Conclusion

In this attempt to understand the mental and moral characteristics of a race of people by closely studying them as they are presented through works of literature it has been possible to paint a true portrait of the Syrian Christians of Central Kerala. Great changes have taken place in every feature of the community in the space of a century and a half. The purity of the community has become the casualty in all respects. The Syrian Christians have integrated themselves so much with the rest of the world that they are now more global citizens rather than local or national. Many of the features that had held them apart from others have become either redundant or are fast disintegrating. A close study of each of the chapters in this work proves this now discernible fact.

One feature that continues without too much of a change is the basic idea of self worth that is found in every Syrian Christian. This feeling of superiority is further nurtured by increasing material prosperity brought about by shrewd management, hard headed decisions and a chameleon like ability to change according to need. The basic shading of the portrait of the Syrian Christians in today’s world therefore remains unchanged The characters in the selected works, like Koshy Curien, the Syrian Christian in The Slayer Slain, has a great sense of self worth. This same characteristic is found in Chacko in The God of Small Things or in Philip in Something Barely Remembered a
century and a half later. This sense of self esteem continues in more or less degree in the other works as well.

The background of the portrait namely the lush vegetation of Central Kerala has undergone tremendous change. The green carpeted paddy fields and the thick foliaged trees laden with tasty, juicy fruits so beautifully described in *The Slayer Slain* and to some extent in *Take My Hands* are rapidly becoming part of the past. In their place have come up huge blocks of apartments built on paddy fields which are land filled, sand piled, concreted. Whole areas are completely denuded of trees in order to build multi storey flats in their place. The rivers are little more than sluggish drains which carry all manner of muck, chiefly the plastic carry bags, and the green weeds which choke up free movement. The Meenachil River pictured in *The Slayer Slain* is a world away from the same river described vividly by Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*. The ability of the hard headed Syrian Christian business man to turn even a stink into solid cash especially foreign currency, is mercilessly flayed by Arundhati Roy when she talks about how star hotels cash in on tourism by building huge walls to keep the dirty rivers out of sight. The well turned phrases employed by clever hoteliers makes even the all pervading stink acceptable.

Gone are the days when trees grew in plenty and shrubs and bushes flowered luxuriously in home gardens. Mrs. Collins’ complaint
that Syrian Christians do not have proper gardens is addressed in the
later works where there are gardens of all descriptions from the crotons
with their colourful leaves found in the ancestral houses of Mary
Verghese in *Take My Hands* and Meena Alexander in *Fault Lines* to the
potted plants and trailing jasmines that are so lovingly tended by Lissy
in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*. The upper class have formal gardens
with manicured lawns and beds of flowers which are kept watered by
fountains and sprinklers and adorned by gaily painted statues. The
garden fashioned by Baby Kochamma in *The God of Small Things* used
to be a real show piece but with the passage of time that garden was left
neglected and over grown. Gardens have shrunk into flower pots for
those who live in tiny houses built on a few cents of land.

As the land area is limited and the population quite high, there are
no longer the spacious, high ceilinged houses of Koshy Curien’s time.
Instead the houses today are made up of small, stiflingly hot, box like
rooms built out of the flimsiest material like the rented house in which
Lissy and her family live in Trivandrum. Many of the old houses have
been shut up and left to the ravages of the weather and wood rot like the
gracious old house in *The God of Small Things*. The old houses that
remain are either modified like Kuttiamma’s ancestral home in
Pallithanam where new rooms with all conveniences have been added or
demolished and a new one built in its place like the ancestral house of
Meena Alexander’s father in Kozencheri. Paddy fields have been transformed into plots in order to cater to the demand for housing by the new rich Gulf returnees. Such chocolate box houses built on filled in paddy fields are described by Nirmala Aravind in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*.

The architecture of even the churches has changed and they are built more as show pieces displaying the wealth of the parish and giving more importance to accessibility and convenience rather than wind flow and comfort. The old Syrian churches filled with the fragrance of incense and beautiful paintings as the one portrayed in *Something Barely Remembered* where Lukose Achen is apprenticed as well as the one visited by Lissy and Aby in Pallithanam, in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* are compared to the Anglican churches which do not have the fragrance of incense or beautiful paintings. Apart from the incense there is very little difference in the architecture of all the churches. Electronic equipment for the choir and clergy are used in all churches.

