Chapter 5

The Syrian Christian Women

The Syrian Christian women of Kerala followed the path carved by their men folk and remained submissive to them in the public sphere. They were, however, mistresses in their own homes and behaved in much the same way as women of other communities. They were part of the patriarchal system of the Syrian Christians but were familiar with the matrilineal system followed in the Nair households. Perhaps that was what gave the senior women of the Syrian Christian houses a sense of power over the other females and in some cases over the males too. This was more or less the state of affairs for a very long period of time and the women did much of the manual work along with their men. The life of the Syrian Christian women went on without much change over generations and centuries. Though they were Christian by religion their traditions and customs were more Hindu than Christian. It is only with the coming of the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society and with the introduction of western, liberal, English education that the framework of the Syrian Christian society underwent a sea change.

The missionaries established ‘The College, Cotym’ in 1817 as a place where young men could be trained in the new methods of education followed in the Universities of England. Thus they learnt logic, rhetoric, philosophy, mathematics, history, geography, as well as
the classical languages of Greek and Latin, Sanskrit and Syriac. In addition they also learnt the working languages of English and Malayalam. The establishment of the CMS press by the Rev. Benjamin Bailey and the translation of the Bible into Malayalam were two important events in the life of the people of Central Kerala. Under the aegis of another dynamic missionary, Rev. Henry Baker, a number of Anglican churches were established in different parts of Central Kerala. Schools were also started along with the churches and the children were taught the Three R’s so that they could not only learn for themselves but also teach their families. The missionaries firmly believed the principle that the best way to teach the people was to teach their young children. These schools attached to the church may be said to have ushered in the Age of Enlightenment in Kerala and awakened the people from the darkness of ignorance into the blazing light of truth.

A most revolutionary change was brought about in the whole tapestry of Syrian Christian life in 1820 when Mrs. Amelia Dorothea Baker, the wife of the intrepid missionary Rev. Henry Baker chose six little girls from among the Syrian Christian families in Kottayam and taught them the basic skills of Reading, ’Riting and ’Rithmetic along with a few other essentials like dainty needlework, proper deportment and good manners. They were taught in the missionary’s home and their yearly expense of lodging and boarding was met by the missionaries
themselves. Their intention in educating these girls was to provide the priests that were trained in the new seminary with wives who would be true helpmates to them in their vocation of priesthood. Besides, educating a woman meant educating a whole family, not merely an individual. This little school that was started in the Baker mission house grew into a big school in the hands of the Baker women who followed the first Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Henry Baker Jr. the daughter in law of the first Mrs. Baker nurtured the school. By now the number of students had increased and they were willing to pay for their tuition. When Mary Baker the daughter of Rev. Henry Baker Jr. took over the reins of managing the school it had grown so big that it could no longer be contained in the mission house. Thus the Bakers bought the site where the school is presently situated and the school started functioning as the first institution for female education in South India. The school came to be called the Miss Baker’s School and it heralded a new era for Syrian Christian women. Nearly two centuries afterwards the school now known by the name Baker Memorial Girls’ Higher Secondary School continues to function as one of the chief centres of female education. It would therefore not be wrong to say that the progress achieved by Kerala is due to the growth and development of education, particularly female education, which was first provided by the Miss Baker’s School and the CMS College, Kottayam.
It became the practice for the educated and affluent families of Central Kerala to send their daughters to the Miss Baker’s School so that they could be trained to become worthy women equipped to take their place in the world. It was not only the Syrian Christians who sent their daughters to the Miss Baker’s but enlightened people from all castes. The diplomat K. P. S. Menon in his autobiography, *Many Worlds* recalled the fact that his mother had her basic education in the Miss Baker’s School (10). The women who thus obtained their first taste of the world through their basic education at the Miss Baker’s School went on to achieve greatness in other fields notably the fields of medicine and education and were able to contribute their mite to the building up of the Indian nation. This is not to deny the silent contributions of women who have used their education to build homes and bring up children on the principles of love and sacrifice and on the scientific temper which accepts every thought only after due consideration and evaluation.

The mid fifties of the previous century can be considered as the coming of age of the women of Kerala, particularly of the Syrian Christian women. The scores of women who benefited from the education that they had obtained within the state enabled them to seek further education and employment outside the state and abroad. After they had established themselves in their place of work they brought their families too and then other relatives who also carved a space for
themselves in the new countries. Foreign exchange began to flow into the land changing the lifestyle of the inhabitants and even the topography of the territory. The children who learnt abroad adopted the language and culture of those countries though their parents kept alive to a certain extent some of the cultural patterns of the home country. The mother tongue of Malayalam became a kind of mongrel breed interspersed with ample samples of the second language. Perhaps it would be truer to say that the language of the country of their adoption became liberally sprinkled with the taste and twang of the language of the parents. Even those who remained behind at home in Kerala, though not in direct contact with the country of the work place, were affected by the increasing prosperity of the land. The cost of living shot up as also the desire to keep up with the Joneses. Therefore it is possible to note a scramble for everything including the best kind of education. A glance into the pages of several family histories confirms the fact that scores of people, particularly women, have left their native shores and gone abroad chiefly as teachers and nurses. With financial independence and freedom of thought change has come over the attitudes of both men and women. Values have changed and timeworn institutions like marriage and family have lost their sanctity.

In the works that are studied it is possible to trace the changes that have taken place in the attitudes and approaches of Syrian Christian
women. In the very first work The Slayer Slain, Mariam the daughter of Koshy Curien is presented as an example of how education liberates a woman from the shackles of custom and meaningless tradition. Mrs. Collins describes her thus

Mariam was a tall, handsome girl of fourteen; and had just returned from school, where her father, proud of her talents, had spared no expense to secure her the advantages of a good education. He had for several years paid for her board at the Mission School, where her industry and intelligence had gained for her the high esteem of everyone who knew her (SS 39).

When she returned home after finishing her course of study, she found there a number of things which she did not appreciate. She loved all her family but she was pained to see the harsh worldliness of her father and the forgetfulness of her mother who toiled from morn to eve in order to make food for the body totally disregarding the food for the soul. Her grandmother was the only one who held the Word of God close to her heart and tried to follow it in letter and spirit. Mariam did all that was expected of an eldest daughter in that she looked after the younger children, helped her mother in the kitchen, taught her brothers and sisters, kept honed the skills that she had learnt at school and generally managed things with intelligence and understanding.
Education enabled Mariam to judge matters for herself and she had no hesitation in enlisting the help of her grandmother in order to give medical treatment to the old slave. It was Mariam by her kind words and kinder actions who first brought Poulosa into knowledge of the one true God. One might say that Mariam’s education allowed her to sweep aside long established prejudices which ultimately led to the salvation of many from the bondage of sin and humiliation. It also served to literally save Mariam’s life.

Mariam and her brother George had both received good education but George believed that Mariam would have to face a great deal of trouble in her lot as woman. He believed that it would be Mariam’s fate to marry someone her father chose whether unlettered or uncouth. She would live her life out in the tradition bound, ritual ridden Syrian Christian household where she would not be allowed to pursue the studies she was so fond of. Her life would be just one round of soulless work until she pined and died, when she would be buried in the Syrian Christian cemetery. Mariam was aghast when she realized that her father was considering a husband for her taking into account only the man’s Syrian Christian heritage and the extent of the lands that belonged to his father. Her encounter with the shrewish woman who inspected her in church was unbearable. So was the occasion when the prospective bridegroom came to see her and showed himself to be a
most uncouth fellow in appearance and manners. She disliked him on
sight and could not bear the thought of being yoked to him for life.

The education that she had received gave her the courage to
accost her father and confide in him all that she knew about this suitor’s
first wife who had pined away and died of overwork and unhappiness.
Mariam protested that her fate would be a worse one because she was
not timid but headstrong and impatient. She feared that she might do
something terrible if she did not have somebody wiser and calmer of
temperament to guide and support her. Her father was so struck by her
arguments that he did what would be ordinarily considered unthinkable
viz. he wrote to the boy’s father breaking off the settlement. Such an
action was almost unheard of in those days and it put Koshy Curien to
many explanations and even disgrace among his Syrian Christian
brothers. Mariam was able to persuade her father to return to the fold of
the Anglican church. His eyes no longer blinded by considerations of
wealth or status Koshy Curien was able to recognize true worth.
Therefore he has no reluctance in giving his daughter in marriage to
Mathew the clever but poor evangelist. Mariam was able thus to
influence all who came into contact with her because education had
given her a clear knowledge of the true and lasting values of life. Her
sweet nature also changed the life of the old blind Brahmin gentleman
who lived next door to them. So entranced had he been listening to the
stories told by Miriam about Jesus that he had become a Christian and had come as an uninvited guest to attend Mariam’s marriage. He had every right to do so because he had discovered that Mariam’s mother was his long lost niece.

