerala would have obviously informed the poetry of Malayalam poets writing in their mother tongue, right from Thunchat Ezhuthachan of 16th century to one of the present-day poets—Balachandran Chullikad. But it is interesting to investigate how the same cultural motifs would have served at least as appendages to the poems written in a colonial language by poets whose mother tongue is Malayalam. Kerala culture has been portrayed amply in novels by Menon Marath, Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair and some critical studies as well as research work have also been made highlighting these aspects. But the critical scene of Indian English Poetry seems to be a much overlooked realm in general. This could be the very reason for such poets focusing their attention on other genres--mostly
fiction—or returning to their mother-tongue. Further, there is a bad trend in this area that only the poems of those poets who have earned a reputation enter into anthologies and others seldom get a chance of critical attention. Accordingly, whatever research work has been going on in this field is mainly centred on the canonical poets. The so-called minor or non-canonical poets are given scant attention as far as critical studies are concerned.

In this study, only poets hailing from Kerala are included though there are very few Indian English poets like Hoshang Merchant who have written some poems (like “Cochin”) based on their occasional visits to Kerala. But these are only some snapshots of Kerala culture which don’t carry the tension or suspension between two worlds. The pangs may haunt only the poets of Kerala origin who have spent at least some phases of their childhood in this “God’s own country”. These childhood ruminations seem to be their sweet spots and hence could be a convenient point of bringing them under the umbrella “Kerala Poetry in English”. In fact, this area does not run the risk of being narrow since Kerala has a very rich cultural tradition that demands enormous creative stamina on the part of the poet to paint it in words. Other regions may also have such significant cultural heritage and studies oriented towards this particular tension between the specifically regional images and their articulation in a foreign tongue may be encouraged. “Kerala-ism” is something as amorphous as “Indian-ism”, beyond any possible definition, still retaining its characteristics—its greenery, the folk and mythical tradition,
harvest festivals like *Onam* and *Vishu*, its own art-forms like *Kathakali* and *Koodiyattam*, Keralite’s popular love of elephants, festivals like *Thrissur Pooram*, folk songs like *Vadakkan Pattukal, Mappila Pattukal, Nadan Pattukal*, rituals like *Kalamezhuthupattu, Thumbi Thullal*, the rigid class/caste system, the grand structure of *Tharawads* with snake-shrines attached to them, temple architecture and temple-wells etc. One of Kerala’s prominent cultural and ritualistic symbols is the “*Velichappadu*”, the ‘Oracle’.

It is such a difficult task to understand whether there are cross-cultural parallels between English poetry from Kerala and from other regions of India, since the culture, tradition and language of each region is so different. We cannot comprehend the cultural essence of a region unless we have a lived experience of it. For example, if the political and social contexts of the two States—Kerala and West Bengal—are compared some prominent factors will be discernible. While the agrarian structure in the pre-colonial Kerala and Bengal was almost similar, they became quite different in the post-colonial context. Both Kerala and Bengal have a high proportion of tenants compared with the rest of India. In contrast with Kerala, the caste system in Bengal was less hierarchical; thus a pre-existing movement for reform and equality did not exist to the same extent. Brahmanical Hinduism was less entrenched in Bengal than in Kerala or other parts of India. Moreover, unlike Kerala, “the rich farmers, the *jotedars* came from a variety of castes” in Bengal (qtd. in Desai 2). Indeed, *jotedars* were often drawn from the same caste as the poor
tenants or sharecroppers, which made it difficult for the leftist party to polarize caste and class together, as did the CSP in Kerala.

The *jotedars* used their caste status to mitigate intra-caste conflict and unite themselves with poor tenants and sharecroppers in anticolonial protests. In contrast, because of the overlapping of caste and class in Kerala, that is, the absence of a strong class dichotomy within castes, lower caste movements for caste social reform could *potentially* be more easily politicized into class conflict. (2)

