Chapter 4

The Syrian Christians and the Caste System

The Syrian Christians trace their lineage to the Nambudiri families that had accepted Christianity attracted by the words and deeds of St. Thomas the Apostle of Jesus Christ who came to Kerala in 52 AD as part of his mission of bringing the Gospel unto the ends of the earth. The Nambudiris are Malayalee Brahmins and as such enjoyed the status accorded to the upper castes. The principles of observing caste with all its privileges and restrictions, so much a part of the life of the Nambudiris continued without change even after the Nambudiris became Christians. L.W. Brown in his work, The Indian Christians of St. Thomas considers that the Syrian Christians lived in two worlds at the same time. In church they worshipped the one God but out of church they observed omens and propitious days like their Hindu neighbours. This was because of two chief factors:

On the one hand the Syrians had an intense pride of race and tradition, summed up in their claim to St. Thomas as their apostle, which made them exclusive. On the other hand the unit of the Hindu society was the caste and the Christian desire to continue as a separate closed community was to the non-Christian not only acceptable but inevitable (qtd. in Koshy :17).
Thus the Syrian Christians considered themselves as a caste and was accepted so by others. They ranked themselves equal to the Nairs. Each caste lower to the Nairs who make up the lowest rank of the upper castes, was expected to observe certain customs and regulations. The upper castes insisted that these rules and regulations should be rigidly adhered. Therefore it was quite common for members of the lower castes and those who were beyond the pale of any caste- the untouchables- to make themselves scarce in the presence of their betters. They always stood at a distance for fear of polluting the upper castes and always covered their mouths with their hands for fear of corrupting the former with their breath. Those who belonged to castes lower than the Nairs sat far away from the Nambudiris at mealtimes. As for the untouchables, food was served to them on plantain leaves inside a hole in the ground in order to ensure the least pollution from them. So rigid were the rules that governed caste that Swami Vivekananda condemned Kerala and its society as a madhouse. Some of this rigidity lessened with the coming of the English missionaries but not enough to accept those who were out of the caste, the untouchables. After independence the lot of the lower castes and the untouchables was mitigated by constitutional practices which gave them the advantage of reservation in education and employment. In Kerala many of the old practices of warding off pollution etc. were abolished by law. Equal opportunities are given to all
by law. Justice K.T.Thomas in his memoirs entitled *Honey Bees of Solomon* quotes one of his judgements thus,

> caste has been buried fathoms down by the Constitution of India and what remains now is only a fossil for the students of social subjects to conduct researches. (148)

Yet it is not easy to shake off customs and beliefs which have been followed for several generations; it is even more difficult to slough off attitudes that have been taken for granted for ages. The two English writers, Frances Collins and Dorothy Clark Wilson, are quite aware of the caste system in the land and have no hesitation in using caste names. The four Syrian Christian authors whose works are studied here writing in the last decade of the twentieth century take care not to use caste names except in the case of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Caste names have become problematic though they are used freely in order to avail of the benefits offered by the government. And yet though one may speak of equality before the law and in the church, it is an indisputable fact that Syrian Christians will neither give nor take in marriage those who belong to the lower castes. Priests have to fight a losing battle if they want Syrian Christians to worship God along with the newly converted low caste members of the church. Many are the tradition bound village churches in Central Kerala which hold separate services in the same church for the upper and the lower castes. In some cases
separate churches are built by the lower castes or untouchables, Dalits as they call themselves. The constitutions of all the Syrian Christian churches talk about equality for all in the sight of God and the Church, but the fact of the matter remains that the more democratic churches follow a policy of reservation for the Dalits. Such reservation itself points to the fact that in actual life, there is no equality as promised in the Christian faith.

While the Dalits make a frantic effort to climb up the social ladder, the Syrian Christians exert themselves to prevent them from doing so. The self esteem of the lower castes is thus bruised and so many of them, especially the educated, go about with a large chip on their shoulder. The lower castes are now no longer those who had been cruelly treated and humiliated by their upper caste masters. On the other hand, they are now most conscious of their rights and privileges. They have also made themselves a good vote bank for greedy politicians and are able to command power in their common entity as Dalit Christians.

