Chapter 3

The Syrian Christian Custom of Arranging Marriages

Marriage is a very important event in the life of a person and one in which he has some say unlike the two other events in his life, viz. his birth and his death. In the Syrian Christian fold, however, the bride and the groom do not have much choice with regard to their partners in life. This is especially true in the case of the girl who has to bow to the wishes of her parents and elders.

A lot of matters are taken into consideration before entering into any alliance. The first consideration is about the family of the prospective bride and groom. The family should have an impeccable lineage untainted by scandal or insanity and should belong to the fold of Syrian Christians who make up the sects of the Orthodox, the Jacobites, the Marthomites and the CSI of Central Travancore. Those Christians who are either Catholics or those who belong to the various Pentecostal congregations are not usually taken into consideration. The economic status of the family is also very important especially in the case of the bride because the practice of giving dowry to the groom’s family is strictly followed. As in other communities in Kerala the Syrian Christians consider a man blessed if he has many sons and no daughters. Many sons mean a good source of income while many daughters mean a total drain of income. A third consideration especially in the case of the
girl is her physical appearance. The Syrian Christian sense of beauty is concentrated more on the girl than on the boy. A girl who is tall and has a fair complexion, regular features and wavy hair is acceptable to all. In the past it did not matter if she had only basic education but it was essential that she should have no physical defect. A girl who is eligible in all these matters is a catch in the matrimonial market. As it is not always possible to get such a paragon, compromises are made in one area or the other, particularly in the last two considerations. A girl who is not all that good to look at could still get a suitable groom if her father has enough money to tempt the boy to accept his daughter. If the girl’s father does not have the money to meet the demands of the boy’s people, his daughter, though beautiful, will have to make do with a boy who is not up to her mark in the matter of looks, wealth or status.

The process of looking for a suitable boy or girl is one that involves not only the parents but also aunts, uncles, senior cousins and friends. As soon as a boy or girl has reached marriageable age, he or she is filed away in the minds of the relatives who keep an eye open for a suitable boy or girl as the case may be. This quest is an almost unconscious activity and when someone likely is seen, enquiries are made regarding family and economic status. Then the parents of the boy or the girl are informed and the person who has brought the proposal becomes the go-between. Negotiations are undertaken through this
go-between until things develop to such a stage when the elders visit the respective homes in order to verify for themselves the economic and other status of either party. Once this is satisfied arrangements are made for the boy to ‘see’ the girl. Once this test is passed it is plain sailing to the engagement ceremony when all negotiations concerning the dowry are concluded once and for all and the sum of money handed over to the patriarch of the boy’s house. Susan Viswanathan in her work, *The Christians of Kerala*, gives a very detailed description of the manner in which marriages are arranged and conducted. She also explains in great detail the rites of marriage solemnized in the church as well as the customs and traditions that are followed by the community on the occasion of the marriage (105-116). In earlier days the actual amount given as dowry would be announced to the guests gathered for the ceremony which used to be called the settlement ceremony in those days. Such an announcement not only assured the guests of the financial ability of the bride’s family but also indicated the economic worth of the groom and his family. The church also received one percent of the sum of money given as dowry from both the families that have entered into matrimonial alliance. Once the girl is married off with a dowry she has no more claims on her father’s household or on his property. It is the custom for the girl to return to her parents’ for the delivery of her first child. Once that is over along with all its attendant rituals, she has to
return to her husband’s house. In many middle class families the daughters could be married off only after paying a big sum of money as dowry. The financial constraint thus felt is eased by the dowry brought in by the brides of the sons. Sometimes sons would be married off in order to provide dowries for the daughters. Often when this did not work out daughters remained unmarried and became unpaid maids of all work in the house. The plight of such women is beautifully pictured in many of the romantic novels written in Malayalam which have the Syrian Christian setting. It is against this unjust practice of inheritance that Ms. Mary Roy, mother of Arundhati Roy and founder of the school, Pallikudam in Kottayam, contested the Christian Succession Act. According to the judgement of the Supreme Court of India regarding this case all the children, daughters as well as sons, of a person dying intestate will inherit his property equally. This gives some measure of justice to daughters who had spent the best part of their lives slaving for the family.

