SUMMARY

The introductory chapter discusses the coordinates of metropolitan sensibility and also the evolution of Indian Poetry in English from its earliest nationalistic and religious overtones to its present day manifestation of metropolitan sensibility. The chapter also discusses important trends of various critical approaches towards Ezekiel and Ramanujan.

The second chapter discusses metropolitan sensibility of the two poets under study with special reference to their attitude to family. Family is the most ancient and revered social institution but the family poems of both Ezekiel and Ramanujan bring out a totally new perspective on family. Though there are not many poems on family by Ezekiel, yet he shares his metropolitan sensibility with Ramanujan who remembers his family to fill the void of his temporal and spatial displacement. These poets remember their families but they remain unsentimental, distanced and objective. Family, for them, is an institution of both pride and denigration, harmony and disquiet, quarrels and adjustments. Actually, their poems on family are double-edged and double-voiced discourse on the most hallowed institution of the Indian society. Family relations are invoked and re-invoked with parodic intentions. Even the parents are remembered with ironical and mocking feelings. The way Ramanujan remembers his father as an effete and weak-willed person and pays his homage to him in “Obituary” speaks of his parodic intentions and sterilized emotions about his father. No different is Ezekiel’s treatment of his father who is an object of love and ridicule, affection and disaffection. The figure of mother has been presented and portrayed as the embodiment of love, affection, patience, endurance and self-sacrifice in all kinds of literature but not so in the poetry of Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Her blind faith in God, tradition and black magic becomes the target of mockery and irony at the hands of Ezekiel. “Night of Scorpion” does not celebrate mother’s unflinching love towards her children; it is, rather, an ironical comment on mother’s sentimental foolishness.
Though Ramanujan acknowledges his love for his mother but he does it in a more distanced, objective and intellectual tone. There is no exuberance of emotions nor is there display of his unchecked love for her. She is presented as an ordinary human being with ordinary weaknesses and faults. She is neither perceived nor presented as a ‘goddess.’ The metropolitan sensibility of these poets consciously subverts and undercuts their sentimentality. Ramanujan laments the fact that her mother’s radiant youth and beauty was wasted in the pursuit of daily ordinary chores of domestic life but what distinguishes his approach towards her is his cool objectivity and detached sensibility.

Both these poets discuss the hypocrisy of marriage, its sterility and forced nature. They blame their wives for marital discords, discontents and squabbles but also find in her company marital bliss and stability. Though the relationship with children is characterized by warmth of affection and love but Ramanujan does not want to don the role of father because he finds them to be burdensome responsibility. He does not want children to be born but once born, his relation with children continues to be problematic, tentative and full of apprehensions. Ezekiel remembers only his parents, wife and children but Ramanujan’s family is an extended one including grandmothers, sons-in-law, uncles, aunts and even wife’s relations like her father and brother. He remembers his near and distant relatives in an ironic, comic and unsentimental way. Even his relation with his cousin’s sister is marked by subversion of traditional kinship since it is overtly incestuous.

Ramanujan blames the institution of family because he holds it responsible for hindering the growth and development of individuality of its members. He sees in his reflection the image of his father. His self is constantly beleaguered and checked by the family. It is always constricted and bounded by his ancestors as also the ‘unborn.’ Idiosyncrasies, eccentricities and diseases are to the ‘gifts’ of the DNA code. For Ramanujan, family is a matter of pride and denigration; it breeds violence and greed. It at the same time fertilises family relations with mutual faith, love and understanding.

The third chapter examines the metropolitan sensibility of the two poets in relation to their secular and non-devotional approach to religion. Their religion-
oriented poems display a unique blend of agnosticism and faithfulness, devotion and secularism. Both Ezekiel and Ramanujan do not deny the existence of God but at the same time, they do not marvel at him. They address God in a familiar and condescending way. He becomes the object of mocking irony at the hands of both these poets. Ezekiel blames God because He deserted the Jews when they needed Him most during holocaust. His is a humanist God who listens to the prayers of the destitute and the poor. Ramanujan also questions the divine and supernatural powers of God. His comparison of the prophets to bugs deflates and mocks at their miraculous powers to perform wonders. He satirises Lord Murugan and teasingly asks him how he could make love to a single woman with his many faces. Their prayers are secular and mocking in nature. There is simultaneous invocation and deflation of the divine. At other times, their mocking attitude towards gods and goddesses even verges on irreverence. They do not want to live in the world of the absent or non-material. For them, concrete, material things are more important than the abstract and the spiritual. Even the religious myths, legends and beliefs are subverted with modernistic touches and ironical attitudes. Ezekiel questions the Biblical myths and Ramanujan deflates the Hindu myths. Ezekiel’s hymns are in praise of darkness, not of light as we find in the Vedas. His prayers are the prayers of the egoist and his psalms are satiric re-presentation of the Biblical psalms. Similarly Ramanujan demolishes the myth that the Hindus are gifted with the ‘third eye’ i.e. the supernatural eye. He also makes a travesty of the Hindu faith and belief in supremacy of the soul. For Ramanjuan, ‘deathless body’ is as important as the immortal soul. There is an ever-present tension between the claims of body and soul, between an impossible eternity and an actual transience. If there was Shiva, there was Kamadev also. He critiques the ascetic frame of Hinduism because it goes against the natural urges. Bascially, both these poets, though belonging to different faiths, write poetry of negotiation between the opposite cultural pulls, of clash and amalgamation of the opposites. Their attitude towards religion is characterized by complexity and ambivalence. Ramanujan finds his ‘particular hell’ in his ‘hindu’ mind and Ezekiel refashions and remodels Biblical concepts. Theirs is not the poetry of total acceptance or negation; it is the poetry of negotiation between the opposites. There is no total acceptance or total denial of the divine. He offers prayers to Lord Murugan not for
any material or spiritual blessings; rather he seeks his help in fighting the fruit-fly. At the same time, he finds that ‘prayer’ is the most serious ill afflicting the Indian people and, therefore, he prays to Lord Murugan to rid them of prayers. His prayers are both serious and playful. There is the assertion of the supremacy of the material and the physical as against the abstract and the spiritual. He celebrates the claims of the body and wants it to accompany him even after death. But he nowhere debunks soul. He neither abandons completely nor lives in the world of the ‘absent’ or non-material perpetually. The same note of complex and ambivalent attitude towards religion is also found in Ezekiel’s poetry. He unsparingly criticises the Biblical God because He is apathetic to the poor, the needy and the destitute but at the same time he will not deny His existence nor abandon him because he is inseparably a part of his Jewish consciousness.

