Chapter 9

The Syrian Christian Pot Pourri

The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary gives the meaning of pot pourri as “a mixture of dried petals and spices placed in a bowl to perfume a room” (654) The Syrian Christian Pot Pourri is a chapter that is devoted to the discussion of certain common characteristics that are observed in Syrian Christians and the manner in which they are reflected in the works studied. Four strands are thus noticed and they are classified under the following headings

- The Syrian Christian Attitude to Persons Belonging to Other Religions,
- The Syrian Christian Diaspora
- The Syrian Christians and Politics
- The Syrian Christians and the Social History of Kerala.

These four strands make up the spices and the dried petals which give the distinctive perfume that fills the very psyche of the community and marks it from other communities.

The Syrian Christian Attitude to Persons belonging to other Religions

The Syrian Christians are by no means a race that is not native to Kerala. They belong to the original Hindu community that inhabited Kerala in the period before Christ. The Syrian Christians trace their
ancestry to the Nambudiri families that had been converted to Christianity by St. Thomas the Apostle of Christ who is supposed to have arrived in Kerala in 52 AD. They called themselves Christians after being baptized by St. Thomas in the name of Jesus Christ and Syrian because St. Thomas had come from Syria. Thomas and his Master were Jews by race like the other Jews in Kerala who had come here for trade and commerce right from the days of the famed King Solomon. Even though the Nambudiris had accepted the Christian faith and worshipped a different God from those of their Hindu neighbours, they continued many of the Hindu customs and rituals they had once practised. They masked these practices with Christian names but they were in essence the original Hindu ones. Similarities can be noted in a large number of practices which have been discussed in detail elsewhere in this study.

The Syrian Christians have a very long association with Hindus of various castes particularly the Nairs who are the ones with whom they have the greatest points of similarity. With the coming of the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society and the establishment of the CMS College as the first seat of English education in Kerala, the doors of knowledge were thrown open to all who wished to learn. The first institution for female education, the Miss Baker’s School which was started in 1820 by Mrs. Amelia Dorothea Baker the wife of the missionary Rev. Henry Baker Senior, gave young girls a chance to learn
the Three R’s and to broaden the horizons of their world. As a result we find that many young men and women, among them Hindus from wealthy families, also obtained the benefits of modern western liberal education. Though the missionaries ran these institutions and also taught in them, there were also teachers from among the well educated Syrian Christians and the Hindus as well. The students who learned here obtained training under men who were truly eminent educators and there was a great spirit of camaraderie also among the students who belonged to different castes and religions. This spirit of fellowship was found among the Hindu and Syrian Christian teachers as well. The young men who entered the portals of the CMS College came out as intelligent citizens imbued with the values of honesty, impartiality, justice and efficiency. They were quickly absorbed in the government offices to work as magistrates and other high ranking officials merely because the College had the reputation of moulding young men into honest, worthwhile persons. Some of the Annual Reports of the Church Missionary Society speak of the demand for young men from the CMS College for jobs in government offices.

This feeling of mutual respect and admiration was found in the rulers as well. The Dewan of Travancore, Colonel John Munroe was an upright and very capable gentleman, who, though the representative of the British Government was held in great esteem by the Regent
Maharani and her government. It was Colonel Munroe who invited the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society to Travancore in order to reform the ancient Syrian churches. When they came to Kerala and settled in Kottayam, the Maharani granted them several acres of land on which came up the CMS College and the Miss Baker’s School. The missionaries became the sole owners of a little island which was named after Colonel Munroe, also the bounty of the Maharani. They found that they had also inherited a large number of slaves there. They set them free then and there, decades before the Emancipation Proclamation which abolished slavery once and forever. The missionaries had the greatest respect for the Hindu scholars like Sri Chathu Menon who assisted Rev. Benjamin Bailey in the translation of the Bible into Malayalam. The Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society which reported the activities of the Society in the various mission fields refers to the cordial relationship that existed between the missionaries and their Hindu brothers whether the latter belonged to the aristocracy like the Maharani, the scholarly like the Hindu scholars in Sanskrit and Malayalam or the labourer class that helped the missionaries in all ways.

The close relationship between the Syrian Christians and their Hindu brothers was fostered by the liberal education offered in the CMS College and the Miss Baker’s School. In the latter institution girls from good families were taught the rudiments of secondary education
irrespective of caste or creed. This early training gave the girls the gift of discernment and the ability to know their own minds and make their own decisions. They became worthy helpmates of their husbands and brought up their children in the same spirit of tolerance and understanding which they had gained in school. Many are the testimonies that have been given about the teachers of the CMS College and the Miss Baker’s School by their grateful pupils. Some of the Hindu students scaled heights of excellence like K.P.S. Menon the diplomat who in his autobiography *Many Worlds* testified that he had never seen teachers so dedicated as the Syrian Christian teachers who had taught him at the CMS College. He also recalled that his mother had obtained a very good elementary education in the Miss Baker’s School (10). The former President of India Dr. K. R. Narayanan also had the privilege of studying in the CMS College for his Intermediate class. At the reception accorded to him by the CMS College when he became the Vice President of India a grateful Narayanan recollected the generosity of the English Principal Rev. Philip Lea who permitted him to study in the college at a quarter of the fees levied and the Syrian Christian Professor of History P.C. Joseph who took him under his wing almost literally. He recollected with nostalgia his other teachers too, particularly T.R. Subramonia Iyer the Professor of English who used to give him food not only for the mind but also the body. Such a culture of affection
and recognition was practised and encouraged in the College. Every student was treated with affection by the teachers and in return he looked upon all of them with reverence. This same treatment was accorded to the very few Muslim students as well. The rigidity of the Muslim social set up was so strong that the number of students who attended school was very few, as for girl students there were few or none.

The missionaries established churches in many of the villages of Central Travancore, churches which opened their portals to all worshippers irrespective of caste. Adjacent to the churches were the primary schools where children were taught the Three R’s, the missionaries believed that education was the first step which would enable people to seek out God for themselves. The schools were open to all who sought knowledge. Children of all castes were given admission in these schools; the ones who distinguished themselves went on to learn in the College as the first step to good jobs in the government. Even those who did not make it this far left school enriched. Thus the schools established by the missionaries and run by Syrian Christian teachers became the training ground for the typical Keralite.

The Syrian Christians firmly believe that they are the descendants of the Hindus who had been converted by St. Thomas himself. So while they accepted Jesus Christ as the only God, they continued to follow
many of the customs to which they had been used to. One might call these customs and their observance more Malayali than Hindu or Christian. There is very little difference between Hindu and Christian in the matter of celebrating a festival like Onam. The feast served on that great day of Thiru Onam is the traditional vegetarian feast of the Hindus. These days when Onam has become a tourist festival the celebrations are statewide and involves the whole population. The Malayalis who live in the other states of India and abroad consider such festivals as Onam as a mark of their ethnic identity and take great pains to celebrate Onam in exactly the way it is celebrated in Kerala. Syrian Christians are at the helm of celebrations like these because they make up the bulk of the Malayali population abroad. Thus it is possible to see that there is close harmony between the Syrian Christians and their Hindu and Muslim brothers. In Kerala these days Christmas is celebrated by the whole populace of an area, with everyone taking part in the celebrations. The religious part is left to the Christians but the merrymaking and the partying is enjoyed by all. The Hindu festival of Diwali or the festival of lights is celebrated with the bursting of fire crackers not only by the Hindus but by the Christians as well. This custom of bursting fire crackers which was once exclusive to the Hindus and to the festival of Diwali is now adopted for Christmas and Easter as well. The New Year’s Eve celebration has now become a universal
festival. The old year is rung out and the new rung in by all people who nowadays congregate in star hotels and give themselves over to a night of carousing. Here too there is no difference between Hindu, Christian or Muslim. The serious minded, however, go to temples and churches to keep vigil at the passing of the old year and the arrival of the new. Some of the major Hindu temples like the ones at Guruvayoor and Sabarimala have special pujas to mark this occasion just as all churches have Watchnight churches to welcome the New Year.