Mrs. Collins also tries to draw a contrast between the lives of women like Mariam who are educated and those of women like the wife of the local pastor who did not have the benefit of a good education. Such women spent a large part of their time gossiping and carrying tales which did more harm than good. The pastor’s wife was at first no different, in fact, she even neglected the tasks of her own household in order to engage in such worthless occupations. It was only when the pastor took upon himself the task of educating his wife that she began to use her time well by learning how to read and write so that she could pursue these interesting occupations for the edification of her own mind and that of others. And yet she was not progressive enough as to sit at table with her husband for their meal. Mariam’s mother too was not one of those women who had the benefit of education. She, however, made a good wife to Koshy Curien because she obeyed him implicitly and never questioned his decisions. This is more the attitude of servility rather than equality and it is the latter that has to be practised if a wife is to be the true helpmate of her husband. Mariam’s mother does not have any voice in the choice of a suitable groom for her daughter, mostly because
of this attitude of servility. She is not even able to assess her daughter’s
dlikes and dislikes and find her a suitable life partner. If Mariam had not
been made of sterner stuff she also would have submitted tamely to the
edict of her father regarding her husband.

A century later society’s attitude to the education of women has changed. It is no longer the exclusive privilege of the wealthy to have
their daughters educated. Education has become the unquestionable right
of women and it is understood that a man should send his daughters to
school. Fathers who loved their daughters were willing to give them the
opportunities for higher education. Thus we find in Take My Hands
Mary Varghese enjoying the thrill of education. Even when she was a
primary school student Mary asserted her independence by preferring to
learn in the class of a teacher who was known for her strictness. Her
father approved of the fact that his young daughter had an independent
spirit and preferred to run alone rather than with the herd. This trait in
Mary’s character coloured her life and it met with the unalloyed
approval of her father. He always cautioned his daughter not to rest on
her oars “but always strive to exceed our own achievements.” (TMH 27)

Mary could not accept the usual regimen chalked out for a young
girl of a proper Syrian Christian family viz. to take a degree respectably
and then be married off. Unlike her sisters she did not want to be
married for a long time. She wanted to keep on learning things, to
discover, to explore, to travel to distant places, to create. And more than all else, she wanted to be dependent on no one, certainly on no strange man. She wanted to walk by herself along the adventurous road of learning. This desire to learn did not deprive Mary of her essential femininity. After she finished her high school education she spent time learning the maidenly occupations of housekeeping because they were useful. But not once did she lose sight of the fact that she wanted to learn much more than these jobs deemed fit for women. Her friend Ammini told her all about the wonderful exploits of Dr. Ida Scudder who had established the Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore. The exploits of Dr. Ida and her single minded devotion to the Christian Medical College and Hospital so enthralled Mary that she wanted to follow in the footsteps of her idol. Even though her parents and brothers were a bit chary about Mary’s opting for professional education, they made no objection once Mary proved herself able. Mary’s father believed that there were some professions for which women had a natural flair like teaching and medicine. Perhaps it is this attitude that has caused Syrian Christian women to opt for these professions rather than any others. In Mary’s case, when she set out “to show Appan that a daughter could be as capable of scholarly achievements as a son” (TMH 35) her family accepted her decisions without question.
Mary was so tenacious in nature that she accepted all the obstacles that Fate put in her path and surmounted them by sheer industry and perseverance. Along with these qualities faith in God helped her to accept all that was in store for her. She turned all her considerable energies to learning. All her hopes of becoming a good practising doctor were shattered in the road accident that left her a paraplegic, totally paralysed from waist downwards. She was devotedly nursed to health by the different members of her family, her friends and associates in the hospital. It was a terrible moment when she realized that no drug, treatment or therapy would bring her lower limbs back to life. But her faith in God and unquestioning obedience to His Will enabled her to follow Dr. Paul Brand’s advice that she should try her hand at rehabilitative hand surgery for persons who had recovered from leprosy. She spent the rest of her life learning new methods and experimenting with her own innovations in rehabilitative surgery. She was able to do all this because of the unstinted support of her family and her unquestioning belief in God. However, this feeling of independence and self reliance was still relatively new for the women of the Syrian Christian community.

**Fault Lines** talks of the Syrian Christian community, particularly the women, in a kind of cultural transition. The women armed with a good education have decided views of their own, they are no longer
willing to be imposed upon. Meena Alexander tries to evaluate the attitudes of her maternal and paternal grandmothers. As the work is an autobiography the personae and events are real and representative of the community. The author is fascinated by the life and personality of her maternal grandmother Elizabeth, daughter of George Zachariah of the Marathottathil house. Elizabeth had the pet name Kunju and this was how the author constantly referred to her. George Zachariah had been conferred the title of Rao Bahadur by the British and Kunju had been his youngest daughter and naturally the apple of his eye. The children were all brought up in the right British colonial fashion with the sons being educated at Oxford and the daughters married off after a good basic education to suitable bridegrooms from good families. Kunju alone had the courage to rebel against this regimen.

Greatly influenced by certain Scottish spinster ladies, missionaries who encouraged her in her quest for independence, she persisted in her studies. She travelled to Madras; she studied further and gained an M.A. in English Literature from Presidency College. She joined the YWCA, which was quite active in India in the early decades of the twentieth century. In her work in the YWCA she travelled all over the world … (FL 11)
As she lived in the times when the independence movement in India was at its peak it was inevitable that Kunju should play her part in the freedom struggle. She gave up all her colonial pretensions and became very much a part of the freedom movement. It was here that she met K. K. Kuruvilla a staunch Gandhian and freedom fighter. He was a scholar of repute too and Kunju did not have to think twice about marrying him overriding all familial objections. After their marriage she was as much at the forefront of the freedom struggle as her husband and continued to be a public figure all through her life right up to her death. Her public life left very little time for her private life with her husband and young daughter. Her only child had been sent off to the boarding school in Tiruvalla, later to the Women’s Christian College, Madras for her graduate studies. Then it was that her mother passed away, leaving her singularly bereft having never experienced a mother’s love at crucial times in her life. It was this loss that caused Meena Alexander’s mother to live in the shadow of her husband so that her children could always have her at their moments of need. This was the reason why she kept advising her children that the place of a woman was always at home with her husband and children.

It is possible to see a dialectic between what a woman should be and what she would like to be. A home and family force her to give up many opportunities that would help her to grow mentally and spiritually.
Self actualization is possible only when opportunities are put to proper use. But when a woman tries to take advantage of the prospects open to her she has to neglect her family at least to a small degree. Kunju’s mother Anna was a spirited lady who was married off at the age of seven and managed a large household. She never had any formal education. But she taught herself to read and write both Malayalam and English and in her forties “once child bearing was over, ran a small newspaper for housewives, filled with information about child care, hygiene and cooking” (FL 11).