This custom of arranging marriages still continues among the Syrian Christians though with a great deal of modification. The aunts and uncles who had earlier performed the work of finding suitable alliances for their nieces and nephews, even the distant ones, have been replaced by marriage brokers. These are persons who go about finding suitable brides and bridegrooms for eligible men and women as the case
may be - all for a commission on the dowry given or obtained. Such marriage brokers are to be found in the villages. Women also ply this trade though they are few in number when compared to the men. Though marriage brokers have succeeded in arranging several marriages, many of these marriages have broken up because the brokers were not too concerned about other considerations. Therefore it was easy enough to palm off insane men and fallen women on unsuspecting spouses provided the broker’s palm was properly greased. This bad reputation of the brokers made them the very last resort of harassed parents who had not been able to find anyone suitable enough for their child.

As the years passed the marriage broker with his bag full of the photographs and details of possible brides and grooms has been displaced by marriage bureaus which do the very same work but in an impersonal manner. No longer does the marriage broker knock at the doors of parents with sons and daughters of marriageable age, the parents have to approach the bureau which charges a hefty fee and files away photographs and details to be matched against a suitable counterpart. This business too which is only a glorified and costlier version of the earlier has, in its turn, been displaced by the matrimonial columns in the daily newspapers. A look at the Sunday edition of the dailies is ample illustration of the popularity of this method of
matchmaking. Syrian Christian families pore over the matrimonial columns advertised in the Malayala Manorama, the newspaper giant of Kerala. These days it is also common to place such advertisements in the journals of various Christian denominations which cater exclusively to the community. These serve as pointers, diving boards from which parents could take the plunge. Besides, this practice dispenses with the middle man, the go between, and apart from the initial expense is very much cheaper in the long run. When one sees an advertisement which answers most of one’s requirements, one sends a reply at the address provided in the advertisement. This creates a bridge on which one either advances or retreats. In addition to this, relatives who live in the area or who belong to the same church or who work at the same work place are alerted and they do a little sleuthing regarding the credentials of the ‘party’. These days when all South India reels under the IT boom and there is a plethora of internet cafes, matrimonial advertisements have also gone online. People get on such websites and log in their preferences and requirements. As the younger generation is more computer-savvy than their elders much of this seeking is done by the parties themselves. However, further steps like the actual process of striking the deal is done by the elders though the final choice is left to the children.
Though much of the work of arranging marriages is done by the parents the children these days do have a choice, especially the daughters. Education and employment are given more weight in the case of the girls. In fact a personable girl with a good education and a lucrative job is indeed a good catch. She does not need as much dowry as her father would have had to provide if she had been ugly and unemployed. This is not to say that there are no love marriages among Syrian Christians. In fact these days love marriages are on the increase mainly because girls also hold as good jobs as boys and have quite decided views about their partner in life. It is also a fact that once the first flush of love has died down many marriages thus undertaken show a tendency to break down. This fact is borne out by the increased rate of divorce in Kerala.

If some Syrian Christians of earlier generations created history by marrying outside their community, those marriages were generally confined to persons who shared the same Keralite identity. Marriages which did not conform to this practice usually happened between Syrian Christians and persons they had become acquainted with in the course of their work in distant lands. When this was the case the Syrian Christian half usually settled down in the land of the spouse. With more and more of the younger generation finding jobs for themselves in the metropolises of India their choice of partner has also extended. The
Syrian Christian heritage does not hold them back from making their own choice with regard to spouse. Therefore it is possible to see a large number of Syrian Christians marrying outside the community. Conversely there is also no question of a man or a woman wasting his or her life because their marriage has not worked out well. Young men and women see no need to suffer in silence and so divorce is no longer an ugly word in family circles. However, divorce is a last resort which is taken only in exceptional circumstances. Even the churches which used to frown upon divorces are now resigned to this inescapable fact. Many are the matrimonial advertisements that plaintively state that the boy or the girl is a divorcée “through no fault of his/ hers.” However, incidents of harassment in the husband’s house are by and large not all that common in the Syrian Christian community.