Mention of people of other communities is made in all the works under study. While the first two works, The Slayer Slain and Take My Hands, have a faintly patronizing air in the presentation of the attitude to people of other religions, the other four works speak of their Hindu and Muslim friends with love and respect though in The God of Small Things there is more than a hint of irony in the presentation of Comrade Pillai and his family. Perhaps the difference in attitude lies in the obvious fact that the authors of the first two works are English and also missionaries whose life’s mission was to bring more and more people into the Christian faith. In the case of Rev. and Mrs. Collins they also belonged to the ruling class. The latter half of The Slayer Slain which was written by the Rev. Collins degrades it to the level of a piece meant to proselytize. The missionary’s wish fulfillment is effected in the story with the old Brahmin accepting Christianity and living happily with his
niece who looks after him willingly. Though all the threads are safely
tied and loose ends snipped off or tucked away, this part of the tale
somehow does not seem to jell with the rest of the story or the
characters.

In *Take My Hands* too there is a tiny whiff of patronage though
not as obvious as in the earlier case. The political scenario has changed
because India has become independent. Therefore the hint of patronage
lies in the matter of religious superiority felt more by the older
generation rather than the young. When the young child Mary
announces that the next day was Onam and it had to be celebrated, her
elder sisters Annamma and Aleyamma are shocked. Onam for them was
a heathen festival, Vishnu a Hindu god whose name should not even be
uttered aloud. Mary’s brothers John and Babi were sportive enough to
appreciate the thrill of Onam

“They (Christmas and Easter) aren’t so exciting as Onam,”
grumbled John careful not to let his mother and sisters
hear. “In some villages at Onam they have big boxing
tournaments. No matter how much they bleed, the fighters
never give in. And they get wonderful prizes…”

“Don’t worry”, Amma comforted Mary. “We shall have
excitement at Onam also. Remember how we give gifts –
clothes and rice and coconuts- to all the workers? And the
head man in each caste which works for Appan will come to receive the gifts and in return will bring us big bunches of bananas.”

“And our turn will come at Christmas,” Aleyamma reminded her. “Remember what fun we have making the stars?”

“Bananas,” scoffed George, under his breath. “Stars! While the Hindus have boxing and painted elephants!”

(TMH 23)

When it comes to the four works by the Syrian Christian authors the attitude to persons of other religions is not one of patronage. As all the authors belong to free India and to the developed state of Kerala of the nineties their attitude to contemporary Hindus and Muslims is one of friendship and co-operation. In some cases this attitude is one of innocent love and hero worship. These friends leave behind nostalgic memories which are sometimes sweet and therefore very touching, and sometimes so bitter that they turn people into living automatons. One thing is, however, very sure. These friends and acquaintances exercise a great influence on the lives of the main characters in the works studied.

Meena Alexander in Fault Lines has a large number of Hindu and Muslim friends. Her grandfather’s house in Tiruvella was a welcome halt for many of his Gandhian friends which included Hindus and
Muslims as well. As Ilya was a landlord there was also a host of servants in the house and they had been Meena’s earliest playmates. When her father took his family to Sudan where he was in Government service, Meena was sent to one of the important schools where many of her classmates were Muslim because Sudan was predominantly a Muslim country. Meena had a special friend Sarra, a Sudanese Muslim friend with whom she shared all her thoughts and feelings. When Meena attained puberty it was Sarra who made her ecstatically welcome into the world of women. Menstruation especially for the first time was an occasion for joyous celebration according to Sarra thus removing from Meena’s mind the feeling of a nameless shame. It was her Hindu friend Niranjan who persuaded her to wear the auspicious bridal colour red for her wedding, even though it was only a quiet registry office affair.

In *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*, Latha and Suma are very good friends of Lissy. Latha studied in the same college as Lissy and therefore the two are especially good friends because their houses are not too distant from each other. Latha’s mother is a lecturer in the same college which makes the friendship even stronger. In fact it is this fact that makes Kuttiamma approve of her daughter’s friendship with Latha even though the latter is a Hindu. The two friends visit each other’s houses very often and there are no secrets between them. Though Suma is a brilliant student of the Engineering College the early friendship of the
trio continues without any break. As Suma is more outspoken about the rights of women she is not all that popular with Lissy’s mother. When Suma criticizes the endless parade that Lissy is put to before various suitors, Kuttiamma is most affronted. She does not appreciate a Hindu girl like Suma daring to fault the time tested practices of Syrian Christians like arranging marriages and so on. Lissy is made most welcome in Latha’s house. She is so much at home there that she even teaches Latha and her mother how to make a typical Syrian Christian cookie like *kuzhalappam*. Lissy joins in the general flurry of Latha’s wedding and its preparations along with Suma. In fact all three friends sleep together on the eve of the wedding so that the two friends could assist in decking the bride. Latha’s brother Nandan too is most friendly with his sister’s friends. After Latha is married Suma, however, continues to be Lissy’s good friend. She finds time to visit Lissy at the hostel and remark upon the transformation of Lissy from a most mousy person to someone who has a better sense of self esteem. She also strikes a quick friendship with Lissy’s ebullient room mate Renji and together they try to disentangle Lissy from the clutches of Jose. They also try to comfort Lissy when she bursts out about the helpless fate of a young Syrian Christian girl of marriageable age who has neither pots of money nor an alluring appearance. Lissy is popular with all her co-workers at the bank whatever their religion. All of them like her for her
efficiency and sincerity. Lissy’s connection with Jose is matter for concern even with her superior officer who is most sympathetic when Cheriachen arrives at the bank and puts in a request for a transfer for Lissy. When Lissy passes the written test for the job of Probationery Officer, she is applauded by all her senior officers, the younger ones are most generous with tips as to how the later interview should be faced. In conclusion it is quite clear that there is a close affinity between Lissy and all her friends Hindu, Christian and Muslim alike.

The attitude to Hindu friends and neighbours is more than a little bitter in The God of Small Things. Ammu’s husband and the father of Estha and Rahel who had given up all his responsibilities as husband and father is a Bengali. No mention is made of his religion but it seems quite safe to consider him a Hindu but one who possessed none of the noble features that exemplify many of the Hindus of Kerala. He has no sense of values which makes him quite willing to offer his wife to the white boss in return for being retained in his job. He does not care for either his wife Ammu or his own children. Therefore he has no compunction in leaving them to fend for themselves. He appears nowhere in the work but it is possible to get a good idea about the man from the vivid descriptions about him. Even when Estha is returned to him he is not interested in the boy. All that he does for Estha is to return
him to his mother’s place empty handed when he leaves India to settle abroad.

According to the tradition of the Syrian Christians, married daughters have no claim on the property of their fathers. As a result Ammu and her children are at Ayemenem not because they have any legal right, but only on sufferance. The children find a father figure in the untouchable carpenter Velutha who is man of all work at the Ayemenem house. He had a good education and in addition learnt the craft of carpentry. He departed from his family’s traditional occupation of plucking coconuts. He is Mammachi’s right hand and is greatly appreciated by Chacko who depends on him for the maintenance and repair of much of the machinery at the factory. He is also a card holding member of the Marxist party which champions the marginalized whatever their caste. No mention is made of his religion though it is fairly sure that he was not a Christian.

Estha and Rahel consider Velutha as their best friend and guide, a father figure who gives them the feeling of being cherished and loved. Their mother Ammu finds solace and refuge in the arms of Velutha. It is society with its unbreakable love laws that destroys this lovely relationship between the untouchable Velutha and the touchable Ammu and her children.
There are other Hindus in this work, chief of whom is Comrade Pillai and his family which consists of his aged mother, his wife Kalyani and his only son Lenin. Comrade Pillai owns a small press called the Lucky Press and earns his livelihood by printing the labels and leaflets of Chacko’s factory, Paradise Pickles and Preserves. He followed the communist philosophy because that was the fashion of the times and he always has an eye to the main chance. It was the only philosophy which would enable him to rise to great heights, it was a stepping stone to material success. Therefore while he seeks the custom of Chacko, he also foments rebellion in the factory.