It is to be noted that every colour in the portrait has faded in some characteristics and deepened in others. In the case of the nomenclatures more and more children are being given names that are meaningful rather than traditional. The family name, however, is being more used. This is not to say that initials are no longer used but ease in use has caused people to drop initials and change their names. For instance
P. V. Mary became Mary Verghese and Mary Alexander became Meena Alexander. The lack of a surname has a terrible effect on people. Ammu’s children in The God of Small Things have no surname and so they have no roots, no locus standi wherever they go. The marginalized, the ‘small things’ like Estha or Rahel, Ammu or Velutha have no surname. The traditional dress of the Syrian Christians is fast on the way to becoming a relic. Only the grandmothers and the very old wear the traditional dress of the Syria Christians. It is only in The Slayer Slain that the traditional dress is worn by the younger generation too. In all the other works the young and middle aged, male and female alike do not wear the traditional dress. Instead, the middle aged matrons and unassuming girls like Lissy wear the sari while the bolder ladies wear the western wear of jeans and tops or the North Indian wear of churidhars and salwar kameezes. Lissy’s room mate Renji wears jeans and shirts in the hostel while Lissy herself resorts to the nighties which have become the standard home wear of most Keralites. Arundhati Roy mocks at her “Baby grand aunt’s” voluminous nighties and huge blouses in The God of Small Things which can be fashioned solely by Chellapan Tailor of Chungom. The cuisine too is not exclusively Syrian Christian fare cooked at home. The appam and stew, the beef fry and fish curry with black circular pieces of tamarind, so typically Syrian Christian, have retreated into the menu of star hotels. The habit of dining
out is rapidly catching on. One of the characters in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* confides that he has decided to build a house close to the airport and the city in order to give his children a good education and indulge in the occasional pleasure of dining out. The younger generation prefers pizzas and such other fast food easily available in hotels. When Meena Alexander gets her mother to reminisce about her wedding day the latter describes the feast that had been cooked for the wedding guests. This is a far cry from modern times when the work of cooking and feeding is turned entirely over to catering firms. Meena’s mother recounts the dishes familiar as Syrian Christian cuisine but never does Meena Alexander in her work tell us anything about her own culinary adventures. Nirmala Aravind, however, makes her heroine Lissy a good cook who is not only able to cook the traditional dishes but also experiment on new ones. The Syrian Christian sense of taste is also kept alive by Mammachi in *The God of Small Things* through her mango pickles and banana jam. The mango sweet that the old grandmother makes in *The Slayer Slain* is a typical Syrian Christian preparation which catches the attention of Mrs. Collins. Such sweets are very rarely made in modern Syrian Christian households.

Arranged marriages still continue to be the order of the day. In *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* the church continues to be a place where contracts are made particularly in the matter of possible matrimonial
alliances as it had been a century ago when Mariam in *The Slayer Slain* is looked over by a woman with whose son an alliance is proposed. However, in the former case it is only the first step because the people who attend church file away in their minds eligible girls and boys who can be matched as and when the need arises. Today the process of arranging marriages is more online than the family grapevine. There is, however, an element of courtship in the final stages of negotiations. Gone are the days when parents forced their children to marry, gone are the days when the parental edict was final as was at first the case with Mariam in *The Slayer Slain*. Instead boys and girls have a very good idea of their partners in life and accept only those who come up to their expectations. Education enabled Mariam to persuade her father to rescind his decision regarding his choice of a husband for her. Mary Varghese’s father also bowed to her decision in wanting to become a doctor before thinking of marriage. When young people among the Syrian Christians today find their soulmates among people belonging to different castes, communities, even nationalities they have no hesitation in marrying with or without parental approval or the permission of the church. Lissy toys with the idea of marrying Jose even without the approval of her parents because she believes that Jose loves her for her own sake. When she realizes that she is only a weapon of revenge in the perverted mind of Jose she does not have to think twice about breaking
off such a relationship. Such inter caste and inter community and international marriages are on the increase among Syrian Christians. Marriage these days is more a contract than a covenant and so the partners think nothing of breaking the contract. However, in middle class Syrian Christian families there is still a stigma attached to divorcees, hence matrimonial advertisements tend to have the phrase, “divorced through no fault of his/hers.” This is the case with Mariam in *Something Barely Remembered*. Though she had married Paulo with her parents’ approval the marriage did not survive as Paulo deserted her for another woman. So she is back home with the stigma of divorcee attached. But as practical considerations weigh greatly with Syrian Christians a divorced daughter with plenty of money can still find a bridegroom. The practice of co-habitation is slowly taking root in Kerala also among Syrian Christians though not many eyebrows are raised when such things happen abroad as it does in the case of Sumana the student of the violin who runs away when she realizes that her banker lover was getting serious about marrying her in *Something Barely Remembered*.