This custom of arranged marriages is dealt with in one degree or the other in all six books under study. In The Slayer Slain the Anglican Christians are considered a rung lower than the Syrian in social status which is why Koshy Curien returns to his parent church when the time comes for him to find a suitable boy for his daughter Mariam. The first two considerations of family and economic status are carefully weighed and Koshy Curien finds a Syrian Christian family which can match in these two matters. In spite of being more progressive than other men of his age, wealth and status, Koshy Curien does not consult either his wife
or his daughter about his choice of a husband for Mariam. She has to submit to the indignity of being inspected by a Syrian Christian matron, the mother of the proposed bridegroom, who has only criticism for the physical attributes of Mariam and the way in which she is brought up. Later when the boy himself arrives to ‘see’ Mariam it is clear that he is no match for her either in looks, manners or education. The only reason why the marriage does not take place is because the special place that Mariam has in her father’s heart allows the latter to see his daughter’s point of view. Mariam dislikes this boy who is not only uncouth but who had been married before and whose young wife had died in suspicious circumstances. It is quite clear to Mariam that marriage is, for him and his family particularly his mother, a means of making money. She could remember the prospective groom’s first wife who had been her school friend and whose life had been snuffed out by hard work and the cruel behaviour of her husband and his mother. Mariam confides all this to her father and he has no compunction in breaking off the proposed alliance even though it had proceeded almost to the point of no return. If Mariam had not been educated and if she had not been the apple of her father’s eye, there is no doubt that the marriage would have taken place and Mariam’s lot would not have been much better than that of her predecessor. After the marriage is broken off Koshy Curien takes Mariam’s opinion into consideration when he finally chooses a groom
for her. She has no objection at all to being given in marriage to Mathew who is an impoverished evangelist from a good family. It was he who pulled Mariam out of the river after her life had been saved by Poulosa and he has excellent qualities of the mind and heart which find their perfect match in Mariam.

*Take My Hands* also follows the same system of arranged marriages. Mary’s sisters and brothers are married off in the usual tradition with the elders fixing up the marriage though in one or two instances the bride and groom were acquainted with each other before marriage. However, there is no instance of anything very startling or shocking about the marriages thus arranged. There are one or two instances of Mary’s friends in Vellore who fall in love with their classmates or senior doctors and marry. This does not happen in Mary’s case. The accident immediately after graduation makes her a paraplegic for life, therefore no attempt is made to arrange a marriage for Mary. The whole family is more interested in her rehabilitation and she herself does not think about marriage at all.

*Fault Lines*, the autobiography of Meena Alexander also talks about the Syrian Christian custom of arranging marriages even though her own is not one of this sort. But there is a kind of romance about arranged marriages, an embarking upon an adventure blindfold, a perilous walk on a tightrope. Meena Alexander gets her mother to
reminisce about how her marriage had been arranged. Meena’s mother’s greatest disadvantage was that her mother had passed away before she reached the right age for marriage. Her father had grown old and was eager that she should marry and marry well. His family, the Kurichiethu family, was very well known and so was he both as a freedom fighter and as the Principal of the Mar Thoma Seminary in Kottayam. His wife too was well known in her own right, both as a freedom fighter and as a very important functionary of the YWCA. In fact the doyens of the Kannadickal family- Meena Alexander’s father’s family - who had met Elizabeth Kuruvilla when she had visited Ranni in her function as YWCA President had been so impressed by the mother that they desired an alliance with the daughter of this beautiful and intrepid lady. The go between Oomachayan was known to both families and was happy to cement the acquaintance on both sides. Meena Alexander’s mother was not very fair but her lineage was impeccable and her economic status satisfactory. Besides, she was the only daughter of renowned parents and therefore quite a catch. However, K.K.Kuruvilla heaved a sigh of relief only after the boy gave his approval of the marriage even though the elders were all for it. There was also an element of urgency for the marriage to be conducted quickly because the boy was going abroad for higher studies. It was usual for families to conduct the marriage of their
sons before they went abroad so as to save them from the temptation of marrying outside the community.