This was self actualization for Meena Alexander’s great grandmother on her maternal side thus proving that self actualization was possible within the confines of home and family. Another person who lived like a queen was her paternal grandmother Mariamma of the Kannadickal family in Kozencheri. She was the daughter of Wilson Master of Kottayam and she was the middle one among the seven daughters that God had blessed/cursed him with. Grandmother Mariamma was the second wife of her husband and it was believed that if Wilson Master had not been so other worldly he might have been able to find a better match for his beautiful, fair skinned daughter. Perhaps she might be even said to have married beneath her. Be that as it may, Grandmother Mariamma was justly proud of her illustrious lineage as she belonged to the Kaithayil and Sankaramangalam families, both of
which are prominent families in the Syrian Christian community. There is no mention about the education of Grandmother Mariamma but she did not lack self esteem and a decided view of life. Perhaps it was the esteem of being part of a reputed lineage that held her up. She was beautiful and fair skinned, both of which are great advantages in a community which sets great store by these qualities. She had precision and poise unlike her daughter in law who became flustered at the slightest trouble. Grandmother Mariamma’s poise and the straightness of her carriage with her starched garments drawn upright as if a pin had descended her spine, remained an example worth emulating. She was such a redoubtable little lady that one glare from her expressive eyes was enough to quell even the blustering and fiery grandfather. She was also a practical woman too which was why she was willing to overlook the dark complexion of her son’s wife because the latter came from an illustrious family and was an only child, heiress of large holdings of land. In spite of her strict ways which prevented her from cosseting her grandchildren she did have a soft spot for them. She gave the child Meena a pair of velvet ribbons to encourage to keep her hair neatly combed and tightly plaited. While Meena Alexander could weave fanciful dreams about her Grandmother Kunju who had died long before she was born, she could only think of her Grandmother Mariamma as an intrepid matriarch who ruled over home and family with a hand of iron.
Two other Syrian Christian women of the older generation that Meena thought about were the two sisters of her maternal grandfather. These two ladies were referred to as Mallappalilammachi and Chenengerilammachi. Both these ladies were dressed in the traditional manner of Syrian Christian women and wore heavy gold ornaments swinging in the lobes of their ears. She wondered at the pain and inconvenience women put up with merely because it was the practice to wear such heavy ornaments. Chenengerilammachi was remarkable for her eccentricity which caused her to cackle with laughter over the silliest things. Nobody ever thought of her as being touched in the head but all made allowances for the fact that something had gone a little wrong when she lost her mother at a very young age. They were not women liberated by education from the clutches of custom.

Meena Alexander’s own mother, however, in spite of a good education, preferred to live in the shadow of her husband rather than try her wings in the sunshine. It was as if she was eager that her daughters should have all that she lacked. Even though her mother had died when she was doing her undergraduate studies, she had never experienced her mother’s love to the fullest because the latter had been more a public figure than a private individual. She had never been available when her daughter needed her, not even when she had been a small girl. Marriage and childbirth are the two most important events in a girl’s life when she
longs for the soothing presence of her own mother. There is a great deal of unspoken sadness in Meena’s mother when she recollected the preparations for her wedding. There had been plenty of people to do all that needed doing but none would ever come up to what it would have been if her mother had been alive. Perhaps this was only wish fulfillment but nevertheless it leaves behind sadness particularly when Meena describes how her mother had her first delivery in Allahabad with no one to help except an aunt who lived in Burhanpur. As her own mother had not been alive she had not been taken home to Tiruvalla for her first delivery. Even though a Syrian Christian woman loses all her rights and even her position in her father’s house once she is married, she is brought to her paternal home for her first delivery. This is done in pomp and splendour and the daughter is made much of during the final stages of her pregnancy and the delivery. She is given a special diet of the choicest food and her body rubbed with herbal oils and unguents in order to tone up her skin which had bloated up during pregnancy. Meena’s mother had none of this very special treatment because she had been in faraway Allahabad and had no mother to go home to or to be brought to her. Perhaps it was this abounding sadness that gave rise to her life philosophy that the rightful place of a woman is with her children and husband. She stood always in the shade of her husband and did her very best to be a good wife to him and a submissive daughter-in-
law to his parents. In fact it was she who faithfully nursed her father-in-law in the last years of his life. Never once did she take her wedding ring off her finger even in times of oedema during pregnancy. She found it difficult to stomach her daughter’s insouciant attitude which relegated the wedding ring to just another piece of jewllery. Yet in spite of Meena’s refusal to be as submissive and conformist as her mother, there are some things she could not but imbibe from her mother.

Bit by bit I learnt from amma a shyness in the face of the world, a fear of looking straight at the lives of others. I did not want to be seen. I did not want to intrude. What would they make of me? But that reticence, even as it has held me back, has served me. I learnt from her too the art of withdrawal, of thinking inward that no one could look and tell from a woman’s face what her heart might hold. (FL 67)

Meena’s mother found pleasure in conforming to the laws set down by society. She had no wish to fight them as her mother had done. She liked being just an ordinary individual, a girl whose fate and fortune were decided by her elders even if they were not always her betters. Even the choice of her husband was imposed upon her even though she did not have any real objection. She knew nothing of her husband except that he was a meteorologist and the Kannadickal family had wanted him
to be married before he went abroad for higher studies so as to protect him from being ensnared by foreign women. She had to wait months for her husband to return from his foreign sojourn. And yet she did not complain. Instead she did all that was expected of a dutiful daughter-in-law. When her husband came and whisked her off to Allahabad where she gave birth to Meena she had no complaints or opinions. Even when she crossed the seas with her husband she walked in his footsteps without question. She did not like it when people, especially girls, did things out of the ordinary. She found it difficult to answer Meena’s questions about puberty and menstruation simply because in the 1960’s they were usually considered taboo topics. The very thought that Meena wished to wear sleeveless blouses and short skirts in tradition ridden Kozencheri shocked her. At first she could not come to terms with Meena’s choice of a foreigner. The fact that he was a Jew was intolerable for her as it was for her husband. But once it was presented to her as a fait accompli she had no reluctance in accepting David as her son-in-law and the children Adam and Svati as much loved grandchildren. In fact so firmly did she believe that mothers should be there for their children that she went all the way to New York to be with Meena at the time of her daughter’s birth. This is how most senior Syrian Christian women belonging to the middle and upper middle class families behave.
The picture changes when it comes to the next generation of Syrian Christian women. Meena, for instance, cannot be the submissive withdrawn person that her mother is. She cannot accept without question the double standards that are often practised in her community. One example is the blatant display of the female body in Malabar Hill by the same persons who frown on sleeveless blouses and short skirts in Kozencheri. Meena surmounts the taboo of writing at a very early age when she uses the toilet as a safe place to write in fragments and snatches. There are no clumsy and awkward pauses when it comes to talking about supposedly taboo topics like menstruation and parturition. When it comes to the choice of her husband Meena follows the dictates of her heart rather than submit to generations of tradition and custom. She is willing to recognize that her love for her Jew husband is greater than her love for her family and community. She goes through the trauma of being in conflict with her parents in order to marry the man of her choice but manages to hang on. Though she chooses her own path, she still clings on to the values that have been inculcated in her. This is no doubt the reason why she leads a happy and contented life with her husband and two children. She carves a satisfying life for herself in New York though she does suffer from the racism and apartheid that are practiced overtly and covertly.
In spite of this she also experiences the diaspora felt by all who are away from their own mother country. It is only her Syrian Christian roots that give her a sense of belonging, particularly the Tiruvalla house and its environs which are full of the memories of her beloved Ilya. But even here she is not a true fit because she knows only the locally spoken variety of Malayalam and not the language in its written or spoken form. This again makes her not truly a part of Kerala and is the reason why she has named her autobiography Fault Lines. She compares herself to the incense tree which has shallow but sturdy roots and bears fruits that are hard but full of the sweetest scent.

In A Video, a Fridge and a Bride Lissy the heroine of the novel learns to follow the dictates of her own heart after going through the traumatic experience of having been the victim of several marriage proposals. Though a few were so unsuitable that they had to be discarded by Lissy’s parents themselves, a majority chose to reject Lissy on all kinds of flimsy excuses, chief of which was their dissatisfaction with the dowry offered by Lissy’s father. She was too timid to declare her views about her future husband and in spite of the mental torture that she had to undergo every time some proposal came up, she put up with it all. Nirmala Aravind sums up Lissy’s predicament thus:

She had not been brought up to question her elders.

Kuttiamma would frown if she so much as spoke or
laughed a little too loudly. Her whole life had been
ordered by her parents: they decided everything, from the
length of her sleeves to the number of movies she could
see in a year. As for the question of marriage, her attitude
to it had been ambivalent right from the start. She had
accepted it as something inevitable that awaited every
respectable young woman once she entered her twenties.
One married the right man whom one’s parents chose, set
up a home and had children. She did not even have a clear
picture of the kind of man she wanted to marry. (VFB
193)

She was brought up to be so submissive that even when she was
on her own in the Working Women’s Hostel she did not dare to go out
even for shopping because she had not obtained prior permission from
her parents. Lissy’s mother even chose the sari that Lissy was to wear
when one set or the other of prospective bridegrooms came to ‘see’ her.
Her mother’s constant refrain that she was only a plain girl and that her
father did not have pots of money to buy her a suitable husband only
served to erode her self esteem even further. Her mother paid scant
regard to her brilliant academic qualifications or even her job in the
bank. These paled into insignificance before the need for a suitable boy
for Lissy. When Lissy fell into the toils of the Union representative Jose
she was unable to extricate herself because she had for so long been browbeaten by her parents that being subjected to the same kind of treatment by Jose was calmly accepted by her. It was only when Jose confided in her in a bout of drunken revelation that she was only a silly pawn in his game of revenge against the upper class Syrian Christian that the scales effectively fell from her eyes. Only then did she realize that she would be only exchanging one kind of prison for another. It was a worthless exchange because Jose did not love her for herself and so she would be the loser in terms of the love and support of her family and community. When the novel ends Lissy is ready to chart a new course for her life starting with her new job as Probationery Officer in the Reserve Bank, in which she would herself decide her fate and future, instead of leaving them in the hands of others.