Though he dreams of bringing down the capitalists and elevating himself to posts of importance in the party, by making the death of Velutha his trump card, his dream turns into a nightmare because the Paradise Pickles and Preserves simply closed down. Thus many families are deprived of their livelihood and earns Pillai and his party a lot of well deserved ire. Thus Comrade Pillai effectively kills the goose that laid golden eggs. Soon he gave up his pretences of being loyal to party doctrine and joined the capitalist bandwagon. His only son whom he had named Lenin with a great deal of expectations does not live up to his name.

Many years later when Estha and Rahel return to Ayemenem Comrade Pillai continues to be as interested in the family and its doings
as he had been in the past. He shows a reluctant Rahel photographs of his son Lenin who is a petty bourgeois in Delhi, proud of his brand new scooter and his little family. Pillai is all sympathy for Estha who, seemed to have turned queer, and also for Rahel who has neither husband nor child. When the brother and sister instinctively make their way to watch the inebriated Kathakali artistes act out their stories in the quadrangle of the Ayemenem temple as penance, it is to Comrade Pillai that they are indebted for being able to decipher the highly stylistic movements of this dance form and appreciate its intricacies. Comrade Pillai belongs to the Nair tradition which is essentially matriarchal but has an attitude of superiority to his wife who is totally submissive. She expresses no opinions at all but is Pillai’s willing slave. The contrast between this Hindu family and the Christian family of Ammu is very marked Baby Kochamma has a very fundamentalistic attitude to Hindus. This is revealed in the scornful manner in which she speaks about the pilgrims in the bus named Beena Mol parked next to their car as they waited at the closed level cross on their way to Cochin. When the pilgrims in Beena Mol began another bhajan, Baby Kochamma remarked that the Hindus “have no sense of privacy.” (GST 86) This attitude of Baby Kochamma’s remains with her throughout her life. Though she gives up all hopes of a married life in order to be faithful to her ideal man Father Mulligan, she feels betrayed when the latter
chooses to become a Vaishnava priest. When he died of viral hepatitis in an ashram in North India, Baby Kochamma loses no time in reinstituting him in his old form back in her memory. “Once he was dead, Baby Kochamma stripped Father Mulligan of his ridiculous saffron robes and re-clothed him in the Coca Cola cassock she so loved.” (GST 298) Chacko, on the other hand, has a more tolerant attitude to Hindus. So does Ammu, she has no qualms about marrying a Hindu even though he is only her means of escape from Ayemenem. Estha and Rahel are neither fundamental Hindu or Christian.

In *Something Barely Remembered* Eli comments that though she was Christian by birth, Hinduism and Buddhism was part of her just as they are for all Syrian Christians. When Eli visited London she is filled with the desire to go to Cambridge with her old friend Sunil who is a photographer and sculptor in London. Theirs is a happy friendship which is so because Sunil is happily married and had been so for the last fifteen years. Eli gives a lucid analysis about the attitude of Syrian Christians towards their Hindu brothers

His youth and optimism got on my nerves sometimes, but there was a sibling bond between us, an understanding old as time. Syrian Christians are always tense about Nairs, brother-sister bonds and the attractiveness of the whole thing. The fear of incest is the greatest fear we Christians
have, and then, of course, adultery. Any moment one could stop being a Christian and become martial and polyandrous. One could lose the pepper trade, patriarchy, one’s accustomed place in the Christian hamlet; a two thousand year genealogy can in a moment turn to dust.

(SBR 131)

The Syrian Christian family prevented the younger members, particularly eligible men and women, from entering into very close relationships with the opposite sex of other communities. Susa remembered with nostalgia the close friendship that her brother Isak and she had had with Manik the painter when they had been children. They had been fascinated by Manik, Isak was more tuned to his art while Susa was more concerned with the artist. There is a fragile but very strong bond among the three which continues in their hearts long after their parents forbade Isak and Susa from associating with a rootless painter like Manik. Susa remembers with nostalgia the love and tolerance with which Manik had treated them. It was she who told her brother of Manik’s death in rich and prosperous America when she spent a few days with her brother at his house in America. This relationship with Manik by Susa and Isak, Syrian Christians, is another instance about the close ties of the heart between the Syrian Christians and people of other religions.
The Syrian Christian Diaspora

The word ‘diaspora’ is usually used to refer to the dispersion of any group of people from their traditional homeland. K.C. Zachariah speaks about this phenomenon comprehensively in his work *The Syrian Christians of Kerala Demographic and Socio–Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*:

Syrian Christians are now a very much more dispersed community than they used to be. In the nineteenth century and during much of the early twentieth century they used to live in contiguous taluks of the Travancore and Cochin states with a high degree of concentration. Their traditional occupations (agriculture and petty commerce) did not require them to move out of their ancestral places. Now, with higher education and occupational diversification, urbanisation and migration have become inevitable. Syrian Christians have spread all over the state, all over India, all over the world. Nearly a quarter of the members of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, for example, now live outside Kerala. The situation is more or less similar for the other Syrian Christian denominations too (34).
It is possible to note that this word not only means the actual physical process of uprooting but also to that state of mind which signifies a sense of not truly belonging to the place in which one is settled coupled with a great longing for the traditional homeland. There is a savouring of the sweet memories of the past and a nostalgia for what had been once. One is not truly at home in the country of one’s choice and at the same time one has been away for so long that one has become a stranger to one’s own land. Thus one is torn apart by both these conflicting feelings.

Among the different communities of Kerala it can be rightly said that the members of the Syrian Christian community were the first to leave the shores of Kerala in search of fortune. In a bid to seek and improve their fortunes the sons and daughters of many of the Syrian Christian families of Central Kerala left their homes and at first went to the neighbouring states of India, then abroad to the Persian Gulf, Malaysia, Singapore, England and America and now to Australia and New Zealand. Today the presence of the Malayali, particularly the Syrian Christian Malayali, is felt in every country and continent of the world. Many have settled abroad, those who have come back have brought with them a different scale of values and different loyalties and perceptions. Kerala remains part of the nostalgic past for the first generation Syrian Christians who have settled abroad; for their children,
however, it is a strange place peopled by relatives who are strangers. The children are unable to adjust to life in their father’s or mother’s homeland and long to get back to the civilization they are used to. Once back in the country of their birth they find that they are not natives there but only immigrants. The colour of their skin matters in the land in which they are brought up particularly in these days when terrorism and all kinds of discrimination are rampant. They soon find the need to establish an identity of their own, an identity that connects them to their history, their race and their own country. Such an identity gives them the protection of their own government and sends out the signal that they are not to be trifled with because they make up a large number of the immigrant population and hold positions of importance in the land. The government has agencies that see to the welfare of the non resident Indians who also play important parts in the fostering the economy of the native land directly and indirectly. The various self financing professional colleges have what is known as the NRI Quota by which the children of Indians working abroad are given admission at a price.

The Malayali abroad tries his best to foster the myths and traditions that are special to Kerala. The festival of Onam which forms a great part of typical Kerala tradition, is celebrated with pomp and glory by all Malayalis abroad under the aegis of the different Malayali expatriate associations all over the world. In fact the various associations
compete with each other in order to make Onam as attractive as they can possibly make it. Thus we have the men and women dressed respectively in the traditional Kerala *mundu* and sari with gold and coloured borders. Each association vies with the others in producing the best flower carpet and in conducting the games associated with Onam. The Onam lunch too is as traditional as it can be possibly made, money not being a problem at all. The only difference is that Onam for the expatriates is a gathering held at halls and such venues and not the private family affair that it is in Kerala. Christmas and Easter do not have the special Kerala flavour that Onam has because they are celebrated with greater fervour in the western countries. However, some of the Syrian Christian dishes do appear at the Christmas and Easter festivals.