Thus, obviously, structural factors played a crucial role in leftist ascendancy in both the States. Unless and until one is acutely aware of such political/social realities of a region, an authentic imaging of them becomes impossible. More studies based on the regional realities and their consequent transmigration into the colonial language should come up in order to have such analyses. In fact, the way such poets as Santan Rodrigues, Melanie Silgardo and Eunice de Souza make use of memories of their regional culture as background to their poems was pioneered by A.K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy. Again, a very significant poet, Arun Kolatkar meditates on some local details or symbols in the temple town of Jejuri. Confronting his urban existence and the strange Gods that sustain a forsaken people in Jejuri is the major theme in his *Jejuri* poems.
Thus, the study on the imaging of the region from which the poets hail from becomes relevant, especially when the language they write in is not their “own”. Indeed a very risky way of putting it; since almost all the poets under discussion consider English language as their first language. They think and feel in English. In spite of all this, culturally, Kerala stands as the mountain of Alps in their psyche and haunts them whatsoever language they write in. All the poets under discussion are well-educated and settled outside Kerala. Kamala Das and E. V. Ramakrishnan are bilingual and very conversant both in Malayalam and English. Das has always loved to tread the unorthodox path—she contested the elections to the Parliament in 1984; made a foray into politics with her political party by the name Lok Seva; hit the headlines with her conversion to Islam in 1999. Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her great uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon, a prominent writer in Malayalam and her mother, Balamani Amma was also a renowned poet. There have been comparative studies on Das’s poems and that of her mother and also on the much acclaimed Malayalam poet--Sugathakumari. Besides, numerous studies have popped up centered on the man-woman relationship in Das’s poems. But it is surprising that a study in the direction of “manipulation of language” that Das mentioned in an interview (Warrier 1)—linking the roots and creative expression in the colonial language of such a bilingual writer who has written profusely—has not been attempted so far.
Ramakrishnan’s accomplishment as a poet is sometimes obscured by his accomplishment as a translator and critic. Being an Indian poet in English and a translator at the same time, he seems to be really an apt creative writer as far as this study is concerned. In fact, he has authored three books of poetry, publishing each after symmetrical intervals of fourteen years: 1980, 1994 and 2008. *The Tree of Tongues* is a landmark book among the translations of modern Indian poetry by Ramakrishnan. Even then, apart from some rare occasional reviews in some journals, Ramakrishnan is largely neglected as a poet in the firmament of Indian English poetry and no comprehensive study has been made based on his poems.

Meena Alexander has written in Hindi, French and English. Confronting the colonial language, she has opined: “I felt robbed of literacy in my mother tongue” (*FaultLines* 128). Alexander is getting more serious critical attention nowadays and studies based on aspects other than the imaging of the region she hails from are going on. Anita Nair and C.P. Surendran confine themselves to English. Nair is quite well-known as an Indian English novelist and her works are getting translated into many languages. Moreover, with her singular collection of poems—*Malabar Mind*, Nair has proved her crafts(wo)man-ship in poetry as no less important compared to her prose works. After the publication of three collections of poems, Surendran has switched over to fiction with the publication of *An Iron Harvest* (2006). In spite of their generic, locational and gender differences,
Kerala inevitably keeps informing their whole poetic sensibility. It is rather contradictory--while Indian English Poetry is suffused with cityscapes in general, there is plenty of Kerala greenery entering the poems of these poets. In other words, they might be operating from the cosmopolitan centres presently, but they cannot do away with the rural Kerala.

While we come to the linguistic and social context in Kerala specifically, we notice a glaring factor: while the relatively “elite” group uses the English language for practical affairs, those who use it for literary purposes and that too poetry, form still another elite group. In fact, they become “elite” in the eyes of the common mass. A few students, teachers of the English Department who are interested in career advancement and still a few of the leisurely educated class only enter into the readership of Indian English poetry. The average English-knowing Keralite does not bother to read it whereas the case is different with Malayalam poetry. For example, popular Malayalam poems by poets like O. N. V. Kurup and Madhusudanan Nair are on the lips of even an ordinary man-in-the-street.

The present study tries to focus on how English or Indian English can, and does, embody in poetry many different and distinctly regional realities; and how it serves as a more multi-cultural linguistic medium in its poetic use than probably any other Indian language. The aim is not to highlight any sort of superiority or inferiority of regional language or that of Indian English. But the investigation was initiated only to unravel how the social/ economic/
cultural/political realities of Kerala have been “differently” addressed by various poets hailing from that State when they write in English. The pulsations of Kerala culture—its rites, rituals and mythologies; nature comprising birds, beasts and flowers; folklores, legends, riddles and proverbs—become the objective correlative for the vital energy of these poems which merit sufficient attention. Since there is no touchstone to define the "Keralism", the enquiry deserves a generous approach.

As far as the imaging of the region is concerned, there are two aspects—the Outer Landscape and the Inner Landscape. Whatever pertains to our sensual faculty is part of the Outer Landscape—the geography, the physicality, the biology and the agricultural life. All those bio-figures which have their umbilical relation with the cultural essence of the native people should be considered as part of the Inner Landscape. "Since our temple architecture and traditional art-forms get involved with the cultural matrix of the native people" (Prakash 15), they should be classified under the “Inner landscape”. This should take into account the lineage of a clan of people (15). Anyway it is not only in this sense that the imaging of Kerala is perused in the ongoing chapters devoted to various Kerala poets writing in English, but an attempt is made to integrate it with the various postcolonial stances adopted by them, and in some cases, to compare them with their counterparts (not adversarial) in the vernacular, which is in the present context, in Malayalam.