Even though arranged marriages are an adventure and a romance, Meena Alexander does not follow the same path. Instead, she falls in love with an American Jew whom she had met while teaching in Hyderabad and marries him in a civil ceremony which was attended only by a few friends. Though her parents do not approve of her runaway marriage and do not attend it, they later give the newly-weds a reception in Delhi by which they slowly accept their daughter’s husband into the fold. Later, when she arrives with her children for their yearly vacation they are heartily accepted into the family. Besides, being married and the mother of two children lends status to Meena among the cackling tongues of Kozhencheri, particularly because both her sisters prefer their single status to the burden of having a family. It must also be recollected that Meena’s grandmother Kunju also had been bold enough to choose her own partner even though he was many years older than her.

It is in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* that we see this custom at its worst. The main reason for the failure of this custom is because of the importance given to the system of dowry which is the stumbling block in many an alliance. Lissy, the main character of the novel is the daughter of an ordinary officer in the LIC of India. Theirs is a
middleclass family living in a modest rented house in Trivandrum. Their only source of income is the salary of Lissy’s father which has to pay for the education of Lissy and her brother Aby in addition to the expenses of living in the capital city. His wife Kuttiamma is, however, a good manager and she scrimps and saves in order to put together an adequate dowry for her daughter. After graduating with honours Lissy prefers to train herself for a job rather than go in for post graduation like her brother. She writes several bank tests and gets selected without much delay. She is not too bad to look at but her complexion is dark and her hair curly to a fault. Her father can only offer the dowry that it is possible for an ordinary LIC officer to save in a lifetime which after a great deal of addition and subtraction comes up to only Rupees one lakh. Even though there is only one girl to marry off, even that is very difficult because as Kuttiamma puts it, prospective grooms these days, “want ten times as much dowry and the girl should look like a film star too.” (VFB 4)

In keeping with the usual Syrian Christian practice Kuttiamma alerts her people about the fact that her daughter is now in the matrimonial market. It is not only her own relations that are apprised of the fact but also the friends in the church especially the members of the Women Fellowship, the gathering of the women in the church. The matchmaking machine is thus set in motion. Lissy is ‘seen’ by nine
prospective grooms but she is fated not to have any of them as her husband. Most of the proposals are dropped by the groom and his family, only two are rejected by Lissy’s family. The only proposal that Lissy was a little interested in was the very first one brought by her aunt and her husband who were doctors at the Christian Medical College, Vellore. The proposed groom was an intern at the same place as Lissy’s aunt and uncle. He was tall and handsome and had a deep attractive voice. Though he was most acceptable he was not enamoured of Lissy of the dark complexion and the meagre dowry. It was quite clear to both Cheriachen and Kuttiamma that this proposal would not take off because the boy came accompanied by his father and aunt and not his mother. Besides they did not ask many questions which itself was a clear pointer to the fact that the proposal had foundered. This young man finally married a girl who brought him a dowry of Rupees five lakhs and an admission for post graduation at the Manipal Medical College. The next proposal was that of an engineer in the ISRO. Though this also resulted in Lissy’s being ‘seen’ by a large group of people who were most voluble it also produced no result as Lissy was found wanting in the scale of beauty. While the go between here was one of the ladies of the church attended by Lissy and her family, in the third case the proposal was brought by Cheriachen’s cousins Joy and Daisy. However careful enquiries revealed that the would be suitor was 32 years old and had a
very unsavoury reputation. The proposal was summarily rejected and Lissy saved from the embarrassment of being put on show.

The failure of all three suits brings a revelation to both Lissy and her father. Lissy realizes that her academic prowess and culinary skills have no worth at all in the marriage market and her father faces the bitter reality that an honest government officer living on a fixed income cannot hope to find his daughter a decent match if she is not provided with a hefty dowry especially if she has a dark complexion. Lissy’s mother, however, does not give up hope. She is very pragmatic and believes that Mr. Right will turn up if one keeps looking for him. Therefore the search continues though Cheriachen retires from service and returns to his ancestral home in Pallissery. The parents now turn to the marriage broker, Joshua who has a bag full of prospective brides and grooms who can be had at a price including his commission. He worms his way into the affections of the unwary with his toothy smile and sugary words and takes care to present himself right at the time the family is sitting down to one of the major meals of the day thus saving himself the expense of a meal. The groom he finds for Lissy is employed in the Gulf which in the broker’s eyes is ample qualification for him to be a suitor. The inevitable meeting takes place and Lissy is not at all taken with the man who is short, fat and has a moonface. This
proposal founders because the groom’s people demand not only Rupees one lakh as dowry but another lakh to set up a business in the Gulf.