Lissy is saved from the drudgery of life by the good job that she holds. She is part of the new breed of young women who aim at a good job and thereby financial independence. Though a good student in Economics she did not go in for higher studies in her subject instead she preferred to equip herself for a job. Therefore she spent time preparing for tests for appointment in banks and insurance companies even while engaged in her undergraduate studies. She chose these two fields because they are highly paid and also there is much scope for rising to positions of importance. In addition she liked to deal with cash and
therefore the job was attractive and satisfying as well. Unlike her brother who did his Masters in English Literature without any sure plan about his future, Lissy has carefully planned her future. Like other girls who belong to middle class families she did not want to be a burden on her parents.

Education and economic independence, therefore, are ultimately the angels that save women from the drudgery of housekeeping and allow them to spread their wings at least a little. But even here women sometimes meet with opposition. When Lissy applied for the job of Probationery Officer, she had to bear the brunt of Jose’s disapproval and that of her parents. In both cases they did not approve though for different reasons. While Jose did not want Lissy to hold a position superior to his, her parents believed that finding a husband for a Probationery officer would be even more difficult. It was only the bracing encouragement of her room mate Renji and the support of her friends in the bank that enabled her to face the interview with confidence.

Lissy’s room mate Renjini may be called a liberated Syrian Christian woman. She had the benefit of a good education and a very good job because she was Probationery Officer at the Indian Mercantile Bank. She was not submissive like Lissy but an extrovert with very decided views on life and the position of women in society. Her
bubbling sense of humour earned her many friends and a positive attitude to life. She was shocked to see the extent of misery in Lissy’s life in this matter of being at the receiving end of several proposals of marriage all of which come to naught. She did her best to dissuade Lissy from even thinking of marrying Jose. But she was sensitive enough to understand that Jose’s proposal was balm to Lissy’s ego which had been so badly wounded by the many who had come forward only to discard her in the final count. It was Renji’s no-nonsense attitude to life that gave Lissy the courage to break free from the stranglehold of parents and make a life of her own – a life in which all decisions would be hers and hers alone. Perhaps Renji became what she was because she had her education in a cosmopolitan city like Bangalore where narrow tradition bound views have no place. Another reason is that her mother was very supportive and able to understand her need to try her wings. A third and very important reason was that she had a fair complexion and was in addition quite wealthy. Therefore there was no reason why she should be so loaded down with complexes as Lissy was. Her attitude to marriage was that she would think of marrying only someone who was her type because, “after a couple of years you would appreciate good manners more than a man’s views on the future of Marxism in India. If I don’t find the right person I think I’d rather stay single.”(VFB 235) At the end of the novel we find her embarking on the adventure of running
a bookshop of her own in Bangalore. She had no hesitation in throwing up her lucrative job in the bank in order to follow her dream. Not many middleclass Syrian Christian girls would dream of taking such a drastic step as this.

Lissy’s mother Kuttiamma can be said to be the typical middle class Syrian Christian mother whose world is her family. She was not concerned about the world outside except in so far as it impinged on her family. She scraped and scrimped in order to make do with her husband’s salary and run a home in the capital city of Trivandrum. She had very decided views which she imposed upon all the members of her family. Her life centred round her husband and their two children. She firmly believed that her son should get a good job and her daughter should be married off properly. Every moment of her life was spent in the realization of these goals. She worked her fingers to the bone in order to make the money that would be needed to provide Lissy with a good dowry. Lissy’s academic brilliance and lucrative job paled into insignificance before the one goal of marriage. Her son Aby who has turned spiritual was a heartache for his mother but she put up with it all because sons did have a better position in the Syrian Christian households. Kuttiamma was very conscious of her duties as the daughter in law of the house and kept her mother in law happy by working hard at the ancestral house in Pallissery. After her husband retired, Kuttiamma
took over the management of the house in Pallissery where she remained even though she did rush to Trivandrum to bring her daughter back into the beaten track from which she has strayed. She was business like about the various proposals that were taken up for Lissy and paid scant heed to the trauma experienced by her daughter. Perhaps this was because she also had undergone the same trauma in her time and believed that it was part of the life of every young girl. She could not bear the way Lissy had got embroiled with the low caste Jose thus casting a slur on her impeccable lineage. At the end of the novel though Lissy returned to Trivandrum with the knowledge that she would follow the dictates of her own heart she left behind a mother who was sure that her children would come to no harm as they were shielded by the values that had been so ingrained in them.

In *The God of Small Things* we are able to perceive the attitudinal differences in three generations of women of the same Syrian Christian family. Mammachi the oldest member of the family was a battered wife. Her husband the son of the Rev. John Ipe, had been an Imperial Entomologist in Delhi. In spite of being highly educated and a blatant Anglophile he is at heart a sadist who finds great pleasure in terrorizing his wife and daughter

In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web. He was charming and urbane with
visitors, and stopped just short of fawning on them if they happened to be white. He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father (GST181).

His wife put up with all his tantrums even his almost daily beating of her with a brass vase. There were several ridges on her scalp, proof of his maltreatment of her. This cruelty to his wife overflowed to his children chiefly his daughter Ammu. His not obtaining the credit of having identified a special type of moth had left him so embittered that he took it out on his hapless wife and daughter. Therefore after returning to Ayemenem in his retirement, he did nothing about giving Ammu any education beyond the basic education she had got in Delhi. He believed that there was no need to educate daughters beyond the basics. Nor did he think that there was any need to see her married off to a suitable person who could be baited only with a good dowry. This left his daughter with no option except to plot and plan about leaving the place at the earliest.
Mammachi’s attitude to her husband was one of dread rather than of respect or love. She had to put up with the huge inferiority complex that her husband has. When she excelled in something her husband would soon put a stop to it. If he could not he would find fault with whatever she did. Every night he worked out his frustrations by beating up his wife with the brass vase. This practice was finally ended by Chacko who was home from Oxford. After that Pappachi never spoke to Mammachi but withdrew into himself. He bought a car, the sky blue Plymouth which he zealously guarded from everyone including his wife until his death. When he died the whole village turned out to pay their respects to the outer façade presented by the son of Punnyan Kunju. Mammachi cried at the funeral but her daughter callously attributed it to the fact that her mother missed her father’s overbearing ways and systematic torture.

Mammachi’s attitude to both her children was vastly different. After Chacko rescued her from her husband’s interminable beatings she considered him as the man in her life who could do no wrong. Even when Chacko fell in love with the white woman Margaret a shopkeeper’s daughter in Oxford, Mammachi tolerated it though she disliked Margaret. It was Mammachi who raised enough money to pay for Chacko’s passage home after his marriage to Margaret collapsed. It was Mammachi who turned a blind eye on Chacko’s philandering with
the girls who work in the pickle factory. She even made it possible for him to satisfy his ‘Men’s Needs’ without disturbing the rest of the family by putting up a baize door that led directly outside the house.

When Chacko invited his ex-wife to Ayemenem for a change, Mammachi made the visitors welcome particularly Sophiemol in whom she saw traces of her late husband thus binding the child to the Syrian Christian tradition of the family.

