Preface

The Pepper Paper People: A Portrait of the Syrian Christian Community as Reflected in the Works of Selected Authors is an attempt to study the Syrian Christian community and its various characteristics through works of literature. This is done based on the observations made by William Henry Hudson in his work An Introduction to English Literature. Hudson believes that while history gives the externals of a people’s civilization it is only literature that can help if we would understand their mental and moral characteristics, realize what they sought and achieved in the world of inner activity, and follow through the stages of their changing fortunes the ebb and flow of the forces which fed their emotional energies and shaped their intellectual and spiritual life (33).

This study therefore tries to paint the portrait of the Syrian Christian community using the brush of literature. Six works of selected authors are chosen to provide the colours needed to paint this portrait. The colours are those characteristics which are found in common in all the six works. They are the reflections or the images of the reality found in the lives of the Syrian Christians. It is also possible to note that these images have undergone changes over the last century and a half in keeping with changes that have occurred the world over. Therefore the
portrait is not merely a two dimensional picture but a three dimensional one which keeps changing. The study tries to adhere firmly to the principle that literature holds a mirror to history, that history is reflected in literature.

The background of the portrait is Central Kerala with its gurgling rivers and still backwaters, its undulating hills and fertile valleys, its lush paddy fields and luxuriant fruit trees. This is the setting of all the works that are studied. The foreground of the portrait is taken up with the Syrian Christians who are the people who occupy the pages of these six works. The basic shading of the portrait is made up by the sense of self worth felt by the Syrian Christians. This sense of self worth influences their attitude to men and matters. They consider themselves worthy because they claim an ancient heritage. They firmly believe that they are the descendants of the Brahmin families who accepted the Christian faith attracted by the words and deeds of St. Thomas, the disciple of Jesus Christ who is supposed to have set foot on Indian soil at Kodungalloor in A.D.52. The Syrian Christians call themselves so because once they became Christians they gave up their traditional names and took the names of the disciples and friends of Jesus Christ. These were names that were either Syriac or Greek. Also the liturgy used in the church was in the Syriac language because it was a replica of the one followed in the Eastern Orthodox churches of Syria. This is
another and very valid reason for its adherents to be called Syrian Christians. K. C. Zachariah in his extensive work, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century* considers the Syrian Christians as those who “follow the Syrian Rite in their religious services.”(2) The same criterion is followed in the Indian census also.

Such evidences are disputed by certain scholars on the grounds that in A.D.52 there were no Brahmins in Kerala and that Kerala itself was only part of the extensive southern kingdom of the Tamils. They believe that the Syrian Christian identity is just a social construct formulated by a group of Christians in order to establish the fact that they belong to a caste that is generally considered socially superior. Though there are many arguments for and against these ideas, the fact remains that the Syrian Christians hold the firm belief that they are the descendants of the Nambudiri - the term used for Malayalee Brahmins-families who became Christians in A.D.52. These Nambudiris continued to believe in caste superiority even after becoming Christian. This attitude prevails among Syrian Christians.

The Syrian Christians who are the subjects of this portrait are painted using seven fundamental colours. These make up seven chapters of the work, each depicting one particular characteristic of the community that is reflected in the six works studied. The eighth colour
is one that is obtained by mixing together four different colours, it is used in order to touch up the portrait and make it even more attractive and meaningful. This makes up the last chapter of the thesis. A Preface and Conclusion frame this portrait of the Syrian Christian community.

The painters of this portrait are all women, two of whom are white Protestant missionaries. The other four are Syrian Christians hailing from families settled in Central Kerala. All of them share in the purpose of recording their understanding of the Syrian Christian community. The first two authors Frances Wright Collins, author of *The Slayer Slain* and Dorothy Clark Wilson, author of *Take My Hands* painted the portrait of the Syrian Christians from the perspective of the outsider. The other four writers, however, painted portraits that were part of their own psyche as familiar and as necessary as the air they breathed. Meena Alexander’s *Fault Lines*; Nirmala Aravind’s *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*; Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Susan Viswanathan’s *Something Barely Remembered* are the first works of the writers in this genre of prose. These works were all published in the last decade of the twentieth century. Therefore the colours used by these painters have become deeper in some cases and lighter in certain others.

The six works that are taken up for study paint the portrait of the Syrian Christian community over a period of about one hundred and
fifty years from 1866 when the very first work *The Slayer Slain* was published, right up to 1997 when *Something Barely Remembered* was published. They reflect the changes that have happened to the community over this span of time. Every feature is subjected to close study by all the authors though they are separated from each other in time and clime. They consider every issue with the same kind of seriousness. Nothing is trivial or unimportant, a new recipe for chicken curry is just as important as preparing for examinations; the correct way of pickling mangoes is as much a problem to be solved as allowing an untouchable too much freedom. Therefore the portrait of the Syrian Christian community is painted by these women using a whole mixture of colours, like the sheets embroidered by Syrian Christian women using cross stitch patterns in a plethora of colours. This study tries to trace each feature that has gone into the fashioning of the portrait of the Syrian Christians through an analysis of the six works mentioned above.

