Chapter 8
The Syrian Christians and the Family

The institution of family is very important for the Syrian Christians as it is for all the other communities in Kerala. In the case of the Syrian Christians, however, this attachment to the family is more evident because they were the ones who first stepped beyond the bounds of Kerala to seek their fortunes in different lands both in India and abroad. The patriarchy of Christendom was the social system practised by the Syrian Christians unlike the matriarchal system followed by the Nairs. Therefore the patriarch of the family, usually the grandfather, was the most important person in the family. He was the central authority and his word was law. Unlike the patriarch of the Nair household who took care of the landed wealth of his sister’s family and not that of his own, the Syrian Christian patriarch was concerned with the affairs of his own family, his sons and their families. His daughters were his responsibility until they were married off after which they became the responsibility of the families to which they were given in marriage. If the father was particularly fond of his daughter he cared for her even after marriage. In some cases if the daughter was unfortunate enough to become a widow at a young age she would return to her father’s household. If the daughter died in child birth, her child would be brought up by his mother’s household. In those days bringing up one
more child was not a problem at all because each family had a large number of children. In the earlier days when modern methods of family planning were not known or practised, large families were the rule rather than the exception. It was quite common to see both the mother of the house and her married daughters in various stages of pregnancy. Sometimes the uncle or the aunt would be a few years younger than his or her niece or nephew. If the mother were to die in childbirth her child would be fed by whichever nursing mother was present in the house. The squabbles among the children would be dealt with impartially by the seniors in the house and nobody ever questioned the punishment meted out to the guilty.

The children were brought up to obey their father in all matters. Caring for each other was the accepted practice and the sons of the family considered it their duty to look after the household particularly when their father was debilitated or deceased. They did not have to be prodded into doing what was expected of them. The practice of the dowry system was one way in which the welfare of the daughters was ensured. It was quite usual for the dowry brought into the family by the son to be used to make up the dowry of the daughter. In many cases daughters were regarded as a burden because they had to be provided with good dowries if they were to make good marriages. Conversely there were also households where the daughters worked their fingers to
the bone in order to provide their brothers with the comforts of life. This happened usually when the daughter was the elder and the father or the mother had passed away. This state of affairs, though not exclusive to the Syrian Christians, nevertheless, was more common among them.

With the coming of the CMS missionaries and the establishment of the school for girl children by Amelia Dorothea Baker, the wife of the missionary Rev. Henry Baker, the position of the daughters in the household underwent a sea change. Equipped with the rudiments of basic liberal education which gave them much needed self esteem, these daughters proved to be worthwhile helpmates and devoted mothers with a great sense of destiny. Education proved to be the gateway to opportunity which in turn gave financial security to the family. Educated mothers instilled in all their children, particularly the daughters, the need to achieve progress in all matters. Such progress could be realized only through education. The close knit nature of the family continued even after the children obtained the western liberal education given at the schools set up by the missionaries. The sons obtained good employment in the government offices. As for the daughters they also were in demand as school teachers particularly in the primary section where they functioned more as mothers than as teachers. It is a fact that these primary school teachers took the place of mothers at school. The Lower Primary Section of the Baker Memorial Girls’ Higher Secondary
School, even today nearly two hundred years after its inception, have the tiny tots address their teachers as *Kochamma* which literally means ‘little mother.’ These dedicated women were not well paid but their meagre salaries did not prevent them from giving of their best to the young minds left in their charge. Many great men and women had their first lessons taught by this dedicated band of women. Justice K.T. Thomas, former Judge of the Supreme Court of India was one such luminary who had his primary education at the Miss Baker’s School, which is now called the Baker Memorial Girls’ Higher Secondary School. In his autobiography, *The Honeybees of Solomon*, he recalled with gratitude the committed teachers of the Miss Baker’s School who were the first to mould his character (10).

Another field in which women were in great demand was in the field of nursing. While many of the women had to suffer the stigma of social ostracism as nurses, their earnings were most welcome in the family. Many parents, particularly fathers, looked upon such selfless daughter nurses as an easy source of money. Therefore they made no attempt to correct the contempt with which nurses were generally regarded and only made a cursory search for a suitable groom. They were not sincere about this as having the daughter married off would mean a drastic fall in their income as her earnings after marriage, by rights and custom, belonged to her husband and not her father. This kind
of attitude is seen in other communities too but it is more prevalent among the Syrian Christians probably because they were the ones who first experienced the benefits of education. It is also to be noted that very few of these women who were the bread winners of the family ever thought of striking out for themselves. Instead they tried their best to see that their families were set on a proper economic footing before they even began to think of themselves. Often the latter never happened because the former was never realized before the woman passed marriageable age. It is therefore quite common to see maiden aunts in many households, living out discontented lives having had to sacrifice their own happiness for the welfare of their family. There are also cases where maiden aunts live with the family as unpaid servants because they have no other place to go to. If the fathers died intestate the plight of these women is shocking. Some measure of justice was restored after the Mary Roy court case against the Christian Succession Act. This is not to say that all fathers and brothers were cruel to their daughters and sisters; on the other hand, there are cases where the brothers are left with little after having paid huge sums of money as dowries for their sisters.

As the number of members seeking employment outside the home turf increased, the old social system of joint family began to break up. The elder sons began to build houses of their own away from the ancestral house- usually in their work place- where they settled with
their own nuclear family. According to the Syrian Christian practice the 
youngest son inherited the ancestral house and also the responsibility of 
looking after his aged parents. Therefore he remained at home looking 
after the family concerns and seeing to the needs of his parents. Those 
who left the native place in search of fresh woods and pastures new did 
not break off their links with the homeland or the family. Instead, once 
they had established themselves in their new land, they tried to help the 
other members of their family either with money or with employment in 
the place where they had established themselves. Thus we have whole 
families who have migrated from their native lands to the busy 
metropolises of Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, Bangalore, Hyderabad to 
name but a few. The cities of Kerala too have had an influx of the Syrian 
Christian population, particularly the capital city where people settled 
down following employment in the government offices. This settlement 
of the Syrian Christians does not stop with the cities of India. On the 
other hand by mid twentieth century it is possible to note a movement 
abroad at first to Singapore and Malaysia, later to the tropical countries 
of the African continent, then to the promised land of America and now 
to the oil rich Gulf countries. Those who went to these countries also 
made it possible for others to follow in their footsteps and seek 
employment in these places. They settled down in these countries of 
their adoption and became lawful, productive citizens. Or they returned
to their homelands where they settled down in houses which they built in the latest fashion and furnished with no thought for the expense involved.