Her attitude to Ammu was entirely different even though both her daughter and herself had been subject to brutal treatment at the hands of Pappachi. She made no attempt at all to understand Ammu. She was unable to see Ammu’s need for a good education which would provide her with a good job and financial independence. She could not see Ammu’s yearning to escape from the stifling confines of Ayemenem. She meekly agreed to all the decisions taken by her husband in the matter of Ammu’s marriage or her education. Therefore Ammu had to resort to subterfuge in order to escape Ayemenem. Thus she went on a visit to a cousin in Calcutta where she met and married the first man who proposed to her. Mammachi did nothing to stop her headstrong daughter from entering into such an alliance. When Ammu returned to Ayemenem with her twin children they were barely tolerated by Mammachi. She did not see fit to provide Ammu with a locus standi in Ayemenem and thus protect her from her brother’s claims that he was
sole owner of everything the family had. Though Ammu too worked in
the family factory she had neither salary nor any claim to it. Mammachi
herself was only a sleeping partner in this business that she had built up
by dint of hard work and good management. She could not stomach
Ammu’s affair with Velutha because it would destroy the family’s
reputation. The tolerance she had for men’s needs did not run to
women’s needs. Therefore she was ready to spew out curses on Velutha
and his father Vellya Pappen for doing what they had dared to do. She
had no compunction in ordering her own daughter out of her ancestral
home fully knowing that she had no place to go. Mammachi did not
object to Baby Kochamma’s suggestion that Estha should be sent back
to his father. She was so insensitive that she did not realize that
separating Estha and Rahel who are dizygotic twins would cause
irreparable damage to both of them. Her heart did not melt even when
she knew that her daughter was victim of a dreaded disease. She even
told Ammu not to make a habit of visiting the Aymenem house on the
pretext of seeing her daughter. It seems difficult to accept that a mother
could be so callous towards her own daughter. Perhaps years of living
with her sadist husband had deprived Mammachi of all finer feelings.

It must be noted that Mammachi was very intelligent though she
allows her husband to impose on her. She had a natural taste for music
and was able to learn to play the violin quite easily. In fact so good had
she been that her teacher even confided into her husband that she had the
makings of a concert player. Such a remark promptly saw the end of her
classes. Back in Ayemenem she was able to put her culinary abilities to
good use in order to build up a small cottage industry dealing with
pickles and preserves. What started out as Sosa’s tender mango pickle
and Sosa’s banana jam later grew into the Paradise Pickles and
Preserves. Mammachi was also able to recognize ability and skill. This
was why she managed to persuade Velutha’s father to send him to
school, the school for the untouchables that had been started by her
father-in-law. After Velutha qualified as a good carpenter and jack of
all trades he became Mammachi’s most trusted lieutenant, able to bring
into practical reality every project she had in mind whether it was the
baize door leading out into the garden from Chacko’s room or the new
electrical equipment for the factory.

Apart from her callous attitude towards her wayward daughter
Mammachi was, in more or less degree, a good woman. She bought
Vellya Pappen a glass eye in the place of the eye that he had lost at work
in the factory. She also accepted her young sister-in-law Baby and
never caused her to feel that she had no locus standi in the house.
Mammachi listened to the advice of Baby Kochamma in all matters
without bothering to check upon the facts. Even Kochu Maria the maid
has a special place in Mammachi’s heart because she was the cook and
in constant contact with her. Ammu’s children Estha and Rahel had the freedom to play with her hair which they plait into rat’s tails fixed with rubber bands. But she did not support them in the crisis of their lives.

Mammachi was chic and exact about her toilette. She wore the typical off white and gold Kerala sari. Her grey hair was generally coiffed into a bun at the back of her head. This bun was full of black hair and she saw no incongruity in wearing a hair piece that did not suit the general white colour of her hair. Her logic was that the hairpiece was made from her own hair which she had collected every day and had made into a bun. She wore perfume of the best quality and was very proud of the lineage of her own and her husband’s families. Though almost blind she was able to produce haunting music on her violin. She was, by no means, incapacitated and even has a stock of vile language that she used in moments of crisis. Mammachi, to a large extent, can be considered a type of the upper middle class Syrian Christian woman.

Ammu her daughter is very different from her mother. She did not submit to bullying and beating as tamely as her mother did. On the other hand she gave back as good as she got. When her husband beat her in one of his drunken frenzies, she returned blow for blow with the biggest book from her shelf though after making sure that he had fallen into a drunken stupor and would not react. When he dared to act as pimp for the white manager, she had no hesitation in packing her bags and
returning to Ayemenem. Though she had plotted and planned to leave Ayemenem for good, Fate forced her to return to this very place. She hated doing so but still she did it because she had to take care of her twin children.

Ammu had the rare quality of being totally honest with herself and all she came into contact. This quality alienated many people who could have made life easier for her if she had not been so frank about their faults. Her barbed remarks made Baby Kochamma an enemy for life, nor was Chacko very easy with her because she made fun of his pretensions as the manager of the family business. She further annoyed him about his stint at Oxford from which he retired empty handed and criticized him for his bourgeois self which hides behind the mask of proletarian beliefs. She loved her twins with passion but when hurt or insulted she had no problem about calling them millstones around her neck. Ammu worked hard at the family business and was vehement about the unjust nature of the Syrian Christian custom and tradition which favour only the males of the family like Pappachi or Chacko who enjoy all the benefits of the hard work done by the women. She could barely tolerate the supercilious attitude of her ex sister-in-law who seemed to talk down from the high position of the coloniser over the colonised even though the days of the colony had long ended. She could not also help contrasting the way in which her children and her brother’s
child were treated by all from her mother to the servant maid. The former were only poor relations and hangers on while the latter was treated like a princess merely because she happened to be the daughter of the son. It did not matter that the son was divorced and his ex wife was a visitor at the family home. Whatever be her mother’s feelings of dislike for this daughter-in-law who has discarded her beloved son, Mammachi was prepared to welcome her. Ammu abhorred such double standards.

She was eager for love both for her children and for herself – love unalloyed with any other motive, love without strings attached. Such a love she was able to find only in Velutha who treasured her children like his own. Ammu watching Velutha with her children could not but remember her own childhood and how he used to make tiny models of all kinds of things in reed and bamboo and give them to her taking care not to pollute her by contact with an untouchable like him. Such tenderness continued to envelop her even in her present condition of being a divorcee with no locus standi in her own home. Her longing to be loved for her own self became a craving especially after the arrival of her brother’s ex wife and daughter. It is this that drives her to do what was unthinkable. As the author puts it

It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix.

The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless
urge of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her,
and eventually led her to love by night the man her
children loved by day (GST 44).

Her relationship with Velutha was infinitely satisfying on all
counts, more so because of the whiff of danger which lent all the stolen
meetings the extra flavour of the forbidden fruit. Her idyll with Velutha
ended when the news of their clandestine relationship was brought to
Mammachi by a weeping Vellya Pappen. She was locked up in her
room after being scolded – the traditional punishment for women who
step out of line. When Ammu realized that her children were missing
she was at her wits’ end and blamed herself for the harsh words that she
had spoken. She was thankful when her children are brought to her but
shocked to know that her brother’s child had been drowned. She was
even more distressed that her lover was charged with abducting the
children and attempting to rape her. No fear stops her from marching to
the police station in order to deny the charge and demand the release of
Velutha who was innocent of both charges. But she did not take into
consideration the fact that the whole touchable society was ganged up
against her and that she did not have any fairy godfather, political or
otherwise, to protect her. Inspector Thomas Mathew who represented
Syrian Christian officialdom had no hesitation in insulting Ammu by his
gaze, words and actions. He called her a veshya and her children
illegitimate, he looked at her as though she were something despicable, and he tapped her breasts with his baton, the ultimate of insults to a woman who comes from a decent family. He was bold enough to do all this because he knew that Ammu had no one, neither husband nor family to protect her or be outraged on her behalf. Ammu too knew this and thus she was caught in a situation from which there was no escape. Ammu and her children became helpless victims of the terrible Juggernaut set in motion by Baby Kochamma and her prudish sense of middle class morality.

The rest of Ammu’s life is devoted to futile attempts to take care of herself and to find some way to keep her children with her. Cast out of her ancestral home by her brother and forced to send her son back to his father in Calcutta and to leave her daughter in the care of her mother, Ammu had to move from job to job because she was not properly qualified for any. She suffered terrible hardships but not once did she approach either her mother or her brother for financial help. She fell victim to a dreaded lung disease also, but nobody, not even her own mother, cared enough to be worried about her condition. Disease and its treatment, unhappiness and loss of self esteem, weighed upon her so much that she was no longer the beautiful, shapely woman she used to be but a thin woman, prematurely old, coarse and ill mannered, unable to notice her daughter shrinking away from her. She continued to make
plans for the lovely day when they would be together once more. She dreamed of setting up a school where pupils would be taught to express themselves and given proper punishments if they did anything wrong. She refused to acknowledge even to herself that Death had already marked her out. Her constant nightmare was that of being branded a ‘veshya’ and being subjected to the humiliation of having her head shaved which would mark her out as a fallen woman. It was this thought that haunted even at the moment of her death. She died alone and destitute in a seedy hotel where she had stayed in order to attend an interview for the post of receptionist. Fate and society denied her even a proper burial, instead she was cremated and reduced to a mere urn of ashes with a receipt. Ammu who represented the second generation Syrian Christian woman in this work has come a long way from her mother. She exercised her freedom of choice but as those choices were not approved by society she came to grief at the relatively young age of thirty one.