This longing for home and this desire to replicate home in their places of work are best seen in the various programmes that are found on the different television channels. Thus we have America Watch, Gulf Round Up, to name a few. These programmes give the viewers a peep into the way their brothers and sisters live in these places and how they try to recreate there the arts and traditions of their country and state. There are also a number of musical programmes where the anchor interviews Malayalis settled abroad and gets them to speak about themselves and the way they are coping with their life in these foreign
climes. Interviews with elderly persons who are trapped abroad either because they have come there in order to look after their grandchildren or because they have nobody back home in their native land, express their longing for home. Such longings are also expressed in the form of appropriate film songs which are dedicated to the near and dear ones at home. The interviewees are usually accompanied by their families who answer the anchor’s shrill questions and affected bonhomie with a mixture of boredom and indifference in the case of young children and nostalgia in the case of senior members. The feeling of diaspora therefore can be said to be the feeling of loss of the homeland in the case of elder members and a feeling of rootlessness in the case of the younger.

This feeling is best seen in the four works written by the Syrian Christians that are studied here. The idea of diaspora is best seen in Fault Lines where Meena Alexander bemoans thus

That’s it, I thought. That’s all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing. Her words are all askew. And so I tormented myself on summer nights, and in the chill wind of autumn, tossing back and forth, worrying myself sick. (FL_3).
Meena Alexander finds that the only way she can escape from this torment is by turning back in her mind to her mother and to her memories of life in the houses of her paternal and maternal grandparents. This alone gives her a sense of belonging, an identity. But even that is fragmented, because when all is said and done she remains a stranger in her own land as she had spent the major part of her life in places other than her homeland. Her life, therefore, is “a book with the torn ends visible. Writing in search of a homeland.” (FL 4) She calls herself a crooked creature through whom time blows through.

It is not merely diaspora that affects Meena Alexander; she is bogged down by the feeling of alienation from her home, her land. And yet America too is home for her because she cannot even think of a life away from her husband. She has a good relationship with Toby, her mother in law and her untidy little flat in Manhatten is home because, to use a little cliché, home is where the heart is. Her children Adam and Svati are children of a hybrid culture and though the children love their maternal grandparents as much or even more than their paternal grandmother, there is in Meena Alexander the ever growing fear that her children may grow away from her when they grow older. This feeling of diaspora and alienation is shared by other Indian friends who have made a life for themselves in America. Meena is able to identify with and share her feelings with them as she does with her friend Gauri who
believes that they have the right to change their identities. After all there is no real difference between America and India because in both places there is a wide gulf between the rich and the poor. Meena Alexander also longs for Khartoum where she had spent thirteen years of her teenage life, a longing she confides into her friend Talal, the anthropologist who advised her to re-visit the place so that she could exorcise it from her memory. Meena wants to do nothing of the sort because she treasures those memories.

If diaspora has within it the idea of rootlessness it is possible to see this in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu and her children are condemned by society and have no claim to the ancestral home in Ayemenem because custom decreed that it belonged solely to the son of the house. Women who dare contravene the laws of society and community by daring to elope and that too with a man who belonged to a different community and religion are anathema to society. Those who dare to return to the ancestral home burdened with young children after divorcing their husbands, are totally without any locus standi. They therefore have no sense of belonging, a feeling that is further enhanced by constant reminders by all the members of the household. Ammu and her children turn to Velutha because he provides them with a sense of security and belonging.
The family of Chacko and Ammu though rooted in Kerala and Ayemenem, look to the west for language, ideas and even values. As Chacko and Ammu were brought up in the cosmopolitan city of Delhi and given their elementary education in the premier schools there, they are not able to accept the hidebound traditions of Ayemenem. These traditions caused their mother to meekly submit to the abuse of her husband but the children revolted against such suffocating traditions in their own way. Chacko was able to point his finger at the trouble that ailed the family when he told the twins that though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away (GST 52).

He waxes poetical when he tells the wide eyed twins that they are the scions of a fragmented mind and culture. The ominous words of Chacko echo in the minds of the precocious twins.

"We’re prisoners of war," Chacko said. “Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy
enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never
important enough. To matter.”(GST 52)

In *Something Barely Remembered* the question of returning
home arises in the matter of those who leave in search of employment.
Anna recalls how her grandmother had bemoaned that her son Job
would never return to his native land because he had married the Italian
Marcella. If he had not he would have returned because in the Syrian
Christian community everybody returns to the land of his birth. Ivan
came to his ancestral home and to his unmarried sister Annamma so that
he could die there in peace. The various characters that flit across the
pages of the novel are full of nostalgia for home and the familiar.
Mariam longs for the red rice and steaming fish curry of Kerala, so does
Anna in faraway Italy. The former returns to Kerala after her husband
Paulo divorces her but the latter remains in Italy because her Uncle Job
does not have the money to pay her air fare to Kerala. Sumana rushes
home to Kerala and her mother when she finds it difficult to cope up
with the demands made upon her by others. It is to be noted that a
majority of the characters in *Something Barely Remembered* are not
very happy with their lives.

**The Syrian Christians and Politics**

If the subject of conversation between Englishmen is all about the
vagaries of the weather, that of the Keralite is all about politics- politics
at the state, national and international level. Politics is in the blood of the Malayali and the Syrian Christians are no exception. Like the rest of Kerala the Syrian Christians too are most concerned about the politics of the state and of the world. Many of the politicians of Kerala belong to the Syrian Christian fold. There is even a political party, the Kerala Congress, which can be even said to consist mainly of Christians. Kerala with its total literacy cannot but be aware of the political developments the world over. Such awareness can be traced back to the coming of the missionaries and the establishment of schools which gave children western liberal education. This in turn opened up a window to the world at large. Education broadened their horizon and made them politically conscious and socially literate. Every single idea came to be put under the microscope of scientific analysis and logical understanding. Those practices and customs which had been so long accepted without question were now critiqued and in many cases rejected outright or modified to suit changing times. Politics is a way of life for Malayalis, Syrian Christians prominent among them.

Just as religion plays a most important part in the life of the Syrian Christians, so does politics. In fact there is as much politics in religion as there is religion in politics. The Syrian Christian churches are governed by well defined constitutions just as the state and nation are governed by the Indian Constitution. The bishops and all those in power
are elected democratically. The parish which is the smallest unit of each diocese is governed by a body of representatives elected annually by all the adult members of the congregation. There are regular meetings to decide upon the regular functions of the parish with the parish priest presiding and controlling the meetings. Bigger issues and proposals are brought before the whole congregation which is the body that decides the course of action to be adopted. Disputes which cannot be settled by the parish priest are brought before the Bishop of the Diocese, those which cannot be settled there are then brought before the chief bishop who is usually the senior most among the bishops. The Metropolitan or the senior most bishop is assisted by a council of ministers and advised by the Diocesan or Church Councils which consist of elected representatives from each parish. This is more or less the structure that is followed in most Syrian Christian churches. It can be easily seen that the political structure with its three arms of the executive, the legislative and the judiciary are found in the structure of the church too. The trustees of the church are accountable to the parish and therefore is the executive body of the parish. Just as a democratically elected government functions best under the spotlight of an enlightened Opposition and under the searchlight of an alert media, so also there are persons in the congregation who serve as watchdogs and point out the mistakes made by the priest and the committee that assists him. Such an alert opposition
is to be found in the diocesan and church councils as well. This keeps the executive on the straight and narrow path of truth and chokes off any desire to stray from the right path.

Expediency is the hallmark of every politician and this seems true of the regular churchgoer as well. Sometimes opinions change with the speed and vagary of the weather. The average Malayali, though he sticks to the basic tenets of whatever philosophy he follows, has also a singular ability to twist matters in such a way as to turn it to his advantage. The Syrian Christian is especially adept at this quality. Sometimes dirty games are played in church circles too especially during the times of election. Scurrility also makes its presence felt during such crucial times. The weak and the marginalized, particularly the women are put down. Those women who dare to protest are instantly made unpopular thus effectively silencing them. The Dalits, however, are no longer down trodden or marginalized; instead they are able to command a great deal of power because they make up a big vote bank. This is exactly the way the politicians and political parties behave.