Caste is dealt with in one way or the other in all the six works studied. The question of colour also creeps in mainly in Fault Lines. While The Slayer Slain talks about caste, it is more concerned with slavery which was a fact of life in Kerala in the nineteenth century. In fact the whole novel is about the spiritual redemption of the rich Syrian Christian landholder Koshy Curien by his slave Poulosa. The slave slays
the slayer, his master, with the weapon of Christian love and thus proves to him that slave and master are both one in the sight of God. It must be remembered that this novel was written, “for the instruction of the young” (SS 1) by Rev. and Mrs. Collins who as missionaries had the sacred duty of bringing the Word of God to the heathen. Though they were familiar with slavery in their own land and with the slave trade that defaced all Christendom, they were not all that conversant with the stranglehold of caste which is part of the very psyche of the Indian and the Keralite. Therefore it was possible for Rev. Richard Collins to imagine a condition when all men are united in the love of Jesus Christ.

But Mrs. Collins in whose mind the story had first sprouted was more realistic in her attitude to caste. The very first chapter tells about the general attitude to slaves. They had accepted Christianity and wished to keep Sunday holy so that they could go and worship the Lord in the little church they had built for themselves. Their master, egged on by his self seeking overseers, does not concede to their request. When they politely refuse to work on Sunday, promising to work for longer hours in order to make up for the time lost, the irate master strikes a blow at Poulosa the leader of the slaves. This blow catches Poulosa’s grandchild on the head and kills it. Though Koshy Curien is responsible for the death of the child he is not prosecuted because the life of the slave belongs to the master. His conscience, however, gives him no respite.
That is why he does not scold his mother or his daughter too much when they go to the house of Poulosa to minister to the weak slave. But he is angry enough to exclaim that Mariam should not have gone near the slave. He says,

> It cannot be that my child would degrade herself by such polluting contact. No, my child is a Syrian and neither Chogan nor slave could come near enough to her to hear her speak. (SS 42)

The slave knows his place very well and tries to shy away from Mariam when she offers him the herbal medicine concocted by her grandmother. It was Mariam who had first told him all about Jesus. It is this simple faith that gives him the strength to ask his master to allow the slaves to worship in their church on Sunday. Mariam does not ask him to forget his place but she makes him aware of that better land promised by Jesus Christ to all who believe in Him. It is again this belief in true Christian love that makes Poulosa forget his age and weakness and plunge into the flooded river in order to save Mariam from a watery grave. Later at the end of the story Koshy Curien is able to track down his missing slave and bring him back home after making the confession that the latter is a better Christian. He even goes onto affirm that Paulosa is “more fit to be my teacher than my slave.” (SS 100)
At the end of the novel we see the slave and the master sitting together and eating at the same table on the occasion of the marriage of Mariam to the impoverished evangelist Mathew. This is no doubt the fancy of the author who is unable to comprehend the deep rooted nature of caste in the Indian psyche. An even more far fetched matter is the introduction of the blind old Brahmin who lives in the house next door to that of Koshy Curien’s. The mystery regarding the old man is unravelled at the end when he reveals that he is the uncle of Mariam’s mother. He had lost her in the crowds at the holy Benares. After a great deal of enquiry he had been able to track her to the orphanage where she had been cared for by Christian missionaries. She had been happy there and had found her life partner in Koshy Curien. The old Brahmin had not wanted to disrupt the even tenor of her life, so he had not revealed his identity but had remained in the background enjoying the calm serenity of her life and sharing in the happiness of her children particularly Mariam. He had been much impressed by Mariam’s simple and strong belief in Jesus. Mariam and the other children had also noticed that though the old man wore the sacred cord he did not look happy, also he did not seem to be afraid of pollution like others of his caste because, “he asked us to come near him; and he put his hand on our heads, and he did it so tenderly, as if he were blessing us.”(SS 70) Mariam believed that the old man would be truly happy if he were to
become a Christian but her grandmother scoffed at the idea because no one had ever heard of a Brahmin becoming a Christian! The wedding day of Mariam was special for more than one reason because not only had the old man revealed his blood tie with Mariam’s mother but he also declared that he had accepted Christianity because the “Shasters” (SS 69) that he had studied were no solace to him in the evening of his life. He gave up his Brahminhood with all its rules and restrictions. So he has no trouble in sharing in the food served at the wedding feast or even in holding the hand of the untouchable slave.

The missionaries of the Church Missionary Society who had come to Kerala in order to reform the ancient Syrian church did succeed to a certain degree. Many of the rituals which had choked up the essential teachings of Jesus Christ had been pruned down. However, there were not many converts from the educated and upper caste, the ones who flocked into the Anglican churches were mainly those who belonged to the lower castes who were attracted by the promise of equality and the food that was given them. It was therefore a great feather in the cap if the missionaries were able to influence the upper caste Hindus to accept Christianity. The old Brahmin converted to Christianity is perhaps a wish fulfillment on the part of Rev. Collins though Rev. Joseph Peet reports the conversion of a Brahmin in the letter he sends to the Church Missionary Society which is printed in the
Annual Report of the Society (*Proceedings, 1839-40*). This is an occasion that is the rarest of the rare.