The most important point to be noted is that the members of the family continued to be very attached to each other in spite of the physical distance among them. Those who had the means supported those who did not, in terms of money and employment. The family closed its ranks during special events like weddings and funerals. These were not only occasions of joy and sorrow but times to catch up on news about all the other members of the family. In the past these were occasions when the elder male members of the family took the leadership in arranging all matters while the elder female members exhibited their prowess in cooking. They would descend on the house en masse and take over the reins of government well in advance. These days when there are enterprises which see to every matter with regard to weddings and funerals the expertise of the older generation is no longer looked for. However, these occasions continue to serve the purpose of renewing acquaintance and friendship though there is no longer the fellowship brought by the sharing of toil and trouble.

Apart from the family gatherings on the occasions of weddings and funerals there is now the gathering of the clan in the form of annual family meets or Kudumba Yogam. This annual meeting of the family
with all the generations from the oldest to the youngest takes place on a particular day in the year usually on a public holiday. The days that are favourite with most families are May 1, August 15, January 26, and in some cases December 25. These days are chosen because they are known public holidays and people could plan for the event much in advance particularly families living outside Kerala and abroad. They could plan their annual holiday and make their itinerary around this central event. The programme for the day is also planned in advance and competitions are organized for the big day. The usual practice in such family meets is to start the function with a short service of Thanksgiving followed by the members introducing themselves and welcoming new members into the fold. Games and sports for the younger members and walking down memory lane for the elder members make up the rest of the day’s function. The whole programme is rounded off with prize distribution and a concluding prayer. While these are the main programmes of the day there is also a great deal of private conversation between individuals and small groups. These buzz sessions are truly the ones that serve to knit the family together by gathering all the scattered skeins and making out the family pattern of relationships. They give a feeling of oneness, of fellowship, of a great sense of belonging. The children of mothers and fathers who have made their nests outside Kerala and India feel this sense of continuity, this realization that they
make up the latest generation of a family that has roots that stretch far back into the past. This feeling is further enhanced by the writing of family histories which traces or tries to trace the genealogy of the families right up to one of the Nambudiris supposed to be baptised by St. Thomas. These family histories serve as a ready reckoner to trace out relationships and connections. In a bygone era the elder women of the family used to recount the relationships that extended among the members either by birth or marriage. Such unveiling of intricate relationships is now taken over by these family histories or Kudumba Charithram. Most of the well known Syrian Christian families have such histories of their own.

The family in its extended form is most necessary in the matter of arranging marriages. When young daughters and sons reach the age of marriage, aunts, uncles, cousins- by blood and marriage- keep an eye open for a suitable bride or groom. If anyone suitable comes up the fact is immediately conveyed to the parents of the eligible bachelor or maiden. The person who suggested the proposal then becomes the intermediary through whom the two families make contact. The suitability of the proposal hangs largely on the credibility of the go between who becomes in a way responsible for the success or failure of the marriage.
Even when the proposals are brought by brokers it is customary for the parents of the bride or groom to make enquiries about the parties concerned through relatives. The enquiries made by these relatives at either the workplace or at home, obtain more credence than the exaggerated descriptions of the broker. K. M. Mathew in his book *Annamma* recalls how the question of his marriage came up and how his elder brother Unnonichayan was the one who went to see the ‘girl’ on behalf of the boy (8). The approval of the elders was, at that time, all that was necessary for the marriage to take place. This practice is followed even in today’s world of e-matrimonial.

When a member of the family falls ill the others help the sufferer in terms of money, advice and even by their physical presence. The sorrow and suffering of one is shared by all the others and they try to sustain the sick person with their prayers. This sharing is often a great psychological boost to the sick person because it gives him the feeling of being loved and cared for, it soothes him to believe that he means a great deal to those who love him.

It must not be thought that the Syrian Christian family is an ideal social set up in which all members live in close harmony and fraternal feeling. On the contrary the Syrian Christians too are people who have rough tempers and who tend to be furious when provoked. Thus it is not uncommon to find brothers at feud with each other, sons and daughters
who have been cast out of the parental house for refusing to toe the parental line, mothers and fathers who have been deprived of their life savings and pushed out of the home by unfeeling children and their spouses. There are even occasions when family brawls have resulted in murder and mayhem. In the modern world it is a fact that more and more homes for the aged are coming up in order to house the old and infirm men and women who have been left destitute. The old system when the family took care of its own is rapidly coming to an end mainly because most of the children have settled down in distant lands. Those who live and work abroad cannot throw away their jobs in order to come back to their home land just in order to look after their parents. Some children persuade their parents to make their home with them but transplanting old people is a most risky business. The longing for the scent of their native land makes them sick and in many cases they return home to live alone with servants to see to their needs. If they cannot return they simply pine and die knowing that they are a burden on their children. In many cases the most important need for old people is to feel wanted and loved by their dear ones. If the loved ones are too far away or busy in their own world, there is great need for the feeling of security. Thus it is that we find that many of the old age homes, especially the ones run by the church, also have a section where old people stay as paying guests by which they retain a modicum of independence and preserve their self
esteem. At the same time they have the security of knowing that they will be well looked after if they fall ill besides the added advantage of having the companionship of others like them.

In the case of the Syrian Christian families of the present age it is possible to see that the joint family system is once again coming into vogue. This is mainly because the present day grandparents are younger and in some ways better preserved than their forebears. The sons and their wives go out to work leaving their children in the efficient and loving care of their parents. As the children are with the grandparents the parents can go to work with an easy mind without having to worry about part time servants who do not turn up in time or full time servants who are more concerned about their own welfare rather than that of the children entrusted to them. As every house has only one child or two children of either sex it is possible for parents in law to love their sons’ wives as their own daughters. In the same manner it is possible for the daughters in law also to return that love in like measure. Therefore the household chores are shared by all members including the male members who no longer sit around reading newspapers and drinking coffee. Everyone has to plough in if the work has to be done properly and speedily. The grand children grow up enjoying the love and care of their grandparents who indulge them in their harmless whims. If the workplace of the children is away from that of the ancestral house it is
also quite common for parents to go and stay with the children in order to help them tide over crises. It has also become a custom for grandparents to bring up their grandchildren until they reach school going age especially if their parents are working abroad.