This political awareness of the Syrian Christian is evident in most of the works under consideration. In The Slayer Slain, the Protestant pastor who comforts the slaves in their distress following the death of the grandson of old Poulosa, becomes a representative of the colonial masters. It is he who sees to it that the cruel punishment meted out to the
old slave is stopped immediately. The pastor threatens to have the Sircar soldiers arrest Koshy Curien’s men because such inhuman treatment to any one will not be tolerated by the British Government which is the ruling power. The very fact that the servants obey him is clear indication of the respect and awe in which he was held merely because he belonged to the church of the colonial masters and therefore was presumed to be very powerful. The social setup of the times with its attendant hierarchy of master and slave is accepted without dispute or question.

The scenario changes when it comes to the next book *Take My Hands*. Dorothy Clark Wilson the author faithfully describes the political situation of the times in which Mary Varghese lived. The life of Mary Varghese bestrode the pre and post independence period. Therefore her youth was coloured by talk of independence and by attempts to do something to achieve it. Though her father belonged to the old school which considered white men and women as benevolent masters, her brothers believed that the land should be freed from the foreign yoke and every Indian should be free to live and earn his livelihood in his own land. Gandhiji’s exhortation to the British to quit India inflamed the youth of India among whom were Mary’s hot headed brothers as well. Mary felt confused because she saw her brothers go against the edicts of her beloved father. When her brother Babi came to visit her at the YWCA full of the news of the hartal which was called for
the following day she timidly broached the matter with him. Babi tried to convince Mary that their father was out of tune with the times and that she should be the one to decide the destiny of her country. In spite of feeling guilty with regard to her father’s feelings, Mary also took part in the hartal with as much verve as her roommate Ammini Mathai who was an outspoken freedom fighter. Mary continued to fight for independence throughout her college course and made firm decisions of her own like the time when she refused to sell Union Jacks at the pro British War Day exhibition held in the park at Ernakulam. When India finally achieved independence in 1947 Mary was studying at the Christian Medical College, Vellore. The Principal of the College, Dr. Hilda Lazarus saw to it that the college celebrated the occasion with fervour, in the manner fitting to a nation that had been just born.

But, as August 15, Independence Day approached, new students and old, men and women, staff and student body, foreigners as well as Indians, were joined in a unanimity of emotion that recognized no barriers. There was sadness in the emotion as well as triumph. For the sweetness of freedom was mingled with the bitterness of a country divided, of bloody rioting instigated by the jealous leaders of religious factions, of tragic massacres and migrations. But there was no conflict in Vellore. Hindus, Moslems,
Christians, all rejoiced in a unity which in a truly free land could be achieved only through diversity. (TMH 76)

The author beautifully describes the feeling of exultation that Mary had on the day of independence. It was as though her own fierce need for independence was echoed in the whole nation. The clarion call for doctors to serve the needs of the teeming millions of India shook Mary to the core and filled her with the desire to respond to it. This ardent desire remained with Mary even during the days when she realized that she had become a paraplegic. It was this that inspired her to make use of her healthy hands to cure and reconstruct, to operate and rehabilitate the persons cured of the dreaded disease of leprosy. Right till the end of her life Mary Verghese remained in the mainstream of the country, aware of the political changes taking place and contributing her mite to the upliftment of her fellow countrymen.

Meena Alexander in her Fault Lines traces the trajectory of Indian politics right from the freedom struggle in which her maternal grandparents took active part right to the days of the Emergency imposed upon the land by Mrs. Indira Gandhi against which she herself took part. Her beloved Ilya had been a staunch follower of Gandhiji and one who zealously followed Gandhiji’s ideals of a simple life. He always dressed in homespun and lived the simplest of lives. His wife Kunju who had once been an admirer of the colonial masters turned a
complete volte face when she fell in love with Ilya. She threw herself into the ideology espoused by her husband and became as fervent an admirer of Gandhiji as her husband. The ideals of Gandhiji were no different from the basic tenets of Christianity and therefore Ilya and his wife did not have to suffer from divided loyalties. In fact Grandmother Kunju threw herself into the task of rebuilding the nation. She was nominated as the first lady member of the Travancore Legislative Assembly. She took part in all the major movements of the state including the Vaikkom Satyagraha which attempted to throw open the temple at Vaikkom to all worshippers irrespective of caste. The house of Ilya was the place where Gandhiji stayed when he came to Kerala in 1934. Many of the young men and women of Kerala came to meet Gandhiji and enter into spirited discussions with him about various topics, chief of which was the idea of freedom in all its aspects.

Meena’s paternal grandparents were vastly different in their attitude to freedom. Her Kozencherry grandfather was a typical feudal landlord for whom the caste lines were strictly drawn. He would not allow his servants the freedom that was allowed in the Tiruvella house of Meena’s maternal grandparents. His word was law and no one dared to flout him, the only person who did not stand too much in awe of him was his diminutive wife. He transformed each prayer session into petitions importuning God to turn against upstart Communists who were
stirring trouble for the landlords by giving workers ideas above their station. It is not wrong to say that Meena’s paternal grandfather is a true representation of many of the landlords of big and small holdings who found it difficult to cultivate their land because the workers now demanded wages which were far above the sum that had been doled out to them in earlier days. The Communist Party had become a force to be reckoned with. The only problem was that they seemed to be resorting more and more to violence. The daily newspapers were full of such atrocities. Ilya grieved over such activities but he had nothing against the social ideals of the Communist Party. In fact Comrade EMS Namboodiripad had been a constant visitor in his house. Ilya so firmly believed in the ideals of the Congress party which had been fostered by Gandhiji that he could not even imagine leaving it. Instead he remained within the old party and tried to introduce new ideas into it. He could not even conceive of a party in post independent India other than the old Congress even though he was quite aware of the rot that had set in. Ilya believed in the social gospel and the upliftment of the poor and he upheld these ideals in the Mar Thoma church in which he was a highly respected theoretician and a very well known figure.

Meena’s own interface with politics started when she was five years old and she was taken to Sudan where her father had been posted as meteorologist on deputation from the Government of India. Meena’s
father had been a member of the Indian Civil Service which had been formed by the British in order to help them rule the vast land of India. After the British left, the Indian Civil Service turned their considerable abilities to the task of a building up a free India. Meena’s father belonged to that category of Indian trained in the British standards of behaviour. He admired the British sense of order, system and discipline.

He was devoted to the secular ideals of the new Indian government, but the British sense of order, of stilling the “native” chaos in the colonies struck a chord with my father. Perhaps that had to do with the tumult of the feudal family he came from and his constant efforts to keep his own emotions under firm dominion. (FL 58)

Most of Meena’s elementary schooling was done in Sudan and the formative years of her life were spent with Muslim friends chief of whom was Sarra. When she became fourteen and went through the difficulties of teenage she joined the hundreds of students demonstrating against the dictatorship of General Abboud. It was her first public march, fighting for rights that had been cruelly stifled. This love of freedom which had been inculcated into the child Meena by her beloved grandfather did not allow her to calmly accept democracy being flayed during the days in which Mrs. Indira Gandhi clamped the Emergency upon the nation. She joined the march of the teachers’ union to protest
against the repressive measures of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Her friendship
with the poet Uma Shankar Joshi the father of her friend Svati, kept the
flame of freedom burning brightly in her. It was this that led her to take
part in 1974 in the great march called by the socialist leader Jayaprakash
Narayan when she had been working in Delhi.

Nirmala Aravind’s world in *A Video, a Fridge and A Bride* is not
the large world of politics but the small insular world of the Syrian
Christian community caught in the web of custom and convention.
However, she depicts the post independent world of Kerala where
women are educated and employed. It is usual for middleclass families
to give their children the benefits of a good education which would
enable them to secure good jobs. Good jobs in India and abroad increase
the value of a girl or a boy in the matrimonial market. The only politics
that is found in the novel is not of the overt variety but the covert
variety, hidden behind layers of custom and tradition.

Politics does play a very important part in *The God of Small
Things*. Chacko is a capitalist who plays at being a socialist; Comrade
Pillai dons the cape of a socialist but is at heart a capitalist interested
only in feathering his own nest. Pappachi is a true anglophile who
presents a very proper façade of loving husband and father before the
external world but was in reality one who terrorized his wife and
daughter. Ammu burned against an unjust society that gave neither her
children nor herself any locus standi but lavished it all on her wasteful, worthless brother merely because he happened to be the male of the species. In fact all the main adult characters in the novel have politics of one kind or the other, the fallout of such politics breaks up families and individuals.