Ammu’s daughter Rahel represents the third generation of Syrian Christian women in this novel. Her childhood was fraught with problems of identity. Even in the matter of the surname her mother pondered over whether to give her children her hated father’s name or her hated husband’s name. As this problem was not solved Rahel grew up without a surname, without an identity. The two most important
persons in her life were her dizygotic twin Estha and her mother Ammu. Her relationship to her twin brother was one in which there was no ‘She’ or ‘He’ but only ‘They’. They were always together and though they squabbled and fought over all kinds of things, they had a kind of unspoken oneness which enabled one twin to know when the other was troubled or disturbed in anyway. That was why Rahel instinctively knew that something bad had happened to Estha even though he did not actually tell her anything about his harrowing experience with the paedophile. Estha too knew that his sister was always there for him which was why he was not surprised at all when she opened the door of the bedroom she shared with Chacko at the hotel in Cochin. So united were they in their thoughts, feelings and actions that it was hardly possible to think of them as separate identities. Until they are torn apart by cruel Fate, Rahel has no life separate from her twin brother’s.

Apart from her brother and mother Rahel lavished her affection on Velutha the untouchable carpenter who was an indispensable part of her grandmother’s house and factory. The love that the twins had for Velutha was the simple love that children have for those who show them tenderness and affection. Velutha was their mentor in the art of swimming, boating and fishing, a playmate in games of make believe, a master to turn to in problems like mending an abandoned boat and a father to turn to in times of crisis.
Another person for whom the twins have a liking was for Ammu’s brother, their uncle Chacko. They called him by name because he did not like to be addressed in any other way. He was eccentric and peculiar in many ways but he was closest to being a father figure. Three other persons made up the twins’ world - their grandmother Mammachi who tolerated them, Baby Kochamma their grand aunt who was jealous of their complete preoccupation with each other, the servant maid Kochu Maria who looked on them as intruders in Ayemenem.

Rahel and Estha loved the exercises their beautiful mother set them. Estha especially liked declaiming the lines he had learnt from Shakespeare. Rahel, like Estha, quickly learnt everything she was taught whether they were famous passages from Shakespeare or Christian songs. In addition there were the things the children picked up from everywhere which they quickly and easily absorb. One favourite past time was saying words and sentences backwards a habit which entertained the twins but irritated their teacher. Words had a special fascination for them so much that they play with them as one would play with a toy. Words had such a charm that they became clothed with personalities of their own, like the afternoon nap which became transformed into Gnap in the hands of a Rahel reluctant to take an afternoon nap.
Rahel did not at first like her white cousin mainly because of the attention showered on her by every one in the house except Ammu and Velutha. But when Sophiemol made friends with them and gave them presents of trinkets brought from England, and because it is not in the nature of children to bear grudges, they allowed her to join in their games. Thus it was that Sophiemol also joined them in their scheme to run away from home with disastrous and far reaching consequences. Rahel and Estha were unable to accept the fact that Sophiemol was truly dead which was why Rahel imagined that Sophiemol was playing some kind of game by lying down in the coffin with the priests chanting solemnly and the bats flying into Baby Kochamma’s dress. They could only barely realize that their beloved Velutha had been battered to death by the policemen and tried to cope up with this shocking reality by pretending that the dead man was not Velutha but his make believe twin brother. This pretence kept them from losing all sanity.

The worst blow to the twins came when they were forcibly separated and their home broken up. When Estha was returned to his father in Calcutta, he left behind his voice and his twin who had been connected to him ever since they had been conceived in their mother’s womb. The effect of their separation went beyond the obvious, they retreated into themselves. Estha locked himself in the world of silence. As for Rahel she had to put up with the heartbreak of the visits of her
beloved Ammu who had become a derelict riddled with disease. Each visit became sheer torture for Rahel because each visit caused her to remember the past and contrast it with the bleak present. Rahel was also forced to witness Ammu’s dead body wrapped in a dirty sheet on a stretcher bumping against the sides of the van when transported to the cremation ground. She had the traumatic experience of watching her beloved mother being fed to the hungry flames that reduced her to a heap of bones and ashes, flames that took the smile away from her mouth.

Rahel became the typical problem child of a broken family. She reacted to the fact of being unwanted by moving from one school to another, always creating problems by her behaviour which, though quiet, had a streak of the unusual and the unpredictable. In adult life too she did not behave any differently. After dropping out of architectural school, she allowed herself to be swept off her feet by an American who married her. She had grown up to be beautiful and her husband loved her but he was unable to come to terms with the fact that he was a stranger to the inmost depths of her soul. It was always as if she was looking out at life as from a window. There was always a brooding stillness about her. This finally caused him to divorce her. She survived somehow in America on odd jobs. It was from this state of Limbo that she awakened when she got Baby Kochamma’s letter that Estha has
been re-returned to Ayemenem. She lost no time in returning to Ayemenem to take up her life with Estha after a long period of twenty three years.

It was a journey into the past, into persons and places which had so influenced their lives in the past. It was also a journey of purgation, a journey in which she finally buried the past and expunged herself and her brother of guilt. There were no words when she met her brother after such a long time, he did not even meet her gaze but they knew for sure that they had once again become the dizygotic twins united by the umbilicus and the placenta of their mother’s womb. They went by common consent to the temple where Kathakali was performed by the artists in order purge themselves of the guilt of reducing this great art form into capsules for the delectation of half naked foreign tourists. When they returned home they tried to find each other in the memory of those happy days when they were little children. They forgot that the years had passed and they were no longer children. They forgot the fact that they were both grown man and woman with adult needs and desires. In their exploration of each other, they transgressed the love laws laid down by society as to who should love whom and how much. Society’s edicts of sexual love forbidden between brother and sister were lost in the desperate need for each other.
As a third generation Syrian Christian woman who has had all the benefits of education and the freedom to run her own life one wonders if Rahel has truly achieved anything. In flouting the laws laid down by society she has lost out on happiness, even the very meaning of life itself. She bears upon her very spirit the brand of generations of patriarchy in the form of a sadistic grandfather, a submissive grandmother, a drunkard father and a promiscuous mother.

In the case of Baby Kochamma also it is possible to trace this kind of disintegration. As the young daughter of the Rev. John Ipe she enjoyed all the benefits of a premier Syrian Christian family. At the age of eighteen she fell in love with Father Mulligan, a young Irish monk who made weekly visits to the house at Ayemenem ostensibly to discuss weighty religious questions with Rev. John Ipe. So great was the young girl’s love for the monk that she even went to the extent of becoming a Roman Catholic. She did not stop at this but took the veil so that she could have easy access to her monk. She soon realized that convent life was not for her and managed by a clever ruse to get her parents to withdraw her from the convent. She, however, refused to give up her Roman Catholic identity though she had no hesitation in giving up nunhood. She continued to love Father Mulligan whom she enshrined in her heart as her only man. This love continued unabated for several
years until she fell out of love with him when he gave up Christianity for
the tenets of Hinduism.

As she had thus earned for herself quite an unsavoury reputation
her father decided that marriage was out of the question for her. “He
decided that since she couldn’t have a husband there was no harm in her
having an education…” (GST 26) So she went to Rochester where she
took a degree in Horticulture. Back in Ayemenem, she gladly took
charge of the front garden with her father’s blessings. She spent her
afternoons in the garden in sari and gumboots, planting, pruning,
watering and weeding. She carefully tended bonsai plants and pampered
rare orchids and exotic plants like edelweiss and Chinese guava. So
unusual and exotic was her garden that people came from Kottayam and
other places to admire it with its formal beds, fountains and gnomes.