Yet the rate of divorce among Syrian Christians is shooting up. The probable reason for this is that the young men and women of the present day are less tolerant than those of a previous generation. Economic stability has brought into being a society of youngsters who are strangers to any kind of hardship and therefore unable to empathise with those less fortunate. Equal opportunities have made it possible for women to take up all kinds of jobs even those which were formerly male preserves. There is no economic dependence of the sexes, on the other hand the throw away culture of the west is rapidly infiltrating into Kerala. Hence divorce and cohabitation do not raise as many eyebrows in upper and middle class society as they would have in the past. The sacrifices involved in child bearing and rearing are now no longer acceptable to the younger generation. Hence many couples prefer to limit themselves to single children or none at all. These days women have a choice even in the kind of delivery they wish and it is found that those opting for the Caesarean section have increased many times. The days when childbirth was at the maternal home supervised by the elder women in the family under the watchful eye of the midwife have now
become part of the past. Instead the labour takes place within the white walls of the Labour Room in the presence of indifferent nurses and harassed doctors or in the green nothingness of the operation theatre. Here also it is possible to note a paradox viz. the pregnant woman opts out of the pain of parturition but meekly submits to the ministrations of the experienced woman who comes to give her the traditional herbal bath and massage in the days following the delivery. She meekly drinks the bitter Ayurvedic medicines and rigorously follows the diet prescribed perhaps because there is the promise of rejuvenation and greater vitality after this course of treatment.

Thus it is possible to note that the attitudes in the family have undergone a great deal of change especially in the last century. The old joint family has broken up and has been replaced by a large number of nuclear families. The ties of family continue to be strong enough to cause people to want to get together at least once a year. Thus they congregate at the ancestral house during festive occasions or during the annual school holidays. The grandparents spend a happy but strenuous time with their children and grandchildren. At the end of the holiday the children return with fond memories and their elders heave sighs of relief that all had gone smoothly. The ancestral house goes back to its usual slumber. Many of the nuclear families have regrouped as joint families with a difference. This is also because of sheer necessity. Land is scarce
and costs the earth in big cities, therefore it is easier to build a new suite of rooms to the parental house. This gives the nuclear family its own privacy and at the same time allows it to be part of the bigger family. As it is difficult to get household help it is easier and safer to leave the children in the care of the grandparents. When many people live together though tempers do get frayed, there is also a great deal of affection and emotional dependence on each other. It is this that helps families to adjust to changed circumstances particularly when one member or the other falls seriously ill. All the members of the household stir themselves to support and sustain the sick person at any cost. Those children who are not part of a greater entity than their own nuclear family think nothing of leaving their parents to the mercy of home nurses or other institutions that care for the aged and the sick for a sum of money. In this day and age people are more practical and less sentimental, relationships are blatantly economic.

The family is an important entity in all the six works studied. The nuclear family is most prominent in all the works though the joint family also impinges in more or less degree. While The Slayer Slain concentrates entirely on the nuclear family of Koshy Curien, the bigger family of aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins and grandparents are present in all the other five works. Obviously the English couple who authored The Slayer Slain were not familiar with the advantages and
disadvantages of the joint family. Hence they made no reference to this institution.

Though *Take My Hands* was written by a white American the fact that the work was the biography of Dr. Mary Verghese made it necessary for the author to speak about her family. Besides, as she had not married, the only family that Mary had was the one that encompassed her parents, brothers, sisters and their families. In the case of the other works studied the bigger family is prominent, particularly so in *The God of Small Things* where the whole story is determined by the way in which the senior members react to events. In the other three works the members of the extended family exercise a great influence though it is for the most part a subtle, indirect influence. Meena’s grandfather whom she affectionately calls Ilya fills her childhood with colorful memories in *Fault Lines*, so do the grandmothers of Lissy and Anna in *A Video, a Fridge and A Bride* and *Something Barely Remembered* respectively.

The family of Koshy Curien in *The Slayer Slain* is a well knit entity. Set in the second half of the nineteenth century the family consists of the wealthy Syrian Christian landowner named Koshy Curien, his old mother, his wife, his son George, his daughter Mariam and three more children of whom one is a baby. Koshy Curien’s wife is just a shadow of her husband with no opinions of her own, content to
follow in the wake of her husband. His mother, on the other hand, is not such a doormat. She has decided views of her own though she does not try to impose her wishes on her son. However, she pursues an independent path of her own and is always willing to share her knowledge of herbs and ayurvedic concoctions with all those in need. Like elder daughters in all communities Mariam too helps her mother with the cooking and the cleaning in the house. She also looks after her siblings and teaches them stories from the Bible. These stories ultimately gain her a great uncle, the blind old Brahmin who becomes a Christian. Koshy Curien is a true patriarch in that he makes his own decisions without consulting anyone, not even his wife. His wife is properly submissive and is most attentive of her husband’s likings even when he is most irascible Koshy Curien accords his daughter Mariam greater status than other girls of the times because she is well educated. He loves her so much that he is willing to heed her arguments and does not force her to enter into an unhappy marriage. Though very conscious of his power as the man of the house, he is also a dutiful son. This is best seen in the fact that he does not berate his mother even though he does not approve of her going as an angel of mercy to the help of Poulosa. His son George who makes his appearance only in the middle of the novel has a clear perception of the way in which eligible girls in Syrian Christian households are married off. George reminds his sister
that women have no choice in the matter of choosing their husbands and that she would have to leave the freedom of her father’s house and slave for her husband and his people until her death. It is this bleak scenario painted by George that warns Mariam that her future too would be a life of stifling restraint unless she tried to persuade her father otherwise.

The father, Koshy Curien loves his daughter Mariam more than he loves his son. This is rather incongruous in the usual patriarchal nature of Syrian Christian households where sons are considered better than daughters. The fact that Koshy Curien chose his wife from the orphanage run by the mission is more the exception than the rule. It is also far-fetched to see the old blind Brahmin as the natural uncle of Koshy Curien’s wife and easily accepted as such into the family. These happenings may be put down to the poetic license of the authors particularly in view of the fact that they were not all that familiar with the Syrian Christian way of life even though they chose to set the story in this environment.