*Take My Hands* does not make a lot of mention about caste though it is an ever present reality from which there is no escape. But because Mary Verghese is a doctor and one who is truly faithful to both the Hippocratic Oath and her own commitment as a Christian, she is not bothered by any considerations of caste. The only mention about caste is found in the early chapters which speak of the childhood of Mary. As she comes from an upper caste family of wealthy landowners, she is aware of the various castes who are dependent on her father for a living. There are the Pulayas, the Kanakkas who are professional coconut pickers and the like, the Chogans or Ezhavas who do not have any fixed profession but are available to do anything that needs doing. Like his Hindu counterparts, Mary’s father presents gifts of clothing to his dependents on festive occasions like Onam when they bring him gifts of the farm produce they have cultivated. There are also a number of squatters who also experience the bounty of Mary’s household when they are given baskets of goodies on special occasions.

In *Fault Lines* the author is more exercised by colour and social status rather than caste as such. As Meena Alexander belongs to the upper middle class among the Syrian Christians a large number of servants – ayahs, cooks maids, gardeners and the like – pass through her
life in Tiruvela and Kozhencheri. These men and women earn their livelihood by serving affluent families like hers. Most of them are servants of long standing, loyal and trustworthy, almost like members of the family. Her earliest memory is about Marya, a winsome beauty, fair and well endowed. She was a junior maid entrusted with the exclusive duty of looking after Meena the child. She had all the men at her feet including the brawny Verghese who looked on her as a Kashmiri goddess. There were also Chedathi, Chinna the cook, Narayani the maid: all of whom kept the wheels of the Kurichiethu and Kannadickal households smoothly oiled. In Allahabad there was Motrilal who made soft chappathis and who saw Meena Alexander’s mother through the early years of her marriage. Her paternal grandfather at Kozhencheri was every bit a feudal landlord who doled out wages to the many workmen who laboured in his rice fields, his coconut and rubber plantations. He was very careful in observing the niceties of class. The children of the family were not supposed to play with the children of the workers because the latter were so much below them in status. In Tiruvalla, however, things were not so rigid, Meena Alexander could often be found playing with the milkman’s child or with whoever happened to be most handy. Perhaps this was because her maternal grandparents had been Gandhians and the freedom struggle had erased out class differences. Yet the author noted that though her beloved Ilya had given
away some of his property he was quite content to administer to the rest as a benevolent land owner.

The question of colour too comes close to that of race and caste. Right from childhood Meena Alexander was conscious of the fact that she came nowhere near the Syrian Christian concept of beauty which believed that a girl should be fair, moderately tall with pleasing features. This fact was especially rubbed into her by her paternal grandmother Mariamma who possessed all these features. She always sympathised with her grand daughter for having inherited her mother’s dusky complexion but she was also hopeful that with careful grooming and accomplishments, she might still manage to find a suitable husband. In Sudan, the question of colour was not a burden but this is not the case either in England or even in America which is supposed to be the land of equal opportunity. Meena Alexander recalls the attempt that had been made to humiliate her even in her department on trumped up charges. Another disturbing incident of covert racial prejudice was when three women poets from Third World were not officially included in a session of poetry reading. She also relates the incident when she was abused by a white man for daring to lean on his motor bike which was parked in the street. Such abuse happened merely because she was a black. Colour has a lot to do with the colonial question and Meena Alexander feels that it has sunk deep into the psyche of both coloniser and colonised.
Caste and class do play an important role in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*. Seemon, the general factotum of Lissy’s grandmother in the Pallissery house is as much a member of the family as the children themselves. In fact Cheriachen cannot even remember a time when there was no Seemon in the house because the latter had been brought there as a kid by Cheriachen’s father. He is loyal to the core and the family puts up with his irritating habits of speaking out of turn, of shirking work, of spending a large part of his money in the local toddy shop. In fact Lissy’s grandmother would be most bereft if there had been no Seemon to run errands and to guard the house when she paid a fortnight’s visit to Trivandrum in the last year of her son’s stay there. Another loyal help is the washerwoman called Aley. She has a daughter who was a nurse in one of the Gulf countries and did not like her mother to do menial work in other houses. So Aley had ceased going to the other houses and would go only to the Kunnumpurathu house once in a while to help with the washing. This was because she was so deeply indebted to the family. In Trivandrum Kuttiamma has no servant at all to help her and does all the work herself with occasional help from Lissy.