The titles of each of the books taken for study are intriguing. *The Slayer Slain* by Mrs. Collins plays upon the verb ‘to slay’ and uses it to refer to a complete transformation of the spirit, a spiritual purgation of the protagonist. Dorothy Clark Wilson uses the first line of a popular Christian hymn as the title of her work *Take My Hands*. Here Mary Verghese dedicates her clever hands to God for the service of humanity groaning under the stigma of social ostracism. Meena Alexander calls
her autobiography, *Fault Lines* because she is “a woman cracked with multiple migrations” (*FL* 3) “a mass of faults, a fault mass.” (*FL* 2) A Video, a Fridge and a Bride is Nirmala Aravind’s way of bringing to our notice the spectre of dowry that hangs over the head of every middle class Syrian Christian girl. The spectre becomes more fearful if she has a dark complexion and is not strikingly beautiful. Every aspect of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* has come in for critical appraisal. The title too has come in for a lot of comment, perhaps its cryptic nature allows any number of explanations. The easiest explanation is that it refers to the resilience of the human spirit which allows even small things to survive, though only after a fashion. *Something Barely Remembered* can be variously regarded as a bunch of short stories or as a very loose novel. The thoughts of the various characters always come back to the barely remembered background of their lives. Therefore the title of this work is most relevant.

The methodology that is used to support the premise put forward by Hudson is one of comparison and contrast. The factual evidence about each trait that is analysed is discussed and supported with evidence from the books written by persons who have dealt with the matter. Manuscripts of memoirs, letters, diaries, informal interviews and discussions, shared memories have gone into the making of this work. For the researcher who belongs to the same community that is portrayed
here, it is lived experience, a present reality. In each chapter the historical facts regarding each characteristic are placed against the exposition of the same in each fictional work in chronological order. This helps in understanding how most of these traits have undergone change in more or less degree over a span of nearly a century and a half. At the end of such a search one has to agree with the wise observation made by the late poet scholar, Dr. K. Ayyappa Panicker that there is very often more fact in fiction than otherwise.

It is appropriate to make a brief mention of each chapter and its contents, to give a brief account of the colour that is used in each chapter to paint this portrait. Chapter 1 entitled “The Syrian Christians of Kerala” deals chiefly with the history of Christianity in Kerala with special reference to the Syrian Christian Protestants. This term is used broadly to refer to all the Syrian Christians who do not bear allegiance to the Pope viz. the Syrian Christians of the various denominations of Jacobite and Orthodox, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Anglican church established by the Church Missionary Society and its successor, the Church of South India (CSI) as well as some of the Pentecostal churches. The main characters as well as their authors belong to one or the other sect of non Catholic Syrian Christians. All the works are set in the area that encompasses the districts of Kottayam, Pathnamthitta, Ernakulam and Alapuzha. The fertile regions between the two major
rivers of Pamba and Periyar make up the geographical area frequented by the characters and their authors.

The second chapter entitled “The Syrian Christian Mode of Nomenclature, Dress and Cuisine” speaks about some of the culture markers of the Syrian Christians viz. the way they name their children, the kind of dress they wear and the dishes they cook. These culture markers are present in all the works studied. Chapter 3 with the title “The Syrian Christian Custom of Arranging Marriages” is about a very important custom carefully followed by the Syrian Christians. Marriage for the Syrian Christians is a very important event. The whole family consisting not merely of blood relations but also people connected by the ties of marriage and friendship get involved in this process of sifting and negotiating in order to find the right partner. Many are the problems caused both by arranging marriages and otherwise. The problems of arranging or not arranging marriages are reflected in more or less degree in all the works.

If one were to say that Syrian Christians practise one of the main tenets of Christianity viz. that all men are equal in the sight of God, it would be far from the truth because they firmly believe in the laws of pollution followed by the Nambudiri ancestors from whom they claim descent. This basic trait of theirs is expressed in Chapter 4 entitled “The Syrian Christians and Caste.” While there are traces of caste in all the
books it is in *The God of Small Things* that it is most evident. Chapter 5 with the title “The Syrian Christian Women” traces the saga of Syrian Christian women who have been able to rise to great heights on the wings of education. Using the advantages of a good education they have been able to play a great part in crafting the social, economic and cultural history of the country and even of the world. The life and work of Dr. Mary Verghese in *Take My Hands* is ample proof for this fact.

Progress and self actualization are possible only for women with a good education. This fact is reflected in the mirror held up by all the six works studied.