Arundhati Roy has a great deal to say about the Communist party and its politics in Kerala. She touches upon Communist icons like E.M.S Namboodripad and gives her frank opinions of the party and its workings in Kerala, stirring a veritable hornet’s nest with her remarks. They were causes of many a debate in the literary and political circles soon after the publication of the book. Today more than a decade later the storm has abated to a great extent though the evaluation still goes on in the minds of most men. Arundhati Roy comments on the reason for the flourishing of Communism in Kerala in the words of Chacko. He believed that Communism flourished in Kerala because the writers and thinkers substituted God with Marxism.

Replace God with Marxism, Satan with the bourgeoisie,
Heaven with a classless society, the Church with the Party, and the form and purpose of the journey remained similar.
An obstacle race, with a prize at the end. Whereas the Hindu mind had to make more complex adjustments.
The trouble with this theory was that in Kerala the Syrian Christians were, by and large, the wealthy, estate owning (pickle factory-running) feudal lords, for whom communism represented a fate worse than death. A second theory claimed that it had to do with the comparatively high level of literacy in the state. The high literacy level was largely because of the communist movement. The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a castoridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (GST 66).

Chacko is so attracted to the tenets of the brave, new world envisaged that he remains a sympathizer of communism all his life in spite of being the owner of a capitalist concern like a pickle factory. Ammu jeers at Chacko and considers that he is just playing at ‘Comrade! Comrade!’ as one would play a game. His socialism never goes more than skin deep as is clear from the fact that he is not willing to share his inheritance with his sister even though she worked harder
than he did in the factory. He never loses an opportunity to remind Ammu and her children that they have no locus standi in Ayemenem and were there merely on his mercy. If the ideals of true communism had gone deeper into Chacko the whole tragedy would not have occurred and the little family would not have been torn apart.

The political figure in the novel is Comrade K. N. M. Pillai, the owner of the Lucky Press. He can be categorized as the ordinary party worker who finds nothing contrary in professing communism and observing casteism. He espouses class struggle among the workers of the Paradise Pickles and Preserves and accepts contracts to print labels for the products from the owner of the same factory. Even though Velutha is a party worker and a legitimate card holder of the party, he is not treated so by Comrade Pillai the official party representative. In fact it is Pillai who can be said to have brought about the death of Velutha because he told Inspector Thomas Mathew that Velutha had nothing to do with the party. As a result the Inspector has no compunction in crushing Velutha. After Velutha dies Comrade Pillai loses no time in making him out a martyr and places all the blame fair and square upon the bourgeois Chacko against the poor proletariat Velutha. He tries to turn the death of Velutha to his own advantage by calling a lockout against the factory. The factory, already in the throes of bankruptcy, simply collapses leaving its employees jobless and Comrade Pillai
unable to realize his dream of being the Party’s candidate for the local elections. Thus when communism does nothing to further his dreams Comrade Pillai turns entirely to the management of his little letter press. Years later his son Lenin becomes a smalltime entrepreneur working in Delhi.

Politics plays an important part in the life of every person in Kerala. The Syrian Christians who own and run big estates, even the ones with small holdings of land, are firmly against communism. They vote for the Congress and at the same time takes care to see that they do not ruffle the feathers of the party in power. When Baby Kochamma comes to the police station with a complaint against Velutha charging him with attempted rape and the abduction of the children, Inspector Thomas Mathew takes care to verify with Comrade Pillai about the status of the accused in Communist party circles. A posse of soldiers is sent to track down Velutha only after the inspector obtains Pillai’s affirmation that Velutha has nothing to do with the party. When Inspector Thomas Mathew discovered that he had been misled by Comrade Pillai, in an effort to save his own skin he intimidates Ammu and frightens Baby Kochamma so much that she persuades the disoriented children to identify Velutha as the one who had abducted them. Thus the poor children are made scapegoats in the political manoeuvres of their elders.
In spite of the problems posed by the labourers regarding the processes of agriculture where they demand more money from the owners and then resort to strike and arson if their demands, even unreasonable ones, were not complied with; the literate and intelligent cannot but agree with the principles put forward by communism. It is difficult to turn a blind eye on the cruelties perpetrated in the name of custom and convention, it is equally difficult not to appreciate the sacrifices made by committed communists like E. M. S. Namboodiripad who gave up their patrimony for the toiling masses.

In *Something Barely Remembered* there is Ivan of the Vazhayil family who gave up the faith and joined the Communist Party totally disillusioned with the Syrian Christian practice which gives no right to property to the daughters of the house. He recalls how there had been no rejoicing when his sister Annamma was born, how she had chosen to remain unmarried because their father had not allowed her to marry their cousin with whom she had fallen in love. The Syrian Christians believe that there should be no marital ties between cousins until the seventh generation. Therefore Annamma remained unmarried. Her brother Ivan too preferred a bachelor’s life rather than marry and have children and thus be forced to carry on old tradition and worn out custom. When Ivan returns to his ancestral house in order to prepare for death it is to find that none of the essentials had changed. He gives specific instructions
That he should be given a very quiet funeral and laid in a coffin made of the cheapest wood. Annamma is quite adamant that he would be buried in the manner befitting the son of the Vazhayil family. It is therefore evident that Ivan’s political leanings did not go so far as to forbid him admission into the church or to be buried in the churchyard with the blessings of the priest.

Thus it is possible to see that the political attitudes of the Syrian Christians are very clearly reflected in all the works under study in more or less degree. It is quite evident that this community is as good or as bad as all other communities in using political aspirations and leanings to suit themselves.

The Syrian Christians and the Social History of Kerala

As had been earlier discussed the state of Kerala was able to make great strides in development with the coming of the Anglican missionaries. This is not to say that the land had no progress at all till the first quarter of the nineteenth century when the missionaries came. On the other hand the princely state of Travancore had been ruled by wise kings who loved their subjects. They were not benevolent despots like the Tudors but they were a cultured race who considered their land the gift of God. In fact legend has it that the whole state of Kerala had risen from the sea following the churning of the waters when Sage Parasuram hurled his mace into the sea. It was King Marthanda Varma who united
the warring principalities of Travancore and laid it at the feet of Lord Padmanabha. The king was only the dasa or the servant of the Lord, bound to carry out the wishes of the Almighty.

Seventeenth century Europe, on the other hand, could not even conceive of a vision like this. Colonisation was in full swing following the discovery of the sea routes to India and the East as well as westwards to the Americas. The various powers of Europe were vying with each other for power and wealth by the possession of more and more colonies. The Pope had divided the whole world among the chief Catholic countries of Spain and Portugal. England as the predominant Protestant power had come on the scene later than the others but had already caught up with and even surpassed them. With the Battle of Plassey in 1757 England had established herself as the most important colonial power in India with the East India Company ruling the subjugated people. The Company had succeeded by brute force, hard bargaining and slick diplomacy in establishing its power throughout the land. The kings of Travancore found that they had to submit to the British powers. The British administrators who were appointed to help the king rule his empire wisely and well were, by and large, men of vision and commitment. Many of them were true friends and advisors of the king though their allegiance was, of course, towards the British king.
They admired the Travancore kings for their simplicity, their sensitivity, their hospitality and their willingness to accept good suggestions.

It was the British Resident in Travancore, Colonel John Munroe who invited the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society to come to Travancore and to reform the ancient Syrian churches of Kerala. The coming of the Anglican missionaries brought about a sea change in all aspects of life in the land. At the end of two centuries after the coming of the missionaries and establishing the fountain of knowledge from which everyone could drink deep Kerala has become a developed state within a developing country and has achieved cent percent literacy.

