Preface

Nature playing the role of a life sustaining benefactor to the millions of species of flora and fauna on earth is a virtuoso performance. This thesis titled *Refrains of the Earth-Woman Interface: Poems of Alice Walker and Sugathakumari, A Glocal Perspective* acknowledges it and addresses the complexities of nature, human and non-human beings democratically. It attempts to establish the modalities of an ecocentric vision fostered by the principles of ecocriticism, and in particular ecofeminism.

The homogenizing tendencies of capitalism and globalization have accelerated the erasure of indigenous identities and unique cultural entities. Problematizing the oppressive and dualistic standpoints, ecofeminism tries to nurture a web of interconnectedness among human and non-human lives, and celebrates diversity, cooperation, mutual care and love. When ecofeminism tries to find alternatives to the prevalent Eurocentric theorizations, it has to take note of postmodern ecology’s challenge of the long held model of a monolithic and normative nature and its assertion of a dynamic, open-ended, rhizomatic nature. Ecofeminism should guard against the reductionist and essentialist notions that could surreptitiously creep into the manifold theorizations of the complex and heterogeneous subjects of its concern, woman and nature. This could be done by incorporating a postfeminist perspective that advocates multiple subjectivities, non-binary collocation and respectful confabulations. Postfeminism affirms gender difference and celebrates the feminine, championing the possibility of an unfettered individual choice for women outside traditional political theorizations. By making sense of the diverse needs of women in the integrated global
circuit, it becomes a crucial platform to articulate the multiplicity of subject positions experienced by the postmodern woman. The postfeminist-ecofeminist perspective prioritises the local within the global spectrum, which in turn develops a globalised local — ‘glocal’ outlook. In order to draw the blueprint of the glocal perspective, this thesis has selected an ecofeminist critical study of poems of two women poets who belong to distinct national, cultural, social and racial positions — Alice Malsenior Walker from the U.S. and Sugathakumari from Kerala, in India.

Alice Walker (1944- ) is recognized as one of the leading voices among black American women writers, who has produced an acclaimed and varied body of work, including poetry, novels, short stories, essays and criticism. Her writings portray the struggle of black people throughout history, and are praised for their insightful and riveting portraits of black life, in particular the struggle of black women against a racist, sexist and violent society. She calls herself a womanist — one who appreciates and prefers woman’s culture, strength, emotional flexibility and at the same time remains “a bold, brassy universalist committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Evelyn C. White 377). She continues not only to write but to be active in environmental, feminist/womanist causes and issues of economic justice.

Sugathakumari (1934- ) is an Indian poet-activist who has been at the forefront of environmental movements in Kerala. An active presence in the cultural and literary world of Kerala, she is noted for her romantic poems presenting the plight of the weak and the oppressed, including woman and nature. She is a down-to-earth poet, a lover and preserver of wild life and nature, and also an empathetic supporter of the suffering and
the downtrodden who criticises the ill-focussed and unethical ‘reform and development’ projects undertaken by the establishment. With her intense philanthropic zeal she has become the voice of the marginalized and runs a charitable institution ‘Abhaya’ to home the shelter-less little children, women and the old ones.

Unlike Sugathakumari, Walker is herself a representative of the oppressed class. But both profess an interesting level of similarity in their attitudes, especially in the epitomizing of the woman who has realized her inner potential and has radiated it to her fellow beings, proving her social commitment. As poets, they combine in themselves, activism and spirituality, a keen awareness of one’s own heritage and a matching optimism about the future.

Alice Walker grew up in a racial environment though not as much horrible and typical as her ancestors’. In an accident she lost the sight of her right eye in her eighth year and it took six years for the scar to be removed permanently. Walker led the life of an introvert all these years. But once she entered college, her writing, which she had begun in childhood, increased in volume and quality and began to attract prestigious prizes and fellowships. Recognizing her innate potential, she became an active worker, deeply committed to the civil rights movement. The bulk of her writings deal with black experience, chiefly the black woman’s victimization by men in general and black men in particular. Their oppression was not just physical, since there have also been attempts to stifle the aesthetic creativity in them. The womanist consciousness developed by this writer is an attempt to resist this oppression and to mend the disjointed self of black and the marginalized woman in particular and by extension, of all the marginalized beings.
For Sugathakumari this experience is an empathetic sensitivity created within the poet. As she comes from an upper middle class family, her writings do not navigate towards any personal injury or subjective discontentment. Hers is a chosen path inscribed by a deep sense of social commitment. She voices the cause of the victims of political, social and physical oppression. Though the patriarchal world attempts to subsume her voice and actions as clichéd and shower a volley of criticisms against nature lovers, the proliferation of environmental, social and gender issues cropping up in the Kerala society at her wake reinforces her towering figure as a very sensible and devoted poet-activist professing an untiring vision for the preservation of her immediate society and the planet at large. Among the contemporary Malayalam poets, Sugathakumari is a dominant figure as she wields her pen to portray the emerging social issues in a unique and lucid style.