The third shade that colours the portrait of the Syrian Christian community has faded a little viz. the idea of caste. Caste continues but more as a state of the mind rather than anything else. True blue Syrian Christians consider caste distinctions as part of their very psyche. In
The Slayer Slain though slavery is a reality then, it must be understood that the slaves are those out of caste. Therefore when Koshy Curien accepts Poulosa the slave and the old Brahmin as his equals he is breaking all the barriers of caste. The feeling of caste prevents Syrian Christians from entering into marriage alliances with those outside their caste which is why there is such a furore in Lissy’s house when her parents learn about her connection to the low caste Jose. The Dalit Christians play the caste card for their own material advantage in the form of making use of reservations and the like in the church and in society. At the same time they try to rise above their caste in material considerations. They try to get their own back at the Syrian Christians by marrying into their families as Jose tries to do in A Video, a Fridge and a Bride. There are no longer any untouchables but there are touchables who cannot be touched as Velutha realizes at the cost of his life in The God of Small Things. Generations of neglect and deprivation have in more or less degree turned the former untouchables into persons who are very conscious of their rights.

One of the deep shades in the portrait is the change that has taken place in the attitude and behaviour of the Syrian Christian women. Education has liberated them from the toil and drudgery of daily life and enabled them to spread their wings and soar above the mundane just as Mary Verghese in Take My Hands and Elizabeth Kuruvilla in
Fault Lines did in their own lives. Every profession that was once the monopoly of men has been conquered by women, Syrian Christian women too. They make their own decisions; like Meena does when she decides to marry David Lelyweld or Lissy does when she decides not to marry Jose or when she decides to apply for the job of Probationery Officer in the bank. They do not allow themselves to be brow beaten any more, though this is true only in more or less degree. They do not submit tamely to patriarchy. In the process duties which once were exclusively for women are no longer acceptable. Many young girls do not want to marry and take up the onerous responsibilities of running a household. They do not want to have children because childbearing needs sacrifice. They too are part of the rat race and yet they are not happy but drift around like the three professional women, Sumana, Elena and Sarah, in Something Barely Remembered who had been too professional and career oriented to think of marriage until it was too late. In the same novel those who are married do not or are not allowed to have children as in the case of Sosha who deserted her husband George and infant daughter Anna in order to elope with Azor. Or as in the case of Ammini Beautician whose husband is still so deeply in love with his dead first wife that he has no time for his living second wife.

Another colour that is deeply shaded is the Syrian Christian attitude to the church and the parish priest. The established church is
today more a social gathering than a spiritual one. People still frequent the churches but they do it more out of a sense of duty or obligation rather than a slaking of spiritual thirst. The older generation goes to church because they are conditioned to do so, while the younger generation is dragged there by their parents. There was no need to do this a century and a half ago. In *The Slayer Slain* the whole family goes to church though their purpose in doing so varies. In *Take My Hands* also the church and spiritual revelation are tangible realities. In *Fault Lines*, however, though Meena Alexander comes from a very premier Syrian Christian family with very close connections with the church in all its aspects, as an adult Meena Alexander confesses to feeling intimidated by the church. Lissy and her family feel comfortable in church, particularly in the reformed church to which they belong. Both Aby and Lissy unlike Ammu, Chacko, Estha or Rahel in *The God of Small Things* or the various characters in *Something Barely Remembered*, are regular church goers and members of the various associations in the church like the Sunday School, Youth League, Choir etc. It is observed that these organizations of the church are, to a certain degree, unable to fulfill the purpose for which they were started due to a variety of reasons. The pressure of modern life takes their toll upon the younger generation who seek solutions to their problems in different ways. Without any spiritual moorings obtained either at home or in the
church today’s young men and women are battered by the vicissitudes of fortunes and soon become mental wrecks at worst and self centred creatures at best. Ammu, Rahel and Estha in The God of Small Things do not have a support group in the church to help them with their problems. Para churches and godmen have sprung up by the dozen and so have many counselling and de-addiction centres and eventide homes. The zooming rate of divorce and mental wrecks are ample proofs of the degeneration that is found in the Syrian Christian attitude to churches and spirituality. Aby in A Video, a Fridge and a Bride is graphically portrayed by Nirmala Aravind as one who has been caught in the stranglehold of excessive religiosity. He goes his own way without caring about his parents or his sister. The parish priests are no longer looked upon with the awe and reverence that had been once given to them as it had been given to priests like Lukose Achen and his uncle before him in Something Barely Remembered. The priests themselves are more than a little responsible for such an attitude because many of them consider their work as just another profession, no longer a vocation that is based on austerity and sacrifice. It is only a matter of time before Kerala’s churches empty themselves like the churches in many of the countries in the First World. This sad fact is graphically described by one of the characters in Something Barely Remembered who has to
remain in a church in London because there were only three worshippers there including the priest himself.