There is peace for about a year in which much of the sorting and sifting takes place through letters. The engineer from Keltron who is the next prospective groom also demands a dowry of Rupees one lakh and ornaments worth 50 sovereigns. This proposal also falls through because the boy is put off by the girl’s dark complexion and by the fact that her father does not own the house in Trivandrum. The next proposal is a most embarrassing one for Lissy because it is that of a business man in Calicut who looks like a gorilla and has the impossible name of Welcome. The man is so brash that he dares to come to Lissy’s office without the permission of her father in order to have a look at her. This is one proposal that is rejected by Lissy’s parents because the man is uncouth in his manners. Lissy’s ordeal is not over in that the next set of people who come to ‘see’ her are the ones with a clerk in a nationalized bank in Alleppey who come to her hostel to interview her thus broadcasting the whole business to all and sundry. As before this too does not work out. Lissy’s father once again falls back upon the broker Joshua who now brings the proposal of a pastor in Pennsylvania who is due home on leave. The man’s parents come to see Lissy and profess themselves satisfied with her. As the pastor is home only for a short while, it is decided that Lissy’s parents should go to Bombay and meet
him at the airport when he arrives. Accordingly they make the long and arduous trip to Bombay to meet the pastor only to find that there are two sets of other parents on the same errand. It is a further shock that all of them had been deceived by the pastor and his parents because the man had an American girl friend clinging to his arm. The only saving grace here is that Lissy has not been subjected to the indignity of being looked over by the man. And yet there is a measure of disappointment because she had been heartily approved of by the man’s parents. The ninth proposal that is brought for consideration is that of a Personnel officer of a firm in Coimbatore who confides to Lissy that he is more interested in furthering his career rather than getting married. Here Lissy does not feel insulted because there is a spirit of camaraderie between them.

The several proposals that come her way and which end in her being rejected humiliate Lissy and serve to make her feel inadequate. This feeling makes her a sitting duck for the overtures made by Jose the Trade Union leader who belongs to her own native place but is of lower caste. She knows the dangers fraught in entering into an alliance with Jose but is willing to close her eyes to the social ostracism that would be her lot if such an alliance materialized. She is swept off her feet by Jose and meekly falls in with all his plans. She is frightened when she hears Jose gloat that he would wed her in the very church which had put him out as an untouchable and in front of those persons who had always
considered him their inferior in all respects. It is this announcement that finally forces her to face the truth that true love plays little part in the relationship. Lizzy realizes that there is no point in throwing away the affection of her family and friends for the sake of a man who has become so embittered and vengeful. Her dear friends Renjy and Suma had tried to point out her folly in entering into a relationship with a person like Jose not because he was an untouchable but because he went about with a permanent chip on his shoulder and had uncouth and ugly manners. She had then justified herself saying between sobs

You say that Jose isn’t good enough for me, but that’s what so many of those parents and sons thought about me, isn’t it? As if appearances are what matter. And what about the dowry? If my father could pay five lakh rupees, they could find someone to marry me, even if I were lame or a half wit (VFB 34).

It is this buying and selling of brides and grooms that forms the thrust of this novel with the intriguing title which signifies the kind of things that are acceptable to the groom and their order of preference. It is to be carefully noted that the bride occupies the very last place in the list of articles that make up the title of the novel.