*Take My Hands* gives a very clear picture of the importance of the family and its influence on the life of Dr. Mary Verghese. Her father had been the eldest of a family of six children. When his father passed away while he was at college in Trichinapally he had given up his education and had returned to take up the reins of managing his household. Thus he had seen to the education of his siblings. He had
seen to it that his brothers were well educated and settled in good jobs and his three sisters married off. He was very particular that all his eight children should be given the benefit of the education. Thus he saw to it that his three sons, John, George and Baby became doctors and engineers. As for his daughters all of them were given a good education before being married off to young men who were very well educated and belonged to worthy Syrian Christian households. Mary was the only exception in that the family, particularly her father, fell in with her wishes to become a doctor even though the medical profession was at that time considered not suitable for a gently bred girl. The family was very close knit embracing not only the brothers and sisters of Mary but also her father’s brother Matthew, a favourite visitor whose penchant for tea was satisfied to the full by his sister in law who provided him with tea every hour. Another favourite person of Mary was her father’s cousin Abraham who also used to visit the house regularly. Cousin Abraham’s father Uppappen or Great Uncle was a great favourite with Mary. Mary’s mother’s aunt whom she called Valiamma (Great Aunt) was another favourite. Visiting her house at Parur was a great treat for Mary and her brothers and sisters. Valiamma’s six children were as happy a crowd as Mary and her siblings, and there was a great deal of bonding among all the children particularly between Mary and her girl
cousins Kunjamma and Aleyamma even though the latter were both older than her.

The earlier chapters of the novel recount the escapades of Mary’s brothers and sisters. The brothers got into scrapes and dragged their sisters also into them. As they grew older their tastes differed but the closeness among them did not diminish. Though the final decisions were taken by the father, he did so only after consulting the rest of the family especially his sons. Thus when Mary put forward her desire to take up the medical profession her brothers at first opposed it on the grounds that it would be too arduous for her. However, when they saw that her heart was set upon it they bowed to her wishes and gave her all their support. This emotional security that was given her by her family is what sustained Mary through her life in good and bad times alike. It is fortunate that Mary’s brothers and sisters had spouses who were also devoted to the family. Mary found that with the coming of the new brothers and sisters in law, the family only expanded to contain them as well. The children that were born became part of the close knit family, cherished by not only their parents but by a host of aunts, uncles, cousins, to say nothing of the doting grandparents. The first grandchild of the house, Joy, born to Mary’s eldest sister Aleyamma was only ten years younger than Mary herself and a great source of joy to all especially his grandparents. When Mary’s sister Thankamma fell ill with
rheumatic arthritis after she delivered a girl child, it was Mary who
cared for the little infant named Omana. In a large family like Mary’s it
was only natural for the elders to care for the younger and for the
healthy to look after the sick.

Illness always brought the family together as it did when the
father had a quite serious heart attack. Mary rushed home to find her
father clinging to life by sheer effort of will. The family closed its ranks
to support Mary after the tragic accident which left her a paraplegic and
confined her to a wheelchair. During those hard times she was sustained
by the constant attention lavished upon her by her mother and sisters
who were always present at her bedside and by her brothers and brothers
in law who saw to it that she had the best care possible. Like her own
father Mary had an invincible will which caused her to fight all odds to
live a meaningful life. In all the ventures she undertook, physical,
mental and spiritual, her family was with her all the way. Though her
brothers were ready to pool their resources so that she could go to
Australia in order to study there her father had already provided for all
her expenses from the proceeds of the coconut groves of the family.
Even in her choice of specialisation which was rehabilitative hand
surgery for patients who had recovered from leprosy she had the
wholehearted support of her family even though they were at first a little
hesitant regarding her choice of subject. In all her travels in India and
abroad she always had the help, support and physical presence of the
different members of the family- brothers, sisters and their spouses,
nieces, nephews, cousins and their children. This is ample indication of
the benefits of a large family. A graphic description of the whole family
is given in the following passage:

    On December 26 the family gathered at George’s house to
bid her Godspeed, and incidentally, to have their picture
taken. Nearly all of them were there, ranged in three rows
in front of the sturdy pillars of George’s porch: the three
brothers and the three sisters with their wives and
husbands and their children. Even Appan was there, in
substance as well as spirit, his portrait propped on the
empty centre chair where he would once have sat, Amma
and Aleyamma on either side. All but one of the sixteen
grand children were there, most of them sitting cross
legged in front from curly topped Usha, John’s youngest
to Omana, Thankamma’s only daughter, now a sari clad
young woman in her teens. Mary sat in her wheel chair,
between Amma and Thankamma, her godchild Shiela at
her feet, and wondered if they would ever be all together
again (TMH 250).
In *Fault Lines* too the extended family comes into play even though Meena Alexander’s family is a nuclear family consisting of her father, mother and three daughters of whom Meena is the eldest. Her younger sisters Anna and Elsa prefer the happiness of single blessedness rather than the responsibilities of married life. Even though Meena Alexander’s marriage was a runaway one without the blessings of her parents, they soon accepted David into the family and lavished love upon Meena’s children Adam and Swati. Meena’s parents have a broad outlook on life and therefore they accept the decision of their younger daughters Anna and Elsa not to marry. In fact they did not try to persuade them into conventional marriage by resorting to any kind of emotional blackmail. Therefore it is an occasion of greater bonding when Meena comes down with her children to Thiruvella when she hears that her father has suffered a major heart attack. The three daughters and their parents are together after a long time at the ancestral house which Meena’s mother had inherited being the only child of her parents. It is at this time that Meena tries to understand the pattern of her parents’ lives and what it means for her.

Meena’s parents came from two of the prominent Syrian Christian families of the times. Her father George Alexander belonged to the Kannadickal family of Kozencheri, he was the only son along with the two daughters in the family. Meena’s mother was the only child
of K.K.Kuruvilla and Elizabeth of the Kurichiethu family which also was a renowned Syrian Christian family. Both her maternal grandparents were freedom fighters and her grandfather was also a scholar of the Mar Thoma church. In fact he had been the Principal of the Mar Thoma Seminary in Kottayam which trained young men for priesthood.