The fifth colour in the portrait is that of the Syrian Christians and their family relationships. The patriarchal joint family has come to an end. There are no longer any houses where the grandparents and all their children and their families live together in harmony along with uncles, aunts and cousins. But the family gathers in all its clan for special occasions like weddings and funerals as in the one described in *Something Barely Remembered*. In *Fault Lines* Meena and her sisters gather at the family house when their father is seriously ill. Their cousins and relations from Ranni also come to visit the ailing father. Apart from these occasions there are also yearly gatherings called Family Meets or Kudumba Yogam. These are, however, not gatherings at the ancestral homes but rather in convenient halls or hotels. The family grapevine is still active but its original function of arranging marriages is on the decline because in these days of deceit and divorce, people do not dare to be ‘go betweens.’ Marriage proposals online seem to be most preferred these days. As each family has only a few children, usually only two, illness of the senior members is a great problem which people try to solve with the help of heavily paid home nurses or helpers. In times of crisis the mother goes to help her daughter just as Meena’s mother comes to her aid when she has her second child in New York.
Kuttiamma goes to Moolamattom to keep house for her sister in law Rajamma when the latter had to have an operation in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*. In spite of her differences with her great aunt, Rahel brings her medicine for diabetes when she returns from America in *The God of Small Things*. The children and grandchildren live at such a frenetic pace that they have no time for aged and ailing grandparents. They only occasionally visit their grandparents like Eli visits her grandmother and Sarah her father in *Something Barely Remembered*. Relatively young and healthy grandparents are very much in demand in these days when home help has become a very costly rarity. Sons and daughters in law or conversely daughters and sons in law can go to their respective offices with easy minds knowing that their children are in good hands, well fed, well clothed and well trained by the grandparents. Once the children reach school going age and the grandparents fall sick the latter feel that they have become a burden to their children and prefer to go back to their native homes and to the ministrations of servants. Thus Sarah’s father in *Something Barely Remembered* lives alone in Allepey where he prefers to stay rather than go to Sarah who is a spinster. Though the vestiges of spite between mother in law and daughter in law still remain it is by and large dormant because as there are so few members in the household there is need for dependence, emotional and physical. There
are exceptions as in the close relationship between Sara, the wife of Thomas and her mother in law in *Something Barely Remembered*.

