



# Where the Rain is Born: Writings About Kerala

*Anita Nair*

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The southernmost part of India was born, it is said, when the mighty Parasurama sixth avatar of Vishnu threw his battle axe to carve out the territory that would henceforth be his. And thus begins the story of Kerala, the land of coconut palms (kera), backwaters and lagoons; joyous temple festivals, classical kathakali and ayurvedic healing. In this anthology, writers as diverse as Arundhati Roy, Ramachandra Guha, O.V. Vijayan, Vaikom Mohammad Basheer and Kamala Das combine to bring alive the languid beauty and charged social and political ethos of this tiny state that has been listed as one of the top fifty holiday destinations in the world.

Shashi Tharoor writes of indolent summer vacations spent in his grandmother's house in a small village in southern Kerala; Alexander Frater captures in mesmerizing prose the spectacle of the dark monsoon clouds as they rush towards the coast, heralding the arrival of the south-west monsoon in India; Pankaj Mishra describes his experience in a no-Indians please seaside hotel in Kovalam. Salman Rushdie's evocation of life in Cochin, with its mixed Jewish and Portuguese legacies, brings alive the historical roots of the ancient port city, while Dalrymple, walking the narrow streets of contemporary Kochi, is surprised by the discovery of a living church of St. Thomas the first known Christian visitor to these parts. At the other end of the spectrum are Father Alphonse and his band of villagers in idyllic Mayyazhi, Mukundan's Mahe, where French and Malayali influences fight for dominance.

Changing lifestyles and the gradual erosion of past values and traditions in favour of a seemingly modern, yet paradoxically conservative society engage the interest of several of the writers featured in this collection. The tempered nostalgia of being a part of the royal family of Thiruvananthapuram, the fierce patriotism of the Gulf-returned Malayali, and the reality of male-female hierarchies in a community that likes to boast of its strong matrilineal traditions make for a bitter-sweet depiction of today's Kerala where high literacy and excellent health care are balanced by the highest rates of suicide and unemployment in India.

A combination of essays, short stories, poems and extracts from published works both in English and Malayalam including perennial favourites like Chemmeen and The Legends of Khasak this anthology affords a tantalizing glimpse into the rich and varied layers of experience that Kerala has to offer.

Contributors include:

Arundhati Roy  
Pankaj Mishra  
David Davidar  
William Dalrymple  
O.V. Vijayan  
M.T. Vasudevan Nair  
Sreekumar Varma  
Jaishree Misra  
Suresh Menon  
M. Mukundan  
Vijay Nambisan  
Kamala Das  
Geeta Doctor

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer

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#### **Anne Bonk:**

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#### **Rosemary Robinson:**

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