Though theirs was basically a nuclear family, Meena spent at least a quarter of a year on holiday with her mother at both the ancestral houses. As this practice continued every year she grew up experiencing the love of her grandparents and the adventure of living in houses where there were relatives of all ages visiting and staying for days together. Even though her Grandmother Kunju had passed away while Meena’s mother had been in college, she was greatly attracted to this beautiful lady who was able to strike a path of her very own.

Meena’s grandmother on the paternal side belonged to one of the oldest Syrian Christian families viz. the Sankaramangalam family which traces its origin to one of the Nambudiris originally baptized by St Thomas the Apostle. She was very proud of her ancestry and endeavoured to instill that pride in lineage in Meena also. Meena recalls the stern nature of her Kozencheri grandmother and the rigorous discipline she followed in all matters. One example of this was her straight carriage which gave her dignity and grace. She insisted that
Meena too should have an erect posture long before her teachers in her schools taught her the basic lessons of deportment. She believed in speaking her mind even though the truth may not be very palatable. At the same time in spite of her stern nature she could inspire love in others by her evident concern for them. The two velvet ribbons that she gave Meena was a kind gesture and very much appreciated by her granddaughter. Though small in size she ruled all including her irascible husband.

Meena’s great aunts too, especially her grandfather’s sister whom Meena called Chenangeril Ammachy also find a place in the narrative. It is she who comes to the house in Thiruvella to help pack the boxes that Meena’s mother would take back with her after the yearly holiday. Her slight eccentricity makes her the object of Meena’s curiosity and sympathy. Other aunts and uncles also have their place in Meena’s mind. There is Uncle Patrose who was very proud of his English accent but Meena cannot forget the fact that his brilliant only daughter Graciemol had lost her life when her long, flowing hair got entangled in the blades of an open table fan. Meena’s childhood is filled with such impressions and peopled by dear cousins like Koshy who showed her the glory of the life of a butterfly as it emerges from the cocoon and taught her to experience the forbidden delight of smoking and fire eating. There is the distant cousin Vatsala who always wore pearls
around her neck even if they clashed with the brocade border of the skirt that she wore. She was always immaculately dressed and very dainty and Meena could not help feeling a touch of envy. Meena looks back with nostalgia to the innocent, carefree days of childhood when,

in the large house in which Ilya lived, there were visiting relatives and cousins, coming to call, servants and older aunts, multifarious visitors all bound together in the loose yet formalized functions of the family. (FL 38)

The greatest influence in Meena’s life was her maternal grandfather whom she affectionately called Ilya, an abbreviated form of Valiyappacha or grandfather. He was the central figure of her life at Tiruvella right from the days she could remember. He was the one who told her stories from the Bible, the Puranas or the ones he made up himself. He took her to see the wonder of the train cutting through the night along the newly laid rails near the house. Meena would perch on his knee and listen to the endless discussions between the Pathyam and Sathyam groups that rocked the Mar Thoma church at that time. She would take refuge under the big desk at which he sat writing, curling up against his long legs. He was everything to her and so was she to him. Meena traces all her literary abilities to her grandfather who had encouraged her to enjoy learning. She speaks about Ilya thus:
And so he led me from sound to sound, from sight to sight, the moving surfaces of the garden exerting a pressure on his brain, a relentless consonance of sense, a shimmering thing that wrapped us both. It only struck me later, after he had died, that my childhood, coming so late in his life, must have seemed a rare gift to him. As for me, I could not conceive of life without Ilya. (FL 37)

Apart from her grandfather Ilya, Meena has a close relationship with her father. He had great appreciation for her flair for literature and encouraged her to write. He wanted Meena to have the best education that was within his power to give her. It was Meena’s father, unlike her mother, who encouraged Meena to give expression to her thoughts, “to send them out, get them published, allow my work to find a place in the world.” When she hears that her father has had a serious heart attack she rushes home to be with her parents while her father was convalescing after the attack. It is during this visit that she realizes once more how very important family relationships are. The time she spent with her parents and her sisters became doubly precious because its length was so tenuous and fragile. She not only sought her own roots but also strived to root her children in the fertile soil of Tiruvella as well as in the equally fertile soil of New York with their paternal grandmother Toby with whom Meena enjoyed a close relationship. Meena’s children Adam
and Swati grow up in the cocoon of the profound love of Meena’s parents whom the children call ‘Mechan’ and ‘Mechi’. Just as Meena obtained the companionship of her younger sisters Anna and Elsa, so too did the children truly enjoy the company of their maiden aunts.

There are also other family members like Meena’s uncle Oomachayan who always dressed immaculately in starched white clothes and sported a gold wrist watch on his thin fore arm. When the news of her father’s heart attack reached Ranni, a whole clan of his cousins – his father’s brother’s sons who were seven in number along with their wives and children – descended upon the family at Tiruvella. Meena had to look after the cousins as her mother had gone to a prayer meeting. The cousins patiently waited for her return while the children tore about the house and generally made themselves very much at home. When Meena’s mother returned, the Ranni daughters-in-law who were more or less her age gave her a rousing welcome and pressed upon her the gifts of spices that they had brought with them. It is indeed a measure of their attachment for the family that made them undertake the journey to be with Meena’s parents in their time of trouble. One of the cousins who was born almost at the same time as Meena’s father was Pouloseachayan. He sat by the bedside of his dear cousin holding his hand. The two men sat in silence savouring the memories of the times that they had spent together as children. There was no need for any
other communication, so great was the understanding between them. Meena realized the extent of their attachment for each other from the fact that both men had tears in their eyes because they both knew that the days were numbered. Thus *Fault Lines* expresses the importance that Syrian Christians give to the family and how even one who has broken the bounds of convention - as Meena did by marrying a foreigner - tries to keep the family together both in its nuclear and in its extended condition.

The typical middle class Syrian Christian family is depicted in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*. The heroine Lissy is the only daughter of Cheriachen who is employed in the LIC office in Trivandrum. Her mother Kuttiamma tries her best to feed, clothe and educate her family on the meagre salary earned by her husband. Lissy has a brother Aby doing his post graduation in college. Though Lissy had scored very good marks for her degree examination she wants to land a good job so that she is not a burden for her parents. Thus she does her best to contribute her mite to the family resources.