Chapter 6 “The Syrian Christians and the Church” explores the place of the institution of the Church in the lives of the Syrian Christians. Many a family has been made or marred by its attitude to the church. In many cases the Church is a stepping stone to material prosperity rather than spiritual wealth. The church even in its external façade is a reflection of the attitude of the parishioners.

One of the pressing concerns of the modern world is the environment and its present degradation. As the Syrian Christians as a community are the ones who have had the greatest contact with other cultures, particularly the western, they are, in a great measure, responsible for bringing the throwaway culture of the west into the land. Chapter 7, “The Syrian Christians and the Environment” is a pointer to
the state of the environment. The tragic degradation of the Meenachil River is graphically rendered by Arundhati Roy in her *The God of Small Things*. The eighth chapter “The Syrian Christians and the Family” talks about the close knit nature of the Syrian Christian family which too had been a joint family under the firm rule of the patriarch. Though the joint family has been replaced by several nuclear families there is still a bonding, a desire for coming together. This happens most at the time of weddings and funerals, in times of joy ad sorrow. *Fault Lines* and *Something Barely Remembered* give the clearest reflection of this bonding. Chapter 9 of this study entitled, “The Syrian Christian Pot Pourri” brings together four disparate strands which are to be found both in the community and in its reflection in the six works. They are the Syrian Christian attitude to people of other religions, the Syrian Christian diaspora, the Syrian Christians and their penchant for politics as well as the social history of Kerala with regard to the Syrian Christians. The study is rounded off with the Conclusion, which along with the Preface make up the frame of the portrait.

The very first portrait of the Syrian Christian community was painted as early as 1859 by Frances Wright Collins. A whole century had to elapse before a second portrait was painted. This time also the author was another white woman, Dorothy Clarke Wilson who wrote the biography of Dr. Mary Verghese, *Take My Hands* which was first
published in 1963. The long gap of a century between the publication of the first work and the second is cause for thought. This can, however, be explained from the subject matter of the works themselves. Mariam, the central female character in *The Slayer Slain* represents the Syrian Christian woman who has only started exploring the vast avenues of knowledge through the education offered by the missionaries. In the second work *Take My Hands*, society has already decided upon the professions women can follow viz. teaching and medicine. It is a historical fact that many Syrian Christian women pursued these careers and excelled in them. The intervening century between the first two works studied here witnessed momentous events in the country and in the world. Boundaries were re-drawn in the worlds of matter and spirit. The Syrian Christian women also took part in the great events in the land particularly the struggle for independence. Freedom fighters like Accamma Cherian have become household names. Meena Alexander’s maternal grandmother Elizabeth Kuruvilla is another example. After India became free the task of building up the nation from the rack and ruin in which it had been left, fell to all people, men and women alike. The churches too had to have its various bodies reorganized according space to women. Thus the Syrian Christians played important roles in the building up of the churches and the nation as a whole. World bodies like the World Council of Churches heard the voice of Syrian Christian
women like Miss Sarah Chakko, Principal of the Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, presenting her ideas about Ecumenism. The Students’ Christian Movement, The Women’s Fellowships and the YWCA had Syrian Christian women in the fore front. In the secular world hundreds of women distinguished themselves as dedicated educators and doctors. Dr. Mrs. Mary Punnen Lukose brought honour to the community as the first woman Surgeon General in the court of the Maharaja of Travancore. So did Smt. Anna Chandy who became the first woman Chief Justice. These women are just two examples of Syrian Christian women who were able to carve out a niche for themselves. This perhaps accounts for the fact that none of them resorted to writing. One does not discount the fact that many works were written in Malayalam by eminent writers of both sexes which have the Syrian Christian milieu.

While English is the native tongue of Frances Collins and Dorothy Clark Wilson, it is the language in which all the Syrian Christian writers studied here choose to express themselves. As all of them were educated outside Kerala it is natural for them to be more at home with the international language of English rather than their own language of Malayalam. Therefore the portraits they paint are couched in the language of English.
Though each work depicted the Syrian Christian community, each had an objective entirely its own. In *The Slayer Slain* the objective of “educating the young” (SS 33) was clearly set out. The missionaries felt that it was their bounden duty to civilize the ‘natives’. The objective in writing *Take My Hands* was also clear – it was meant to bring to the notice of the world the brave history of Dr. Mary Verghese who showed that even a paraplegic can lead a useful life if she has the will for it. The task of building the independent nation of India is also emphasized here.