When men and women became educated they were naturally exposed to a whole new world of thought. They read voraciously and began to understand the ideas and philosophies put forward by the thinkers of the times. The socialist ideas of Karl Marx caught the imagination of the people of the land. The brave new world envisaged by Karl Marx did not seem very different from the ideal world of Jesus Christ. This is perhaps the reason why communism took such deep root in Kerala. With education for all Kerala progressed by leaps and bounds. Many of the educated and adventurous left the shores of Kerala to go at first to settle in the nearby states and then further afield to foreign countries. Foreign exchange and new ideas and attitudes flowed into Kerala.
Those who made annual or occasional visits to the land of their fathers brought with them new tastes which opened up a whole new world of business, big and small, in order to cater to their needs. Those who returned home for good after spending the major share of their life abroad, brought with them all the gadgets that they had been using. They also believed that it was possible to buy almost anything they desired at whatever cost. With these new rich people settling down in Kerala the cost of living shot up. The wages for servants sky rocketed, their numbers dwindled drastically. The family became a truly nuclear one with each member having his or her inner world which excluded all the rest. The rate of divorce and suicide has risen to alarming proportions. The number of homes for the aged and the destitute and the number of centres for rehabilitating mentally disturbed and addicted persons have increased. Plastic and plasticware flooded the land, the throw away culture of the west was encouraged and fostered. Broken homes and disturbed individuals, all kinds of sexual perversions make Kerala a benighted land. There is a rash of charismatic centres and faith healers which make hay out of the existential agony and lifestyle diseases that hold the people of Kerala in thrall. The slogan ‘God’s Own Country’ coined in order to lure foreigners to the clean, sandy beaches and the lush, cool hillsides have only succeeded in depriving the Keralite of his natural birthright and made him an undesirable irritant in the beaches
and hilltops of his own land. In an effort to promote the tourism industry
the land and its people have become poor, degraded creatures fast losing
their identity in terms of language and culture. Kathakali, the ancient
temple art of Kerala has become compressed into capsules suitable for
the short attention span of the jaded tourist, foreign and local. Ayurveda,
Kerala’s own system of medicine has been prostituted into massage
parlours which promise rejuvenation for skins and minds that have
become tough and insensitive. The mushrooming of private ‘public’
schools have made the younger generations strangers to the mother
tongue of Malayalam. Today’s children of Kerala have become vast
storehouses of information with no room for wisdom or lasting values of
life. The media, particularly the television, have succeeded in producing
a kind of world citizen who considers the immediate present as the only
worthwhile thing and the making and managing of wealth the only
occupation. The media batten on controversies which are, for the most
part contrived ones, and throw the gullible into a meaningless round of
argument which fizzle out the minute the media judge it is time for the
next controversy. In the name of investigative journalism personal
privacy is destroyed and innocent remarks made in the heat of the
moment are blown out of proportion. This is the social reality in Kerala
today.
The works under consideration provide an insight into the way in which the social situation of the land has changed in the past century and a half. The changes which were very gradual in the nineteenth century picked up speed in the twentieth century especially in the last half after the enterprising Malayali left the shores of the land to make his nest egg and either return to the land or to settle abroad embracing a whole new set of values and adjusting to a whole new environment. Today the speed of change has become a breakneck one which has put the land and its people in danger of morbidity and ultimate destruction.

The life and society depicted in The Slayer Slain is not very different from the social set up that had been in existence in Kerala for centuries. However, the process of change had started because the missionaries had made a niche for themselves in Central Travancore. The methods of education they employed in their schools and in the CMS College had opened new vistas of knowledge. Evidence is seen in the attitude of the educated people of Kerala which is very clearly portrayed in the discourse on the merits and defects of ‘English Education’ found in the Malayalam novel Indulekha by O. Chandu Menon.

Change is most evident in the customs and conventions employed by the people. When Koshy Curien sends his daughter Mariam to be educated at the mission school, he ushers in an age where women
express their likes and dislikes, where they voice their opinions instead of meekly submitting to the inevitable. However, they are tactful in their protests and do not voice their opinions aggressively. Mariam, for instance, confides in her father that marriage with the son of Oommen Thoma would degrade her into a wild creature because her prospective husband has neither the intelligence nor the wisdom to guide her. She is able to present her argument so well that her father flouts the usual custom and breaks off the engagement.

In *Take My Hands* too custom is flouted because Mary is allowed to choose her career and to pursue medical studies for as long as she wished. With the last decades of the twentieth century, women choosing their own professions and making their own decisions are no longer unusual events. Meena Alexander in *Fault Lines*, Lizzie in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*, Ammu and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*; Mariam, Anna, Sosha and most of the women in *Something Barely Remembered* make their own decisions. Such decisions may shock society to some extent but they are tolerated nevertheless.

The social history of Kerala is depicted in all the works through the march of progress and development. This is most evident in the post independence works that are studied. Meena Alexander gives a very vivid description of the railway line that was constructed close to her maternal grandfather’s house in the late sixties. The image of the
metallic creature belching fire and smoke as it “grunted and shoved forward” (FL10) remained with her decades after the actual experience of seeing the train. Public transport which takes the Keralite into the most remote villages of Kerala even to the tiny village of Pallissery is described by Nirmala Aravind. Even the eve teasing that women are too timid to fight against is described, Lizzie becomes the victim of a middle aged lecherous creep when she travels alone to Trivandrum. The many buses of the Kerala State Transport Corporation are the lifeblood of the college and office goer of Trivandrum. The Students Only and Ladies’ Only buses which ply the roads of the state capital are the best and cheapest means of transport for the carefree college student and for the harassed office goer. Once inside the buses the conductor is supreme and the travellers have no option except to accept his supremacy and put up with some of his games like leisurely handing out tickets after stopping the bus in a no man’s land. In the rainy season, the saris and trousers of the bus travellers are soaked and soggy; they have to dry off at work. Air travel too is not a very rare feature particularly with the influx of skilled labour from Kerala into the Gulf countries. Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* describes the scene at the Cochin Airport when the family goes to collect Chacko’s ex- wife and daughter. Whole families have come from the rural areas of Kerala in order to welcome back sons and daughters who have gone abroad as plumbers,
electricians, wire benders, construction workers, teachers, nurses, housemaids. They fill the airport lounge with their chatter and the crunching of tapioca and banana chips:

They were all there – the deaf amoommas, the cantankerous, arthritic appooppans, the pining wives, scheming uncles, children with running noses. The fiancées to be reassessed. The teacher’s husband still waiting for his Saudi visa. The teacher’s husband’s sisters waiting for their dowries. The wire bender’s pregnant wife. (GST 138)

The concrete kangaroos in which rubbish is deposited, the long and dusty door curtains are brilliantly described, evoking the image of the none too clean gateways of God’s Own Country. The women in Something Barely Remembered are also no strangers to air, road and river travel.

Tourism has grown into an industry in Kerala today and this fact is vividly represented in The God of Small Things. Catering to the tourists has brought about a lot of changes in the social set up of Kerala. The History House of Kari Saipu has been taken over by a big hotel group and refurbished for the delectation of the tourists. It is now out of bounds for the ordinary people of Ayemenem. Some of the traditional wooden houses of Kerala called the manas have been transplanted to the
premises of the hotel and they stand around as examples of Kerala
architecture. The chief of these is the *mana* of EMS Namboodiripad, the
first elected Communist Chief Minister of Kerala; the other houses stand
around this one as if acknowledging its superiority. But ironically the
very room which had once witnessed deliberations which dreamt of a
brave, new world of social equality, now stood mute witness to another
world where the Keralite catered to the culinary likes of the foreign
tourist in order to rake in the foreign exchange. The hotels marketed
heritage and the regional flavour by introducing the foreigner to the
architecture of Kerala and all the knick-knacks that came along with the
wooden ancestral house. “A reed umbrella, a wicker couch. A wooden
dowry box. They were labelled with edifying placards which said,
Traditional Kerala Umbrella and Traditional Bridal Dowry Box.” (GST
126)

Tourism thrives on regional flavours and Kathakali is
undoubtedly a real regional flavour. But the rendering of the various
stories in the right Kathakali style would tax the concentration of the
tourists. Consequently the heritage hotels put up performances of
Kathakali which specialize in presenting the stories in encapsulated
form. Thus six hour classics were truncated to twenty minute
presentations, played at the poolside to a group of foreigners cavorting
in the water or lying about on the poolside. The dancers had to stomach
these insults if they wanted food in their stomachs and in those of their families. Thus they put up performances but after the deed had been done and they had received payment, they get drunk and expiate their sin by indulging in an orgy of Kathakali in the temple at Ayemenem. Tourism brought in its wake a whole new set of values as well as the decay of old ones. Pollution set in and so did the loss of values in the mad rush to make money.