Ecological activism among writers of Kerala was triggered during 1978-80 with their engagement in the ‘Silent Valley protection’ campaigns. Inspired by the writings of the environmentalist Prof. M. K. Prasad, Sugathakumari joined the movement and wrote for the cause. The reader response to that exhortation was so immediate and passionate that she could create an intense awareness among the populace on the issue which the scientists were trying hard to create for more than three years. Under the leadership of her patron Sri N.V. Krishna Warrier, ‘Prakriti Samrakshana Samiti,’ an organization of writers, was constituted, with the slogan ‘For the protection of nature, for the survival of life’. The organization published a collection of poems titled Vanaparvam in November 1983. This was the harbinger of ecological writing in Malayalam. In spite of being satirized as ‘marakkavikal’ (tree poets),
many of these poets imbibed the philosophy of ecology and deciphered it into their writings. The movement which had sprouted in poetry, spread to other genres like short stories and novels, and by 1990 ecowriting had established itself as a significant genre in Malayalam literature. The first writing on environmental or ecological aesthetics in Malayalam was *Paristhiti Soundaryasasthram: Oru Mukhavura* (Environmental Aesthetics: A Preface) written by T.P. Sukumaran in 1992.

In the West, though ecocriticism began in the 1970s it grew and established globally as a critical approach in the 1990s. In 1996 *The Ecocriticism Reader* was published in English edited by Cherryl Glotfelty with the announcement that ecocriticism adopts an earth-centred approach to learn literature. Ecocriticism is an umbrella term which takes on race, class, gender and environment in its analysis, bringing together a variety of diverse aspects like history, socialism, democracy, and feminist politics along with the resistance of indigenous and the postcolonial people.

The dissertation attempting both theoretical and textual expositions of ecofeminism consists of four chapters followed by a conclusion. Chapter one is the introduction to the theory of ecocriticism and its varied branches with emphasis on ecofeminism. The subjects of the thesis, woman and nature and their interconnection are explained in their historical contexts, the shifting paradigms surrounding the subject positions are analysed in detail and their apparently monolithic existence are problematized to disclose their internal complexities. The significance of the theory of postfeminism in ecofeminism is explored to provide a new theoretical turn to ecofeminism to facilitate an inclusive reading of the global situation. The chapter explains how ecofeminism has generated a platform of relevant discourses and approaches that aim at the well
being of all the life on earth, within their biological, behavioural and environmental diversities.

Chapter two pinpoints how ecofeminist literature demonstrates the objectives of ecofeminism. The goals of ecofeminism are analysed by redefining ecofeminist notions of identity, diversity and process and by mooting parallel perspectives on multiplicity, democracy and interconnectedness.

Chapter three discusses the poetic form and treatment of the theme and explores how language, style, diction and suggestion contribute to the poeticization of ecofeminist notions. The limits of human language in expressing the nuances of ecology and the need for developing an *écriture naturelle* that contributes to a democratic, glocal ethic are traced with reference to the poems. The localized constructions contextualized in a global scenario are unearthed to demonstrate how the poems become rich reservoirs and memoirs of unique cultures, individuals, local customs and living patterns.

Chapter four explores the politics of ecofeminism that favours a democratic ecological ethics motivated by a postfeminist platform which favours multiplicity and difference. The global threats to ecological sustainability are shown to be addressed through an emergent glocal perspective, which defends the existence of diversity and asserts the import of the democratic ethics of ecofeminism.

The thesis elaborates on how apart from the celebration of the polyphonic relationship between woman and nature, the poems of Walker and Sugathakumari successfully preserve the unique identities of their respective ethnicity and milieu even when the issues they discuss have global dimensions. Though the two poets are brought on a common
platform, this work does not intend to undertake a comparative study of their poetic traits; instead they are placed as the proponents of the ecofeminist school and promoters of the democratic glocal ecological ethic. The main purpose of this study is to highlight the very pertinent perspectives put forward by the ecofeminist discourse; the democratic outlook that sustains plurality, open-endedness and the disavowal of hierarchical hegemonic constructs as the foundation of a welcome glocal perspective.

Secondary materials from a range of Malayalam critics have been incorporated into the thesis to explore the ecofeminist dimension of Sugathakumari’s poetic world. Quotes from their texts and all the citations from Sugathakumari’s poems are in translation rendered by me. As a supplement to the dissertation I have appended my own translation of thirty ecofeminist signature poems by Sugathakumari from the regional language, Malayalam for the global audience.