The years rolled by and Baby Kochamma became progressively
obese and embittered towards women like Ammu who dared to break
the love laws or Rahel whose behavaviour fitted none of the usual
moulds. Instead of lavishing all the love locked up in her heart on Estha
and Rahel she considered Ammu and her children as parasites and
leeches. In a bid to protect the family honour she had no compunction in
making false charges against Velutha which ultimately led to his being
beaten to death. When Inspector Thomas Mathew threatened her with
retribution she used the children to shield herself. By a mixture of
threats and persuasion she made the children fall in with her statement that Velutha had kidnapped them. She further consolidated her stand by working upon Chacko cleverly that he put Ammu out of her home and returned Estha to his father. She did not feel guilty even for a minute or even in a small degree, for the tragedy of Ammu’s illness and death, Estha’s unbroken silence or Rahel’s rootless and lonely life. In spite of the fact that there was little love lost between grandaunt and niece it was the former who wrote to the latter about her brother’s re-return to the house which resulted in Rahel’s speedy arrival from America. Also Rahel provided her with medicine from America for her diabetes. Therefore some vestige of liking still clung to both of them though it was mainly for their mutual benefit.

When Rahel returned to Ayemenem she came to a house that was choked with dust and falling into neglect, in which lived two old women who let the real world go by in order to disport themselves in a virtual world. Baby Kochamma was

living her life backwards…. As a young woman she had renounced the material world, now as an old woman, she seemed to embrace it. She hugged it and it hugged her back” (GST 22)

At eighty three years Baby Kochamma was the sole possessor of the Aymenem house and her sister-in-law’s jewellery. In her old age she
had taken to wearing as much jewellery as she could and tried to regain her youth by excessively painting herself. In her attempt to recapture her youth she looked garish. Age had her in thrall and presented her with oedematous feet and a paranoic attitude. Thus she shut herself up in the untended, crumbling house and retreated into the wonders of the visual world. It is obvious that life has passed her by and left her nothing worth remembering except her unrequited love for Father Mulligan. Education therefore has not given her the happiness that she longed for, instead it has only left her a bitter, paranoic old woman who thinks nothing of destroying other people’s happiness in order to ensure her own.

Kochu Maria the servant maid also comes under the category of Syrian Christian woman. She was totally loyal to her mistresses in the Ayemenem house, viz. Mammachi in the beginning and then Baby Kochamma. She followed the latter’s example in sneering at Ammu for having come back to Ayemenem as a destitute divorcee. In close knit circles no sympathy was wasted on a divorcee particularly if she happened to have eloped like Ammu did. Kochu Maria also did not have any kindness for either Rahel or Estha whom she scolded for jumping on the cots. She was more concerned about the house, the family and its reputation. She had a very nice idea of whom to praise as she did when Sophiemol was welcomed at the Ayemenem house. She even goaded Rahel by saying that she was jealous of Sophiemol the true mistress of
the house. It was Kochu Maria who carried out Baby Kochamma’s plans and lured Ammu into her room where she was locked up as punishment for her clandestine relationship with Velutha. Kochu Maria cooked for the family both the ordinary Kerala dishes and also western dishes like iced cake which she made in order to welcome Sophie mol. She was very proud of her Syrian Christian lineage and took great care to dress the part. When Rahel returned to Ayemenem many years afterwards she found that Kochu Maria had become old and cantankerous and a replica of her mistress in that she shared in the latter’s preoccupation with the virtual world. Cream buns from the Best Bakery in Kottayam besides a number of other trifles formed the staple diet of mistress and maid. Kochu Maria did not bother with either cooking or cleaning and the house was left to gather dust and crumble. Life has swept by her as well and it must be noted that she too has gained nothing from life.

Something Barely Remembered gives a whole array of women who take on the ‘I’ of the narrator. Sometimes it is Mariam, some other times it is Anna, at still other times it is variously Sarah, Sosha or Susan. Other female characters are Eliyamma, Annamma, Leelamma, Elena, Shantamma – some of these characters do not even appear except in the talk and memories of others. They are the victims of the patriarchal attitude of the Syrian Christian community which is not very different from that in other male-centred communities.
One of the characters in *Something Barely Remembered*, Ivan, looking at his sister Annamma recalled the time when she was born. There was no great rejoicing, no bells were rung to announce her birth, no sweets made of rice and jaggery were distributed to celebrate her arrival. When she grew older she fell in love with a cousin but because Syrian Christian society frowned upon such consanguinous marriages she remained a spinster all her life, a kind of watch dog for the rambling old ancestral house. She subsisted on spartan vegetarian fare and devoted most of her time to the study of the Bible at home and in church. She observed all the fasts and engaged in all the activities of the church. When her brother came home to die of a dreaded disease she nursed him devotedly and tried her best to wean him from his atheistic inclinations so that he might be able to die in peace. After his death she retired to the Mar Thoma Ashram in order to spend the rest of her life in the company of others like her. The house became the property of a nephew who dutifully visited her now and then at the Ashram. She was content with this life in a small close knit community, feeding the chickens, milking the cows, enjoying the companionship of old people like herself and the solace of prayers and devotional songs.

Close friendships between the sexes is frowned upon even between the children of brothers and sisters. This was the case with Anna and her cousin Yohan. Though she had plenty of money and a
great deal of knowledge, particularly in English literature, she was woefully behind in most of the qualities needed for a wife. Yohan was brutally frank about her prospects,

You had better marry soon. You have charm but no beauty. Your father died too early. You can’t even cook or sew. You’re thin like your mother—she almost died when she gave birth to you.”

(SBR 24).

Not much choice was given to women in living their lives. Anna was taken off to Italy by her uncle Job because there was nobody to look after her following the death of her grandmother. But Job’s Italian wife Marcella had a different scale of values. Though she did not have any particular desire to become a photographer Anna fell in with her aunt’s plans and achieved a modicum of success. She longed to return to her native Puthencavu and to her dear cousins but had to let this desire remain in the realm of dreams because her uncle dissuaded her saying that there was no one in Puthencavu eager to see her, not to speak of the practical reality that air tickets cost a lot of money which could not be spared. Another victim in the hands of society was Sarah who had been denied any voice in the choice of her husband. She was married off to a man named Thomas who loved a Hindu girl. Thomas fulfilled his marital duties but sought solace in the arms of his mistress not his wife. Sarah experienced no magic of connubial bliss, no romance, no friendly
companionship. She remained at home helping her mother in law Eliyamma who considered her as her own daughter. Sarah realized that she was the object of the lusty gaze of her husband’s younger brother Markose and though she knew that such a relationship was against society’s moral code she felt drawn to him. Though she was pregnant with his brother’s child Markose takes her on the wet banks of the river. She was so overcome with guilt that she was not heard of any more, perhaps she had drowned herself.

Female sexuality was most evident in the three cornered relationship of Sosha or Susan, her husband George and her lover Azor. Sosha was married to George a rubber farmer in the village of Puthencavu. She had a daughter named Anna. Her father’s first remark holding his new born daughter Anna in his arms was that she was an expense. His mother was very possessive about her son and so his wife had very little place in his heart except as the mother of his daughter. When Azor was brought to their house to look at the antiques there, he had eyes also for the neglected young wife. It was only natural for a deep friendship to spring up between this much older man and the frustrated young wife. The ultimate end of it all was that Sosha abandoned her husband and child and ran away with her lover. She made a new life for herself abroad with Azor. They continued to be deeply in love with each other. There were no regrets or a desire to
return to the old life. But there was in Sosha a sneaking desire to know more about her little daughter in Puthencavu. Her occasional desire for motherhood was strangled by Azor who would not allow her to have any more children. When she met Chacko and learned that he had made his herbal collection in Puthencavu she eagerly sought him out in order to know more about her daughter Anna. She got some information from him and a lot more from Mariam whom she met at an airport. She was astounded to know that her daughter was not only married to a rich businessman but had three daughters too. She got her address from Mariam but it remains to be seen whether she will contact her and revive old memories that are none too sweet. Sosha felt that,

This is my life and I am what I am and the years have gone by too fast for me to regret. What use would it be anyway for I cannot go back, or amend things but must remain where I am. (SBR 58)

Mariam, another female character seems to have had more freedom in the choice of her husband Paulo. Though Paulo was a Syrian Christian he came from a family of drunkards and wastrels. Perhaps that was why he had a mistress on the sly and the reason why he was so possessive about his wife. He flooded her with instructions as to what to do and what not to do. The aborted attempt to kidnap Mariam made him lose all patience with her and he scolded her angrily. Though Mariam
was mostly a biddable person she was no doormat like Sarah, ready to be trampled by anyone. In the instance when the Latin girl tried to kidnap her while giving her a ride on the scooter, Mariam quickly realized the former’s intention. Instead of doing anything so foolhardy as jumping off the speeding scooter, Mariam put her feet on the ground and dragged until such time as the scooter was forced to stop. She fell back upon all the inner resources of mental strength which refused to be kidnapped, and the physical strength which had been fostered by a childhood nourished by red unpolished rice, hot fish curry and succulent fruits of all kinds particularly raw and ripe mangoes. It was this instinct for survival that helped her to weather the trauma of divorce both in Europe and back home in Puthenkavu.