The final strokes of the portrait are made of the four elements dealt with in Chapter IX entitled “The Syrian Christian Pot Pourri”. The earlier trend of considering people belonging to other religions as misguided and the feeling that it was one’s duty to bring them to a realization of the folly of their ways which was very much evident in *The Slayer Slain* has now, to a large extent, been replaced by a feeling of brotherhood with all. This is perhaps the result of being able to perceive truly worthwhile persons in people of other or no religion at all. Cases in point are Gandhiji and E .M. S. Namboodiripad. The popularity of such individuals and the lack of people of such stature in the Syrian Christian fold is the most important reason for this change in attitude. This is, however, not the case in fanatic Syrian Christians, who fortunately are not too many in number. The feeling of diaspora continues to be strong though it is a feeling that is shared by all expatriate communities. It is a feeling that runs strongly in the mind of both the younger and the elder generations. For the elder it is the longing to return to the native land of their birth and youth, Meena’s mother longs to return to Kerala even in the short space of time she was in America at the time of the birth of Meena’s second child. For the younger who were born and brought up outside Kerala it is a longing to
return to the place of their birth and childhood just as Meena longs to revisit Sudan where she had spent her youth. In both cases this longing is not realized, the elder generation has become too attached to the material benefits of the lands of their choice that a return to the native land would entail sacrifices as in the case of Anna’s uncle Job in Something Barely Remembered. As for the younger if he returns he has to adjust to the feeling of being an interloper in his own country. Even though he is mentally a part of the country of his choice he has to face racial prejudice just as Meena had to both at the work place and in the streets of America. The Syrian Christians are some of the most politically conscious people in the world. It is this political literacy and social commitment that made it possible for Kerala to have the distinction of electing the Communist Party to power as far back as half a century. It is this same political commitment that was enraged when Arundhati Roy came out with unpalatable observations about the Communist Party and its heroes in The God of Small Things. It is that very same political awareness that caused the Syrian Christians to join with others to form a political party that would protect the interests of the right parties as well. Just as politics is a stepping stone to material prosperity, politics pervades the life of the Syrian Christians in every walk of life including the church. Power politics is played in every church in the land. The final element of the Syrian Christian pot pourri
is the influence of the Syrian Christians upon the social fabric of Kerala. As the Syrian Christians are the ones who have been the greatest beneficiaries of education, they are the ones who have had the greatest exposure to other states and countries. It is only logical to think that they have been able to influence the land a great deal. They are the ones who are chiefly responsible for bringing the plastic and throwaway cultures of those lands into Kerala. They are the ones who introduced labour saving kitchen devices which halved the work of the women leaving them time to use the electronic devices for entertainment. Such leisure time allowed them to spread their wings and realize their dreams to an extent.

The seven basic colours which have been used to paint this portrait are seven features that all the works have in common. All these features have changed over the last one hundred and fifty years. This change which was gradual in the first hundred years gathered momentum towards the last decade of the twentieth century, spinning ever faster as the years roll by. While the two works by the Anglican missionaries present the Syrian Christian characters in a setting which is slowly changing, the works by the Syrian Christian authors faithfully record the speed of change and point out the direction into which the community is heading.
The liberal education offered by the CMS missionaries opened up a whole world of opportunity for the enterprising Syrian Christians. As a result the community grew in wealth, education and importance. In the march of progress changes occurred in all the main features of the community which are best expressed by the ideas and deeds of the characters who people the six works that are studied. Fiction is always a reflection of fact, which is why it is said that fiction holds the mirror to history. Contemporary history is best remembered and recorded in works of fiction. The fiction is built up around the fact and in the crafting of this thesis apart from the facts gathered from published material, many more facts were culled from unpublished diaries, letters, memoirs as well as from the life experiences of people. Thus the portrait of the Syrian Christian community was painted by placing the fiction against the fact and finding the former a true reflection of the latter in spite of a few minor differences which were the exceptions rather than the rule.

A close understanding of the Syrian Christian community is useful for the community itself to understand and know itself. In this day and age when the younger members of the community are moving into other communities, other castes, other nations, it is always good to know the origin, the progress and the present condition of one’s own community. Such knowledge would help to preserve the different
features of the community with suitable modifications, thus safeguarding it from total disintegration and extinction. This is well in tune with the present day concerns of the world where one has to preserve or perish. Literature therefore, is another tool by which the truth can be realized with perhaps more effect than in the case of any other discipline because it appeals straight to the heart rather than the head.

In conclusion, the portrait of the Syrian Christian community drawn from the pictures provided by Frances Collins in *The Slayer Slain*, Dorothy Clarke Wilson in *Take My Hands*, Meena Alexander in *Fault Lines*, Nirmala Aravind in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*, Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* and Susan Viswanathan in *Something Barely Remembered* is a comprehensive one. It holds a mirror to the reality that the cohesive identity of the community is fast breaking up. At the same time the mirror of fiction also reveals the desire for roots, the desire for identity present in every generation of the community. There is a constant dialectic of making and unmaking only to remake the Syrian Christian community in all its different characteristics. This thesis therefore fulfills its purpose of presenting a true portrait of this people who are shrewd business men able to turn their considerable energies and resources, pepper or paper, to their advantage and in the process contribute to the progress achieved by the land.