Cheriachen belongs to Pallissery and is the only son of the family. He has three sisters, Annamma, Sosakutty and Rajamma who are all married with families of their own. While Annamma’s husband Baby is a crusty Major, Rajamma, who is the younger of the two, is married to Thampan an engineer in the State Electricity Board. As for Sosakutty,
she is married into an agricultural family at Piravom and is so busy running the large farm there that she makes no appearance.

Cheriachen’s wife Kuttiamma is from a prominent family in Piravanthanam and has brothers and sisters who are prosperous and hold important positions in society like her youngest sister Gracie who is a doctor in the Christian Medical College, Vellore. Her eldest brother Eapachayan is a rich landowner while her youngest brother looks after the ancestral house and the family holdings. Some of her sisters work abroad and when they come home each year they bring saris and dress material for Kuttiamma’s family thus saving the latter a lot of money in buying clothes for the family.

Special occasions like Christmas and Easter are spent in the ancestral house at Pallissery with Cheriachen’s widowed mother. The family goes to Pallissery one or two days before Christmas and there is a gathering of the clan there. Usually Cheriachen’s sisters with the exception of Sosakutty, meet at the ancestral house with their families in order to celebrate Christmas. While Annamma and her husband arrive in their car, Rajamma and her family arrive by bus. Annamma does not have any children but her sister has two boisterous boys Arun and Reji. The children enjoy themselves to the utmost even though they have to face the ire of their elder aunt and uncle. All the others including their grandmother are indulgent towards them and they are very great friends.
with their senior cousins Lissy and Aby. The cooking for Christmas is mainly taken over by Kuttiamma and Lissy and they turn out a whole array of goodies which are eagerly consumed by all particularly the children. Even though Lissy and her mother stay behind at home in order to cook Christmas breakfast and lunch while all the others go to church, they do not complain. Instead they work with a will and cook for the whole family. Perhaps this is because it is understood that the daughter in law is the one who has to see to the welfare of the family. Christmas is also the occasion for exchanging news and keeping track of all that has happened in the different nuclear families. The family sits together and comments on mutual friends and the members of the parish, particularly the parish priest. It is also an occasion when presents are exchanged and thoughtful presents like Rajamma’s present of a sari for Lissy are received with gratitude. When one of the family takes it into his head to behave differently, it disturbs all present though they express that disturbance in more or less degree. This is what happens when Aby decides to fast on Christmas day. This decision casts a pall on everyone and provokes the Major, Annamma’s husband, to remark upon the arrogance of the younger generation. After the festivities of Christmas at the paternal house, it is customary to make a short visit to Piravanthanam, the ancestral home of Kuttiamma where her youngest brother and family lived. His wife Alice belonged to one of the wealthy
families of Kottayam and though she grew up in the town, she has adjusted to life in the village. She makes her elder sister-in-law very welcome and has no hesitation in sharing her culinary knowledge with Lissy. She also promises Kuttiamma to keep a good lookout for a suitable groom for Lissy. News about all the members of the family is exchanged and old acquaintances are renewed.

These annual visits keep family relationships cordial. They also serve to root one in the tradition and heritage of their families. The Kunnumpurathu family to which Cheriachen belongs is by no means as prosperous as his wife’s Padinjaramannil family. Kuttiamma’s father Korulla Eapen was a very shrewd business man. His wife Kochumariamma was, however, “a dumpy little woman with a plain face” (VFB 100) and Kuttiamma like most of her other daughters had inherited her plain features and her father’s imposing height. Though Cheriachen maintains cordial relations with his wife’s family there is always an element of constraint in his mind. The children too are not very comfortable with their maternal grandparents. They had been in great awe of their grandfather who was overpowering by his height and walrus moustache. As for their grandmother she had a faint air of patronage towards Aby and Lissy because they were thin, dark and quiet unlike her sons’ children who were “robust young things full of animal spirits.” (VFB 102). As Lissy grew older she began to resent this attitude
of her grandmother’s and much preferred her paternal grandmother
“who was not demonstrative but loved them and was proud of
them.” (VFB 102)

Lissy’s attitude to both her parents is different. She is better able
to vibe with her father rather than her very practical and domineering
mother. Her academic achievements are more appreciated by her father
than her mother. Kuttiamma is more interested in Lissy’s landing a good
husband rather than her academic prowess or her good job in the bank.
She is so domineering that she deprives Lissy of whatever self
confidence she has. Her influence is so strong that Lissy is unable to take
a strong stand in any matter. It is only when she goes to live in the
working women’s hostel in Trivandrum that she begins to make
decisions of her own.

The members of the greater family as well as good friends are
roped in the matter of arranging a good marriage for Lissy. The very
first proposal for Lissy was brought by Kuttiamma’s younger sister
Gracie a doctor in the Christian Medical College, Vellore. Other
proposals are brought by other members of the family like Cheriachen’s
cousins Joy and his wife Daisy. Friends and relatives are roped in to
investigate prospective bridegrooms and their families. They are the
ones who ferret out information that are usually kept under wraps by
brokers like Joshua or Samuel, the peon in Cheriachen’s office. Thus it
is that the proposal of the business man from Calicut is turned down after Kuttiamma’s elder brother Eapachen arrived in Trivandrum in order to let his sister and brother in law know about the investigation carried out by his wife regarding the credentials of the proposed bridegroom. Her cousin who was a doctor in Calicut had visited them at Piravanthanam. When asked about the man the doctor asserted thus, “If it is a proposal for any girl in our family, you can drop it straightaway. The man is a crook” (VFB 152).

The members of the greater family see to it that everyone in the family, particularly the young and the eligible, keep to the straight and narrow. Those who dare to break conventions are criticized, threatened and even ostracized. Thus it is that Cheriachen’s elder sister turns up at Pallissery trembling with righteous indignation at the perfidy committed by Lissy in daring to allow her name to be linked with that of Jose who is not only a union leader but also one who belongs to the lower caste. Annamma threatens to break off all relations with the family if steps are not taken to curb Lissy’s association with the low caste fellow. Lissy’s mother turns on her like an avenging fury. As a result, Lissy leaves hostel to stay with her cousins, Joy and Daisy. Arrangements are feverishly made for another proposal for Lissy but this too does not work out. Kuttiamma has to return to Pallissery and she leaves with the comforting thought that her daughter will be looked after by the cousins.
When the proposal for the pastor Rev. Z. Zachariah is brought by the broker Joshua, Cheriachen and Kuttiamma go all the way to Bombay and stay with other cousins, Mathachen and Susamma to see the prospective groom. Life in Bombay is so hectic that they are left to their own devices though the cousins do try to look after them in spite of their busy routine. Susamma cooks for them and it is Mathachen who takes them to the airport in order to meet the prospective groom. Mathachen shares the family’s indignation at being cheated when the pastor arrives with his white girl friend.