Another very notable feature in the social history of Kerala is the change in the architecture of the houses in the land. In The Slayer Slain the house of Koshy Curien is not the usual wooden one but is built of bricks and mortar and the whole is limewashed. The rooms are lofty with big windows and ventilators which let in plenty of light and air. Mary’s house in Cherai is also a big, sprawling one in Take My Hands. Meena Alexander waxes eloquent on the spacious rooms and verandahs of her maternal grandfather’s house in Tiruvella in Fault Lines though she does not much appreciate her paternal grandfather’s action of pulling down the old and gracious ancestral house and constructing a modern house on the top of the hill. When it comes to A Video, a Fridge and a Bride Lizzy and her family live in a tiny, little rented house in Trivandrum until her father’s retirement. Made of cheap building materials there are any number of such houses built in tiny plots of land, which cater to the housing needs of the teeming population of the capital.
city. In fact investing in small plots of land and constructing small houses for small families is big business in Trivandrum. So is the real estate business. The elder brother of one of the suitors proposed for Lizzy confides that he had bought land near the Trivandrum airport because it was accessible to every other place. Cheriachen’s home in Pallissery is the spacious one of a middleclass family in the countryside. His wife’s brothers at Pallithanam live in modern houses next to each other. Kuttiamma’s ancestral house with its wood panelling is kept polished Modern plumbing and lighting is adopted without decreasing the old world beauty of the house. In *The God of Small Things* the Ayemenem house is left to woodrot and damp when its inhabitants decline into just Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria. The Vazhayil family house in *Something Barely Remembered* is also a sprawling house falling into decay because there is no one to care for it other than Annamma, the sister of Ivan to whom the house belongs. After Ivan’s death the house then passes into the hands of Anna and Philip and their brood of children. Mariam’s house is also of the wooden ancestral variety but the blinds of the old houses have been replaced by grills which shut in the inhabitants and isolate them. Many of these old houses have today been pulled down to make room for flats, apartments and self contained villas. Real estate has become a booming business these days.
There is change also in the kind of dress worn by the Syria Christians. The clean white cloth and the embroidered blouses worn by Mariam and her mother in *The Slayer Slain* are no longer found when it comes to the twentieth century and Mary Varghese. Even though Mary’s mother in *Take My Hands* speaks wistfully about the fast disappearing distinctive dress of the community, her pleas fall on deaf ears because the sari is easier and more convenient to wear, besides being fashionable enough to suit the most fastidious taste. Dr. Mary prefers light, pastel colours and is perfectly attired even after becoming a paraplegic. When it comes to Meena Alexander in *Fault Lines* the sari has well and truly come to stay, Meena cannot remember her mother in any other dress. Even as a young girl Meena was very much aware of the orthodox nature of the people of Kozencheri who decreed certain standards of dress which people did not dare to flout. She has no compunction about wearing western dress outside Kerala, in fact wearing a sari in America would sometimes earn her the bitter experience of racism. In *The God of Small Things*, Mammachi would always wear the off white Kerala sari with its distinctive gold border, starched to a nicety. Kochu Maria the maid considered it below her dignity to dress in anything less than the traditional dress especially as she boasted of her Syrian Christian ancestry. She wore the large printed apron over her dress merely because Mammachi insisted on it. Baby Kochamma and Ammu
generally wore the nighties and house coats which were rapidly becoming popular irrespective of caste and creed. When they went out, however, they wore saris. Baby Kochamma’s blouses were so big, that they had to be specially stitched which could be done only by Chellappen Tailor of Chungom. As for Ammu she had been the toast of the planters on Assam when she wore daring backless blouses with her saris. Pappachi was something of an expert in sartorial elegance. He always wore three piece suits even in sleepy Ayemenem. His son, Chacko was the very opposite in the matter of dress. In fact, he prided himself on being different in that he wore mundu with canvas shoes. The only time he bothered to dress up was when he went to welcome his ex wife Margaret and his daughter Sophie at the airport in Cochin. Ammu dressed her children in their best clothes when they accompanied Chacko to Cochin. Estha wore a colored shirt and tight pants while Rahel wore a frothy pink dress full of lace. These clothes were not distinctively Syrian Christian. After Estha was re returned to Ayemenem, brother and sister wore shirts and jeans, like most of the younger generation of the present times. Lissy in A Video, a Fridge and a Bride was too conservative to wear anything other than sari even though the salwar kammez of North India was slowly catching on. Her room mate favoured jeans and shirts for hostel wear though she too wore sari to office. The nylon saris, the gifts of relatives working abroad, were
also the favoured dress of working women because they were uncrushable and very attractive. The stiff organdies and organzas came in for leisurely Sunday and church wear. The men, for the most part, wore trousers and shirts mainly because they were convenient and lasted long. Only the farmers and the politicians wore the traditional men’s wear of Kerala. There was no distinction of community in such wear. In Something Barely Remembered we have a cross section of various generations of the Syrian Christian community who wear the dress of their choice. The grandmothers of Mariam and Ely wear the traditional dress of *chatta* and *mundu*, Mariam’s mother wears sari, so does Annamma, Ivan’s sister as well as Anna, the wife of Philip. Every young person who has gone abroad wears jeans and shirt even after returning home. Nighties and housecoats have become ubiquitous in Kerala, so have churidhars. These clothes have done more to bring about social equality, at least in appearance, than any political ideology. It has also to be noted that the distinctive dress of the Syrian Christian community is fast appearing and will soon be limited to youth festivals and ethnic parades.

Beauty parlours are a fast growing industry in Kerala, so are florists who have flowers brought in from Bangalore in order to turn them into bouquets and sheaves for weddings and funerals, and in order to decorate churches and cars for weddings and to provide centre pieces
in halls where meetings are held and in the offices of important people. As the beauty industry is a relative new one in Kerala only *Something Barely Remembered* makes a mention of it. Ammini, the wife of a rich rubber planter occupies herself with the job of running a small but exclusive Beauty Parlour in sleepy Puthencavu. She is not a good business woman because she shares her knowledge with her customers. Once they master her techniques they dispense with her services. Mariam, however, is a most faithful customer because she visits the beautician frequently just in order to have something to do. Ammini is very sympathetic and soothing, always willing to hear troubles without offering advice or sitting in judgement. In today’s Kerala visiting the beautician has become the rule rather than the exception.

The television boom also holds the people of Kerala in thrall. Today people prefer to remain at home and lose themselves in the world of virtual reality rather than confront the actual reality. Thus when Rahel returns to Ayemenem after many years and many experiences, it is to find her great aunt Baby Kochamma and the servant Kochu Maria wrapped up in the worlds brought into their living room through the dish antenna of the television. They watch all kinds of fare, from the serials to wrestling bouts and any number of other contests to advertisements with their crispy jingle. Baby Kochamma enters her name for the many contests and challenges that are advertised. Her desire to take part is
further fuelled by occasional wins. However, Baby Kochamma’s
addiction to serials is perhaps not too bad because at the time depicted in
*The God of Small Things* private channels had not taken over control of
the atmosphere. If the novel had been set in today’s Kerala there would
have been a plethora of serials and reality shows offered by a vast
variety of channels. Channel surfing would have found a mention as
well as the dangers involved in such activity. None of the works mention
computers and the internet; these were only for the initiates in the last
decade.

Thus it is possible to trace quite a bit of the social history of
Kerala from the six works that have been explored. Many changes have
occurred in the social fabric of the land and these have been faithfully
recorded by the authors belonging to different places and different times,
even of different nationalities united only by their common interest in
the people and the culture they were describing.