The four Syrian Christian writers born in independent India are members of wealthy and educated families. Armed with very good education and exposed to the cosmopolitan culture of the world outside Kerala, they take a good hard look at the culture that has fostered them. They try to look at themselves in relation to the community in which they are rooted. As they are not happy with the restrictions imposed upon them in the matter of caste and custom they turn against the community and condemn it as being bigoted, hypocritical and caste ridden. All of them have chosen their own path and the partners of their hearts. And yet they are pulled back to their roots as is clear from the fact that all of them talk about the past and the happy, carefree days of their childhood. These works, autobiographical in nature, therefore are a release for them, a way by which they can savour the happiness of the past without being hounded by doubts and questions. Even if the past is
spoken about in a denigrating manner, a great deal of nostalgia underlies every reminiscence. In Fault Lines the nostalgia is for Ilya and the Kurichiethu House in Tiruvalla, in A Video, a Fridge and a Bride Lissy longs for the family house at Pallissery, in The God of Small Things Rahel remembers the happy days of playing with Estha and enjoying the uncomplicated love of Velutha on the banks of the Meenachil River. Most of the women characters who have made good in their different professions are aware that they are missing something very precious in their lives in Something Barely Remembered though it is only Mariam who craves for the unpolished rice and spicy fish curry of typical Syrian Christian cuisine. There is therefore a love- hate relationship between the authors and their Syrian Christian identity which is so much a part of themselves. They cannot shed the latter as it is so ingrained in them almost like the plasma in the blood. Nor can they get rid of the lives they had chosen for themselves because their choice had allowed them to grow and spread their wings wide. Such freedom that they now enjoy can never be theirs in the straitlaced world of the Syrian Christians. Thus the dialectic continues leaving them no real choice. Perhaps Meena Alexander has put it most succinctly when she describes her life as one of fault lines and compares herself to the incense tree which gives forth hard incense fruit even though its roots do not go deep into the soil. All these writers, though torn apart by their innate Syrian Christian identity
and by the identity that they have chosen for themselves, bring forth literary fruit which give out incense that is truly fragrant. The pictures drawn by these insiders are therefore splashed with deep, inflamed colours which reflect the torment of the characters and their authors.

The study is entitled *The Pepper Paper People* because it points to the business acumen of the Syrian Christians. The pepper vines which bear the hard green berries which turn into a flaming red when ripe, raven black when dried and spicy grey when powdered were to be found in plenty in all Syrian Christian homes. Meena Alexander recollects the carpets of red pepper berries spread out to dry in the sunlight of the Kurichiethu courtyard in Tiruvalla. Long before the Portuguese discovered the sea route to India, the Arabs and the Jews had had trade relations with India and had been the ones to supply the western world with the pungent pepper, the fragrant cinnamon, the spicy cloves and aromatic cardamom and a host of other spices. Among all these spices the one that needed the least care was pepper which grew in almost all places irrespective of terrain. The spice that was in greatest demand was pepper and so the Syrian Christians concentrated on the production and marketing of the same. The fertile land in Central Kerala with its many rivers and backwaters yielded produce beyond expectations. Salman Rushdie in his *The Moor’s Last Sigh* graphically pictures the pepper business run by the Moor’s family in Cochin. Yet pepper so favourite of
the foreigner is not all that necessary in the ordinary cuisine of the Syrian Christians who use pepper mainly in the cooking of meat and allied dishes. Therefore the cultivation of pepper was done mainly as a cash crop.

The western liberal education imparted by the CMS missionaries which opened the doors of opportunity to all was further strengthened by the establishment of the CMS Press and the easy accessibility of books in Malayalam and English. There came into being several printing presses which catered to men’s desire for knowledge through the daily newspapers. One such newspaper giant is the Malayala Manorama which was established in 1888 and has now grown to become the regional daily with the greatest circulation. The Kandathil family which owns and runs the paper is a Syrian Christian family belonging to the Orthodox faction of the Syrian church. One might call this family and its scions benevolent despots whose business acumen has steered the establishment safely through rough seas and hidden rocks, changing their policies to suit the changing times and branching out into new areas breaking virgin soil and succeeding at it. K. M. Mathew the Chief Editor of the Malayala Manorama in his autobiography, *Ettamathe Mothiram* vividly relates the saga of this daily and the various publications of the MM Group.
Kottayam is often called the land of lakes, letters and latex. The truth of this epithet has to be acknowledged because the printing and publishing of books is undertaken by a large number of individuals and firms, many of whom are Syrian Christians, the subjects of this study. The fact that the four Syrian Christians whose works are studied here chose to pour out their hearts onto paper is ample indication of the importance of paper to this people. Therefore this work tries to explore the nature of this people whose business interests have evolved from pepper to paper to several other enterprises.

The Pepper Paper People: A Portrait of the Syrian Christian Community as Reflected in the works of Selected Authors thus attempts to portray the Syrian Christian community in its entirety – its past which deals with its origin, its present which has undergone many changes and its future as foretold by the authors in their works studied here.