Lissy’s marriage becomes a concern for the whole family especially with her maternal relations who are more in number and better connected than her paternal ones. They seem to be the ones most involved in getting a suitable boy for Lissy. Perhaps this is because Kuttiamma confides more in her own people and believes they may be able to find a suitable alliance for Lissy. She confides this problem to her youngest sister in law Alice who good humouredly promises to get her mother to make enquiries in Kottayam. Cheriachen’s sisters, however, are not directly involved in finding a suitable boy for Lissy. Cheriachen’s mother, however, is both considerate about Lissy’s feelings as well as practical minded because she persuades Lissy to put up with the embarrassment of being ‘seen’ by sets of parents and grooms.
Marriage and death are not the only things that unite a family together. Sorrow is a far greater binding force than joy. Illness in the family is one such factor. In A Video, a Fridge and a Bride there is very little talk of illness apart from the natural fatigue of age. It is Aby’s excessive spirituality that is cause for concern. His excessive spirituality comes in for comment among the other members of the family too. Kuttiamma’s elder brother Eapachen tries to comfort his sister with the thought that it might only be a passing phase with Aby. Aby pours scorn on the prayer meeting held at his house at Trivandrum on the occasion of his grandmother’s visit there and decries it as a tea party rather than a prayer meeting. He has to bow to his father’s edict that he should attend the meeting whatever his reservations. His sullen face is noticed by the cousins Joy and Daisy and they also comfort Kuttiamma with the hope that it may only be a passing phase. The only saving grace is that Aby is enamoured with religion rather than drink or women – a fact which is pointed out by his maternal uncle.

Kuttiamma keeps her interest in the family alive, even in those relations of the nth degree by her careful perusal of the obituary columns in the popular daily, Malayala Manorama. Nirmala Aravind gives a very humorous and true description of the manner in which Kuttiamma peruses the obituary column of the Malayala Manorama, a very
absorbing process for most Syrian Christians matrons living away from their ancestral homes:

“Goodness me! Look at this.” Kuttiamma had caught sight of her favourite column in the Manorama, the obituary!

“P.V.Titus is dead. Dear, dear, just fifty years old. You know him, don’t you? My sister Achykunju’s husband Thomaskutty’s mother’s brother’s son, who’s working in Madras.”(VFB 49)

Kuttiamma’s fascination for the obituary column of the Manorama is a source of merriment for the rest of the family. When Lissy wonders why her mother is so interested in the news of far flung relatives, Kuttiamma retorts that the young generation have absolutely “no interest in your own relatives and no family feeling at all.”(VFB 50)

Family relationships are not always supportive, sometimes they are stifling as in The God of Small Things. The family here is more a broken family than anything else. Both Ammu and Chacko live in their ancestral house in Ayemenem divorced from their spouses. Ammu left her Bengali husband and returned to her home with her children Rahel and Estha. Though they are made to feel like intruders most of the time, Chacko was a kind of father figure until the coming of Margaret and Sophiemol to Ayemenem. The house at Ayemenem and the Pickle Factory which belonged to the family was run by Chacko’s mother
Mammachi. Her sister in law and the aunt of Ammu and Chacko, Baby Kochamma, an embittered spinster also lived in the house. The reins of the kitchen are entirely in the hands of the cook Kochu Maria who considered the family as her own. Mammachi’s marital life had never been happy because her husband, the Imperial Entomologist was a male chauvinist of the first order. He was a sadist because he terrorized his wife and children in private while presenting the façade of being an ideal father and husband in public. He did not believe in giving his daughter a good education or finding a good husband for her. When she leaves her drunken husband she is not equipped to earn her own livelihood which makes it necessary for her to return to Ayemenem and live on the sufferance of her brother putting up with all insults. Even the family of the Rev. John Ipe, Ammu’s grandfather, is also not an ideal one because his wife is, in the first place, too submissive and just a shadow of her husband. Their younger daughter Baby had fallen in love with a Jesuit priest Father Gilligan and had embraced the Catholic religion and nunhood in order to identify with her ideal. Unable to adjust to life in the cloisters she gives up her nunhood. No longer the bride of Christ she also lost the chance to become the bride of any mortal because no marriage could be arranged for one who had flouted some of the strictest rules of society.
The house in Ayemenem is therefore a place for men and women who are not happy with either themselves or with others. Each person has an axe to grind, each person is embittered in more or less degree. Only the dizygotic twins are happy and content with each other. They seek solace in each other even though they are made to feel unwanted and insecure. They share a soul and never think of themselves as separate entities. The central figure in their small world is their mother Ammu. Their attitude to their uncle Chacko seems to be one of indulgence for the latter’s pomposities. Their relationship to their great aunt Baby Kochamma is a love-hate one. They dislike the maid Kochu Maria who keeps rubbing in the fact that they are unwanted at the Ayemenem house. When Sophiemol comes they are at first jealous of her but soon includes her also in their games. They have no control over the events that happen later and the course their lives take. Only after a space of twenty three years do Estha and Rahel meet and once again become a whole entity. In spite of the fact that the past cannot be redone Estha and Rahel find happiness in being one again, never to be separated. The stranglehold of the family thus destroys the lives of all the inhabitants of the Ayemenem house.

The family as an entity that chokes and suffocates is more the exception than the rule. *Something Barely Remembered* follows the rule rather than the exception. There are several nuclear families in this novel
which are connected to each other by blood or marriage. There is a great deal of bonding between cousins, particularly the girl cousins. The family of Lukose Achen is the typical Syrian Christian family. Lukose carries on the family tradition when he responds to the call of the ministry. He succeeds his father’s brother Andreyos Achen and also serves in the church which had been built by his grandfather. His father was a quiet and introspective person, “while he was gentle with mother, and always affectionate he went about his duties as if language had never been made.” (SBR 11). His mother was a very capable person and she ran the household most efficiently after his father’s death. Her management tided the family over the financial difficulties that had arisen following the death of her husband. Her younger son Behnan looked after the family’s affairs. His only daughter Mariam had been married to Paulo who later divorced her. Mariam returned to her parents in her native village of Puthencavu devoid of all zest in living. She prefers to bury herself in her bed or mope about in the house until she decides to accept Lukose Achen’s suggestion that she should go and stay with her paternal grandmother who lived down the river Pamba, three hours by boat from Puthencavu.