Caste comes to play when Lissy comes into contact with Jose the Union worker in her bank. She is surprised to know that he is a member of her church though she had never seen him anywhere there. His name –Jose– is evidently not a Syrian Christian name, and he also belongs to
Vellakad which is predominantly a centre for Christian converts who belong to the low caste. His own bitter declamation that he belonged to the church within her church is enough to show Lissy that he is not of the same class or community. And yet she finds herself drawn to the man mainly because he seeks her out. The attentions of a young man to a woman who has been rejected by so many families is true balm for her wounded ego. There is nothing very physically attractive about Jose because he goes about in an unkempt, unwashed manner. There is about him the smell of stale sweat which puts people off. Besides, his tongue is so abrasive that only Lissy who is soft hearted can tolerate him. Jose sweeps Lissy off her feet and proposes to her without even giving her a chance to object. There are many points that she does not very much like in Jose but because she feels honour bound to keep her promise she does not heed the well meaning advice of her friends. She does not like Jose’s trying to ride rough shod over her and forcing the Union’s commands on her. And yet she is unable to reject him because she can remember the pain of rejection that she had experienced when all other suitors turned her down just because her father could not afford a big dowry. The scales fall from her eyes only when Jose in a bout of drunkenness reveals the real reason for his wanting to marry her in the church in front of all her Syrian Christian relatives and friends. All the bitterness that had been pent up over the years is released in a flood when he re- lives
the insult that he had experienced many years ago when the young daughter of the Syrian Christian priest of the church had declined to drink from the same glass that he had used just because he was a person of a low caste. It was revenge that he was after, against the whole Syrian Christian community for having insulted him so many years ago. And as he is marrying Lissy who belongs to one of the prominent Syrian Christian families revenge will be even sweeter. Revenge is not a good foundation to build a marriage on and this confession made by Jose has Lissy seriously considering whether it will be worthwhile to give up for this man so riddled by complexes the love and security afforded by the family and by the community. This feeling is further reinforced when she goes home to Pallisery only to find that the news has preceded her and has left the whole family in a state of shocked disbelief. It is only after Lissy gets the job of Probationery Officer that she decides to live her life in the way she wants instead of being browbeaten by either her orthodox parents or unsuitable suitors like Jose.

The attitude to caste is of paramount importance in *The God of Small Things*. Caste colours the whole story and is perhaps the single factor that runs through and below the surface manifesting itself in terrible events. Caste here is also an attitude of the mind and is as important to Ammu and her children, who though of the upper caste, feel that they have no space or place in Ayemenem. It is therefore
possible for them to identify with the outcaste Velutha who is an 
untouchable and therefore technically without a space of his own.

Velutha, his father Vellya Pappen and his brother Kuttappen belong to 
the caste of toddy tappers and coconut pickers called Paravans. They are 
untouchables and have to stand faraway from their “touchable”(GST 72) 
masters, cover their mouths while speaking so that their presence, their 
very breath should not pollute the latter. There was even a time, 
when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a 
broom sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or 
Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by 
accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint (GST 74).

The household at Ayemenem is proud of its Syrian Christian 
heritage, particularly the fact that it is the household of Rev. John Ipe 
who, as a child, had the singular privilege of being blessed by the 
supreme head of the church, the Patriarch. Even the cook, Kochu Maria 
is proud of her Syrian Christian status. She is poor and works as cook in 
the Ayemenem household. However, she clings firmly to the markers 
which indicate her Syrian Christian status. She wears the traditional 
Syrian Christian dress, even though much of it is hidden under the apron 
that the mistress insists on her donning. Even though the lobes of her 
ears have torn and had to be restitched by the doctor, she persists in 
wearing the heavy traditional ornaments which cause her ear lobes to
dangle and swing to her shoulders. She plays an important role in the lives of the other characters.

Velutha is no ordinary untouchable whose life is just a round of hard work and hard drink. Right from childhood he had great dexterity with his fingers and an ability to fashion anything. This quality of his had been encouraged by Mammachi who prevailed upon his father to send him to the school for untouchables which had been founded by the Rev. John Ipe. Velutha had been a good student easily absorbing everything he was taught. In addition, he also attended the carpentry classes given by a German carpenter named Johann Klein. As the master was a German he was not affected by considerations of caste and so he taught all who wished to learn. Thus Velutha spent all his afternoons at Klein’s workshop mastering the art of carpentry. As soon as he qualified, he did most of the carpentry work for Mammachi. He also had a way with all kinds of machines and soon became an expert at assembling and working all the machines that were used in the factory.