When Mariam came to know that Paulo had a mistress tucked away somewhere, she left him and returned to Puthenkavu. Back home with her parents, Mariam realized that she had become a burden on her parents. Her listlessness and lack of desire to do anything at all – even the ordinary chores of daily existence – was a cause of worry for her mother. Often worry and anxiety express themselves in the form of anger and Mariam found herself constantly reproached by her mother. Mariam’s moods of depression caused her to seek solace in the big white cane chair on the verandah from which she could watch the play of the elements for hours together. Her parents, particularly her father,
were very supportive and ready to help her face the vacuum left by the 
estrangement with Paulo. Finally it was decided that she should not pine 
away in the ancestral house. She could make herself useful by staying 
with her grandmother in the house down the river, a support to the 
redoubtable old lady.

Mariam’s grandmother was a doughty old lady with a mind of her 
own. It was she who salvaged the family fortunes and honour by selling 
off some of the property that belonged to her husband in order to pay off 
the debts he had incurred. She handed her eldest son Lukose to the 
church thus freeing him from the responsibility of looking after the 
g family especially during difficult times. Instead the old lady handled the 
matter with rare acumen so that the family honour was preserved intact.
She was understanding enough to accept and love her daughter in law as 
her own daughter and not just as her second son Behanan’s wife. She 
did not intrude upon the privacy of Behnan and his wife. Instead she 
preferred to live in a small house down the river which had been given 
her by her father. With just a servant to look after her she lived happily 
on a little rice gruel, surrounded by all her personal possessions. She 
liked the life of a recluse but did not completely retreat from the world 
outside. She was there for all who needed her as in the case of Mariam 
who was broken in spirit.
Sara is an example of a girl who devoted herself to study and became a doctor. When she came to attend the funeral of Bishop Mar Raphael who had been her father’s friend she met one of her old friends, Philip, who had once cherished ambitions of marrying her. Though Philip was married to Anna and has three daughters of his own, he still occasionally thought of Sara. He cherished no thoughts of what might have been because Sara was so wedded to her profession that she would not have made him a good wife. Besides she would not have brought him any dowry. And yet, in spite of the passage of years and events, Philip found that he could still talk to Sara with ease and without any pretence. Sara put it down to the fact that as she was a doctor, people, particularly men, found it easy to bare their bodies and souls to her. Though she was forty seven years old Sara believed that she had only reached the prime of her life because longevity ran in her family. When she met Philip old desires surfaced even though she had stifled them for thirty years in order to pursue and achieve her ambition. She allowed all these thoughts to cross her mind as she travelled in the fast passenger bus to Alleppey to see her old father who would want news of his good friend’s burial. She did not really see the curious eyes that look askance at her unconventional dress, her desire to smoke and above all her travelling unescorted when night had already fallen.
Anna, the submissive woman that Philip had married and the mother of his three daughters, is typical of the female whose world is made of just her husband and children. Anna carried with her the stigma of being a child abandoned by her mother. She was therefore burdened with a debt of gratitude to Philip for having rescued her from a drink sodden father and an absentee mother. Anna was so grateful to her husband that she did not ever question his decisions or opinions. She deliberately stopped herself from thinking that Philip was also attracted by the large dowry she had brought him because he was a good business man first and last. Anna was a quiescent wife and therefore a credit to Philip who firmly believed that marriage was a business venture that must be worked at in order to produce good fruit. Philip’s old friend Sara struck the nail right on the head when she evaluated Philip thus, “(he) would do well, with the quietness and cunning of old practice: marry good blood, money, acquiescence.”(SBR 80) Anna gives her daughters all the love that had been denied her by her own mother. In the words of her friend Mariam, Anna is “a great mother, a really loving, caring mother.”(SBR 149). And yet Anna did have opinions of her own which she confided into her diary. She was aware of her husband’s attraction to his childhood friend Sara and even accepted the fact that she was unable to awaken that kind of desire in him. She was curious about the mother she could not remember seeing but she did not bear her
any grudge for having abandoned her so many years before. She was neither filled with the overweening desire to see her nor was she bothered by any emotion of hate or anger against her. She was just curious and yet not curious enough to see her at any cost. She was also happy that her mother still wore Indian clothes and was not foolish enough to give up all the old traditions.

If Sara gave up her desire for marriage and children in order to be an emancipated career woman Ammini the local beautician of Puthenkavu was not at all career minded. Ammini’s beauty parlour was not a very profitable concern because Ammini generously showed her customers the way to wax their arms, thread their eyebrows and cut their hair. Ammini’s beauty parlour was a way to relax, a kind of confessional for people like Mariam for whom life seemed to have stopped midway. For Ammini herself the beauty parlour was a way to keep herself from getting bored, it was an outlet for her sexual starvation because her husband was wrapped up in the world of newspapers, constant cups of coffee and tea and memories of his first wife. Ammini starved herself so that no child took root in her underfed body. Her husband was too handsome for her to hate and so “they lived in a bored but seemingly idyllic companionship.” (SBR 152). Though she was neither a good talker nor listener, she was Mariam’s only confidant. There was a kind of bonding between these two women who were otherwise so unlike.
A final example where female sexuality finds full freedom is to be found in Sumana, a student in the University of Belfast. She had a love for the violin which “fitted against my body like a man, its smooth mahogany had a fragrance, again masculine, impermeated by the intense moisture of some craftsman’s fingers..” (SBR 91). Sumana gave in to her desires and was frank enough to say that she had “never been able to distinguish between lust and love. My body had its needs and I responded to anyone who could quieten it.” (SBR 93). She was filled with desire for her professor who was a true representative of patriarchy. Her banker Alan had an eye for her and even took her to his home to introduce her to his father and his way of living. Though they made love in Alan’s room, she was quite aware of the truth of Alan’s father’s assessment of his son that he would make her “…passive, bear children, stop her wandering the world…” (SBR 96). So though she enjoyed sex with Alan, though she appreciated his passion and methodical nature, she was not willing to enter into a long term commitment with him. When he tried to enforce his will on her, she dodged him and did not keep the rendezvous he had ordered. She thus effectively killed his attraction for her and returned to her homeland where she resumed her friendship with her two other close friends who also represent the emancipated Syrian Christian woman.
Female sexuality as expressed in *Something Barely Remembered* is extremely complicated. Here we get an assortment of women who represent various attitudes to sex and life. There are even conflicting emotions within the same woman. One part of the woman wants to be overwhelmed, overpowered and swept off her feet by love, while another feels choked and stifled by such kind of love which deprives one of freedom. While one enjoys the friendship of males without any under or overtones, another likes to be spirited away into a different world which has no room for baby daughters or wedded husbands. A woman who pays little heed to the sanctity of making love with the right partner does not care for a life long commitment with him. While ‘husbanding’ is often looked upon as restrictive and confining, the lack of a husband drives one to the verge of insanity because one no longer has someone to call one’s own. One then retreats into the barren world of boredom and listlessness. At the same time, another wallows in ever fresh romance which continues well across the years, climes and cultures and considers the world well lost for love.

In short, all the six works studied hold the mirror to the various attitudes of Syrian Christian women which have developed over the last century and a half. The authors themselves, being women, have in one form or the other experienced the freedom given by education. The four Syrian Christian authors represent in themselves, to a large extent, the
change that has taken place in the status and attitudes of women. Such a change is portrayed in the lives of the characters too. Education has allowed them to spread their wings and soar high in the world. In some cases their wings have been singed but in others they have been able to carve a niche for themselves in all the fields that had once been the monopoly of their brothers and fathers. Many of them have been able to achieve a happy union between their lives as mere women and as self actualized individuals.