That redoubtable old lady had decided that she would spend the last days of her life in the house she had inherited from her father. Her logic was simple. “I’ve sat still under your grandfather’s regime, under
your father’s, under yours, and if you had a son – thank God you don’t or I’ll have to sit still under his rule as well. I have a house, I’ll go and live there.” (SBR 166). She made it clear that she was not leaving because she did not love her son and his family or vice versa but merely because she felt the need to live in her own house just for herself.

The family of Markose also makes its brief appearance in the novel. As a teenager Markose had been in love with his beautiful sister in law Saramma. Markose’s brother Thomas had married Saramma bowing to parental pressure but his heart was with his Hindu girl friend Shantamma. Though he did his duty by his lawful wedded wife and even made her pregnant, he had neither the time nor inclination to be with her. This neglect naturally made her distressed and an easy victim to the searching hands of her young brother in law. After the deed had been done no more was heard of her. Her mother in law who had loved her like her own daughter could not come to terms with her disappearance and she also pined and died.

Mariam has a cousin named Anna who had been orphaned as a young girl. Her parents had drowned in a boat accident and she had been brought up by her grandmother. Anna as a young child was looked after by her father’s brother’s wife along with her seven children. Anna thus was very close to her cousins Yohan and Leelamma even though they were slightly older than her. As they grew older they also grew away
from each other. Leelamma was married off and so Anna could not visit her very often. Her relationship with Yohan also became stiff because the latter’s wife did not appreciate their friendship. Her grandmother had also become very old and unable to look after her. Thus Anna wrote to her father’s youngest brother Job who had married an Italian sculptor Marcella and lived with her in Italy. In response to the letter Uncle Job had arrived and taken Anna off to Italy where Marcella bought her a camera and ordered her to earn her livelihood taking photographs for tourists. She fell in with Marcella’s suggestion and managed to earn a little money. Though she longs to return home to Kerala she is unable to do so because her income is meagre and her Italian aunt is not willing to spend money to satisfy her whims.

Another person dear to Mariam is her good friend Anna whom she called Hana in order to differentiate her from her cousin Anna. This Anna had a deprived childhood. Her mother had run away with a man named Azor when Anna was just a baby. She too had been brought up by her grandmother. Her father George was a drunkard who barely tolerated her. As a little girl she had run wild, and had been looked down upon as an unfortunate child. It was her friendship with Mariam that had groomed her into a reserved and gentle person, totally different from her mother who had flouted all convention in running away with a man, deserting her baby. Anna considers it a great blessing that she had been
able to marry a gentleman like Philip who was willing to accept her inspite of her flighty mother and her drunken father. Anna has no complaints at all about her placid life as the mother of three daughters without any opinions of her own. However, when she is alone she does wonder about her husband’s past relationship with his classmate who had gone on to become a doctor wedded to her profession. This girl friend is Sara who comes down to attend the funeral of a Bishop who had been her father’s best friend. She had come in the place of her father who was too old to travel. She had met Philip then and they had renewed their acquaintance. Sara had then gone to Alappuzha to see her widower father. The bond between father and daughter is strong though the former scolds the latter for traveling late and for not having a proper family life. Anna’s husband Philip has inherited a house which belonged to his aunt Annamma who preferred to spend the rest of her life in the Mar Thoma Ashram where the old and the infirm are cared for. Annamma had lived as a spinster in the ancestral house of the Vazhayil family, looking after it until the death of her brother Ivan. He also had not married because he could not tolerate the difference in attitude to male and female children. He was glad he had no property to congeal in inheritance, no child to take over the preoccupation of being an “old line. Under this roof Ivan begat Yohan and Yohan begat John and John begat Yohan and Yohan begat Yohanan, century after century with
deliberate certainty. He thought of his sister, and the silence that followed her birth.” (SBR 38) His sister had remained a spinster not because a husband could not be found for her. There was her cousin Thoma who had wanted to marry Annamma but their father had thrashed Thoma with a walking stick. Annamma told Ivan that their father had been furious because Syrian Christian traditions forbade marriage between cousins. “It was a sin to love Thoma. I could not commit it. But I cannot marry anyone then.”(SBR 42)

Ivan had come home to die because he had a terminal illness. His sister looked after him devotedly and his cousin Thoma kept him company. Though Thoma had had a brawl with Ivan’s father in which the latter had lost two fingers, Ivan does not hold any grudge towards his cousin over past wrongs. Thoma is able to understand Ivan’s disenchantment with the church just as he is able to understand Annamma’s determination that her brother should be buried in the manner befitting his status and his family’s heritage. Ivan dies in peace to the tune of morning song of the birds and the scent of awakening Nature.

There are other close knit families in Something Barely Remembered. The actress Susa visits her brother Isak in Philadelphia. He is married to another Anna and they are quite comfortably placed financially. Isak and Anna have become true American citizen and do
not long for their native soil though they do make Susa welcome. There is also the family which has a mother with two daughters. Their father has passed away and the younger daughter mourns her late father even though there had always been a distance between them. Their father had taught her elder sister Leah and herself his favourite Psalm 121 which their mother asked them to recite at his wake. She felt that it was awkward to sit so close to him in death because such a thing had never happened when he had been alive. And yet she missed him and his liking for geometric shapes, she mourned him long after he was buried.

Sumana and Elizabeth are two career girls who have allowed marriage to pass them by while they pursud their careers. Not much is spoken about their families though Sumana is able to achieve a close relationship with her mother through music. There is close bonding between these unmarried girls.

All these families, in their nuclear and extended forms show that blood is indeed thicker than water and that the ties of blood cannot be ignored. Life may not be always smooth but it is never uneventful. The emotion of love is there in large measure, hate may also be present but there is never any indifference. Thus the Syrian Christians consider the family in all its forms as essential to life.