The fourth chapter relates metropolitan sensibility to the issue of homeland. From Nissim Ezekiel to Ramanujan, the entire battery of Indian English poets derive its moorings from two mutually contesting spaces—one of the acquired metropolis and the other of inherited native past. Even a poet like Ezekiel who is presumably not a local Maharashtrian and does not have a native originary past cannot escape the fact of his being a bilingual. Though like Kolatkar, he may not have written anything in Marathi and therefore, did not have an identity of a Marathi writer, yet the analysis of the preceding chapters reveals that his attitude towards his land of adoption is that of critical insider. He would while cherishing the cosmopolitanism and the secular ethos of Bombay bewails the gross commercial and existential character of the city. The urge for the melodious song and the sight of the growing scrapers and slums continually create a drama of conflict which is the predicament of any modern metropolitan poet. As an English-speaking Jew, he does not feel at ease in the immediate environment of the dominant Marathi speaking Hindus. His reaction to the splendour and poverty, scrapers and slums of his city is light-hearted, ‘ironic,’ detached and sometimes even sardonic. His simultaneous acceptance and rejection, praise and condemnation of Bombay is the essential ingredient of his metropolitan sensibility. His poetry is an unending attempt at unifying the many disjointed ‘selves.’ He would like to be one with the hostile environment of Bombay, the ‘bitter native city’ and that sums up his dilemma and paradoxical situation. Conflict, ambiguity and
the consequent double-edgedness of idiom remain the hall-mark of metropolitan sensibility and the discourse that it generates. In case of Ramanujan, the cultural clash from within is too evident. The question of landscape in his poetry acquires essential distractions. The originary Kannada background and the complimentary Tamil culture of his residence and diasporic life of Chicago later on, all put together, generate a poetic cartography which is at war with itself. Nothing can he despise, forget or intellectually deny nor can he afford to admire, adore or romanticise. Pulls of expatriatism and nativism compete and contest in Ramanujan’s poetry giving it a distinct edge to his attitude to homeland. His attitude is neither of total acceptance nor of total rejection. It is neither religious nor panegyric. He praises the assimilative nature of his homeland and at the same time condemns it for its closed and stagnant nature. He thinks that nation, like family, constricts and bounds an individual’s growth and individuality. His homeland is an ordinary space of ordinary people and routine activities. He condemns it for its immoral politics, squalor, dirt and poverty. It is peopled with beggar, lepers and homeless. He rues the heavy dependence of Indians on their rich cultural past, glorious history and ossified religious rituals. He rues the fact that India has not changed with the change and movement of times. Its politicians still preach urine therapy and scientists and technocrats coming from abroad are forced to work in the fields. But despite all the negatives associated with his homeland, he comes back to his home not for cultural recuperation but for temporary relief. The interiority of the native landscape and the exteriority of outward journey produce an artistic response which can neither be linear nor of plain transcendence; it has to be dialogic, juxtapositional and even transcendentental.

The last chapter sums up the findings of the study. It argues that metropolitan sensibility or experience can not be theorised in one homogenous way and the poets writing from this space have their distinctness. The distinction between the two poets needs to be underlined in the context of the distinct cultural baggage that each one inherits and grapples with. While for Ezekiel, a diasporic Bene-Israeli in fundamental ways, Bombay is not just land of adoption, it also in a way becomes his compulsive choice which he has to accept almost as his native place. In case of Ramanujan, Chicago, the land of his migration, does not become a place of lasting relationship and it remains at best a place of professional transaction and intellectual aspirations. The
native Tamil-Kannada past continues to haunt him and while being in Chicago he makes it a point to translate, analyse and compile ancient and medieval Tamil and Kannada texts. While Ezekiel moves from his being diasporic to a native Mumbaikar, Ramanujan moves from a hardcore nativist to a reluctant metro intellectual of Chicago. Though the trajectories of the two poets remain almost oppositional, yet the common point is that the binary of the insider and the outsider operates in both the poets. In case of Ezekiel, the operational dialectics is that of outsider-insider and in case of Ramanujan, it is that of insider-outsider.