In The God of Small Things no marriages are arranged. Perhaps all that happens in the novel can be traced back to this fact. Marriages which have been arranged by the elders may not always work out. The
marriage of Ammu’s parents which can be presumed to have been arranged by their elders was not a happy one because the husband regularly beat the wife with anything that came handy even brass vases. As for the wife she meekly submitted to his physical bullying and his mental torture. Pappachi was such a sadist and so self centred that he cared nothing for his wife and their two children. He even stopped Ammu’s education after her schooling as he believed that educating girls beyond the basics was a waste of time and money. He was also not prepared to arrange a marriage for her as that would mean further expense in the form of dowry. This unnatural attitude of the father and the fear of being incarcerated in Ayemenem drove Ammu to escape from there and fall into the arms of the first person who showed an interest in her. Ammu paid no heed to the fact that her suitor belonged to a different culture, state and religion. And after the first flush of marriage and after the birth of her dizygotic twins, the marriage began to pall. It reached the point of no return when her husband began to think of offering the wife to his boss in order to pay off his debts. Then Ammu broke off the marriage and returned to Ayemenem with her children only to realize that neither her twins nor she had any locus standi even in her own house. If hers had been an arranged marriage it may not have broken up so quickly, or even if it had, it would not have had such an impact on the lives of Ammu and her children. Baby Kochamma had
fallen in love with the Irish priest and had become a Catholic even embracing nunhood in order to be near him. When she realized that nunhood would not bring her nearer to her idol she gave it up and lived the life of an embittered maiden aunt jealous of everyone who was happy including the innocent happiness of the twins. As she had strayed from the beaten track and had become the talk of the town there was no question of arranging a marriage for her. Her single state caused her to behave callously to Ammu and her children. Chacko’s marriage to Margaret was a love marriage, an alliance between a loud mouthed Rhodes Scholar and a waitress which was solemnized without the willing consent of the bride’s family and the knowledge of the bridegroom’s. This marriage too broke up and Chacko returned to his family in Ayemenem.

He loved his sister’s children though he constantly bickered with his sister who questioned the Syrian Christian practice of giving all the family property to the male heirs and none to their sisters even though the latter were more efficient. Though she did as much as or more work than her brother in the factory she had no locus standi because a married daughter has no business in her father’s house as Chacko was fond of reminding her. When his own daughter Sophiemol comes from England with her newly widowed mother to spend Christmas in Ayemenem Chacko behaves in such a way that Rahel, Estha and Ammu feel like
interlopers. This, along with other events brings about tragedy in the lives of all the main characters. If Chacko had grown up in a family where the parents loved and respected each other he might have refrained from entering into an alliance with a foreigner, or might have made an effort to save his marriage when it began to totter. This is an instance of the double edged nature of arranged marriages. As for Rahel, she had been married by a foreigner, Larry McCaslin who had tried his best to make her truly happy. Though she had responded, there was always some part of her inmost self which refused to open out for her husband which finally resulted in the dissolution of her marriage because she was too lost in that private world of hers to make the effort needed to save her marriage. As Arundati Roy puts it,

Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who would pay her a dowry and therefore without an obligatory husband looming on her horizon. (GST 17).

*Something Barely Remembered* also speaks of several couples who are either the victims or otherwise of arranged marriages. Susan Viswanathan believes that arranged marriages work for the Syrian Christians for the most part and

… what made it work was the cheerful way in which partners were chosen by father, mother, grandfathers,
grandmothers, uncles, aunts and cousins to the seventh
degree.” (SBR 94).

Even though a lot of changes have taken place in the way marriages are arranged there is still the thrill of choosing and finding the right partner from the advertisements in the papers or online. In spite of the sorting and sifting marriages can go awry as in the case of the marriage between Thomas and Sarah. Thomas is in love with a girl who belongs to a different community but his family persuades him to marry Sarah who is not only beautiful but wealthy also. Thomas still continues his liaison with that other girl and naturally cares nothing at all about his legal wedded wife. This is not to say that his wife remains a virgin, on the other hand, he makes her pregnant but has no concern for her. Instead she becomes the silent victim of the roving eyes and hands of her husband’s brother Markose who too uses her. She disappears without trace, perhaps she has committed suicide unable to bear the pain of being a mere object to be used by either brother. Though Sosha’s marriage to George is blessed by a daughter Anna, she does not find a companion in her husband who is puritanically correct. He does not woo her with silly nothings and has taken her so much for granted that she is bowled over by the attentions lavished on her by Azor. In fact so assiduously does Azor court her that she has no qualms about abandoning her husband and baby daughter in order to carve a new life
for herself with Azor. Though this life has to be spent in self imposed exile in America, without any children of Azor’s, without seeing her own daughter Anna, Sosha cannot imagine a return to Kerala or life without Azor. Her daughter Anna is happily married to Philip and they have three children but Anna is aware of the fact that her husband had once been in love with Sara his childhood friend, who had left him in order to pursue her medical studies. Sara has now returned unmarried and available and Anna is left wondering whether her husband still loves her.