However, once he became all this he began to grow away from his own community, particularly his father. Vellya Pappen perceived that education and self esteem had changed his son’s attitude and behaviour. He was now no longer the cringing Paravan always conscious of his own untouchability, but a capable young man sure of his own worth. He tried to force his son back into the old mould of
untouchable but to no avail because education had given Velutha the
ability to think for himself and he saw no real reason to be content with
his fate as untouchable. In fact so fed up did he become of his father’s
constant bickering that he went away and was not heard of for four
years. When he returned he was quickly appointed at the factory by
Mammachi and paid a salary which was less than that of a touchable
carpenter and more than the one given to an untouchable worker. He
was allowed full freedom in the factory and saw to the machines and
other equipment in the factory as well as building the sliding half door in
the house exclusively to satisfy Chacko’s “men’s needs.” (GST 75)
Though Mammachi realizes the true worth of Velutha, she is just as
conscious about the fact that he is an untouchable and firmly believes
that “he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the premises at all,
and allowed to touch things that the touchables had touched.” (GST 77).
The other workers in the factory also feel that Velutha has placed
himself above his station in life and are jealous of him. Comrade Pillai
also plays the caste card. He knows that Velutha is a card holding
member of the Communist party of which he is the local committee
man. But Comrade Pillai does not approve of Velutha because he is an
untouchable. Though the Communist party does not profess to accept
caste it is indeed a fact that some of its members are not averse to
playing the communal and caste card when needed. This is exactly what
Pillai does after Velutha has been removed from the scene. He organizes the workers of the factory and demands compensation for the life of Velutha. It is unfortunate for his political aspirations that the factory collapsed burdened by debt. Many of the workers lost their jobs and Comrade Pillai his position in the Party.

The desire to get rid of Velutha because he is an untouchable is strong in Baby Kochamma who wonders how Ammu can stand the smell of the Paravan, it is just as strong in Mammachi whose imagination is filled with pictures of the black skinned Paravan making love with her white skinned daughter. It is also the reason why the upper caste Inspector Thomas Mathew does not make further enquiries about Velutha but simply gets his policemen to thrash him to death because he cannot tolerate the thought of the untouchable enjoying the touchable. The caste feeling therefore is predominant in the minds of all. Even Vellya Pappen cannot brook such a contravention of custom, such a flouting of caste laws by his untouchable son and the touchable daughter of his mistress. This is what causes him to confide in Mammachi the whole story of the secret meetings between Ammu and Velutha which finally result in such an explosion as had never been witnessed before. In the novel we find a close bonding between the four people who have no space in the general scheme of things. Ammu, her children and
Velutha the untouchable are all victims of a society that crushes them for daring to break the rules that govern caste.

*Something Barely Remembered* does not have anything blatantly caste in it though there are references to servants. There is also a mention of racial prejudice and discrimination in the matter of Isak, the Syrian Christian who has settled in Philadelphia. He is very wary of the negroes of America, paying no heed to the fact that he too is dark and classed as one of the browns by the whites in America. Many of the Syrian Christian families have their own trusted servants. Though below the family in social status they are treated as members of the family and they not only cook and clean, but also advise, defend, protect and sometimes even scold those members who do not behave as they are expected to. Shantamma, the wiry cook scolds Mariam for crying her eyes out for her unfaithful husband Paulo. She advises Mariam to get on with the business of living instead of crying over spilt milk. Pappu Pillai, the seventy year old odd job man has no compunction in killing off hundreds of fish bred in the tank by Mariam’s father when he is asked by Mariam to get rid of the snake that had got into the water tank. Long acquaintance with the family has given him a kind of immunity from their ire and the family forgives him for his actions. Even the beggars that come to the house are no longer a submissive lot throwing themselves on the mercy of the master or the mistress. The beggar who
approaches Elena and her mother refuses to go until he has browbeaten them into giving more money than he deserved.

All the works studied thus serve to show that caste is an ever present reality in Kerala. Even the reformist churches which profess not to believe in caste are also forced to acknowledge the fact that it is not an easy task to remove the feeling of caste from the minds of the parishioners. Caste is all very well if no one breaks its unwritten laws, particularly the love laws. If anyone dares to do so all hell will break loose and the fate of the lovers will be sealed by either death or exile from their respective communities. Class considerations also weigh a great deal. Those who belong to the servant class are most acceptable provided they do not attempt to rise above their station. They may play small roles in the drama of life like Kochu Maria in The God of Small Things but they are not expected to go beyond that. Colour too is another important factor and the black colour of the skin causes one to be treated by whites in America in the same way one treats people of the low castes in Kerala. In both cases the victims are deprived of the space that should be theirs.