Love marriages too are found in the novel. Anna who is left an orphan following the death of her parents in a boat accident is brought up by her grandmother who manages to wrangle an inheritance for her from her tightfisted uncle. But this is not enough to provide her with a dowry and no marriage can be arranged without a dowry. Therefore Anna contacts her uncle Job who has settled down in Italy after marrying an Italian sculptor named Marcella with whom he had fallen in love. Job is the black sheep of the family as he had married outside the community but it is he who comes to the rescue of Anna when there is no one willing to take up the responsibility of looking after her. He takes her away to make her home with him in Italy. His wife believes that Anna should be trained in photography in order to enable her to earn her
own bread. Marriage for Anna is an unrealized dream because there is no one to arrange it and no one to fall in love with her.

Mariam’s marriage to Paulo, though approved by her parents, also does not work out mainly because he is so possessive that he does not allow her to do anything, go anywhere on her own. Such excessive ownership is irksome for Mariam. Things come to a head when an attempt is made to kidnap Mariam. Even though the kidnap attempt had ended in utter failure it brought out into the open the simmering differences between the two. This ended in Mariam’s clearing out of Paulo’s life especially after discovering that he has an English mistress. Theirs had been a love marriage. As Paulo was a Syrian Christian Mariam’s family accepted her choice but when she returns home after the marriage breaks up her parents are sorry that they had consented to the marriage. Her mother regretfully observes thus,

We should have chosen for you. I made a mistake agreeing to your wanting Paulo… His family has a history of instability. His uncle was a gambler, his grandfather a banker. (SBR 155)

When marriages go wrong the absent party is blamed for all the ills that lead to this state of affairs. Therefore Paulo is blamed for the break up of Mariam’s marriage just as Sosha is blamed for the break up of George’s marriage. However, in the case of the former, Mariam’s
parents apportion the blame to both parties and believe that their marriage had been sacrificed on the altar of wanderlust and desire for excitement. If they had settled down to the life of householders with their children, their marriage could have been saved. There is as usual a flood of regrets and a whole lot of might have beens. The question of a second marriage arises but Mariam is not too interested.

It is not too difficult to find a suitable spouse for a girl who has a dowry or property in her name. However, it must be done at the right time and not when one feels inclined to enter into an alliance as a kind of last resort. This is what happens to Eli. When she realizes that her good friend Karan has no honourable intentions she decides to return home and marry her childhood sweetheart Benjamin. She is, unfortunately, a year too late because the latter had married the previous year. Sarah has been too busy with her medical profession that she has forgotten to marry. The musician Elena has a casual relationship with an Englishman but she runs away when the man demands greater commitment from her. The beautician Ammini has a kind of clinical companionship with her husband. She buries her natural inclinations within her beauty parlour and he in endless cups of tea and a horde of newspapers.

In Syrian Christian households once a man or woman is married he or she becomes the exclusive property of the spouse and out of
bounds for everyone, even those who have the purest of good intentions. This is why Anna is not welcomed by Mariam the wife of Yohan when the former pays them a visit even though she is his father’s brother’s daughter. When girls are married off they are not expected to go to their parents whenever they feel like it but are expected to adjust to their new life whatever the circumstances.

The custom of arranging marriages so zealously followed by the Syrian Christians thus serves in a great degree to cement the relationship between families. It is to be noted that when the members of at least three families are involved in the process there is greater chance for their decisions to be more binding upon the bride, the groom and their families. The greater involvement of the elders acts as brake upon hasty and impulsive actions taken by the youngsters. The elders also take on the role of mediators and counselors who guide the bark of marriage safely through troubled waters. However, with marriages being arranged without mediators in today’s world, the chances for rough sailing are greater. This, perhaps, accounts for the large number of counseling centers run by the churches and by private agencies where the single largest problem is that of differences in marital life.