

**THE PREDICAMENT OF SYRIAN CHRISTIANS: CAUGHT BETWEEN EXPECTATION AND REALITY; A MARXIST'S STUDY OF GEETA ABRAHAM JOSE'S *BY THE RIVER PAMPA I STOOD***

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**Abstract**

*Tradition in every sense is a rightful and peaceful conduct as well as maintaining an orderly life. Our forefathers created tradition in order to have a just life. Following traditional values and ethics would always bring about a form of cultured living and a smooth one too. This novel "By The River Pampa I Stood" is a modest attempt by the author Geeta Abraham Jose in bringing about the stop gaps or the loopholes of a very tradition loving community- the Syrian Christians and also its collapsing of all value system when modernity creeps in. Tradition, when catered to along with a progressive getup will ensure in a prosperous life. Alongside this, belief and faith in the Supreme Being brings one's life to a complete whole. Through the author's rich experiences she weaves a powerful web of generations of the Ponnumpurackal family members and also their collapse of all things conventional thus ending in a messy family cum societal life. Her rich tapestry of characters and ideologies suit the typical Syrian Christian families and their ideological crises too.*

The Syrian Christian community of Kerala is a very ancient tradition loving group. Their ancestral origin came from St. Thomas a disciple of Christ who converted some seven Brahmanical families to Christianity way back in the 52 A.D. and now they are a heterogenous group spread all over the world. These Syrian Christians are educated, have strict adherence to the family value system, detest modernity, believe in equality of class and caste, have a progressive mindset and have a simple yet pragmatic approach towards life, religious values are at the epicenter of their lives. My paper seeks to explore the gaps within the social system of this community as against the rich cultural fabric woven by this Syrian Christian group. Most importantly it would bring to the forefront how this conventional society faces the threat of the modern ideology and its adaptation to the idea of an inter-caste marriage or other societal degradation say for instance a member of the family falling in love with a lower caste person and getting pregnant thus carrying an illegitimate child in the womb. Laya, the daughter of Karun was seemed all engrossed in her doll play. She had varieties of dolls from princess to vet and ballerina to barrister. The previous generations of Syrian Christian girls were not so encouraged to play; rather their culinary skills were already starting to acquire roots. The mother would instill the sense of being a good wife and mother in future into their daughters' minds.

The present generation of Syrian Christian girls is an educated and an outgoing lot. They don't confine themselves to the kitchen alone, they go all out and explore the outside world. The doll was described as tall, slim and 'sexy'. The word 'sexy' was filled in by Laya herself. In common Syrian Christian households, this word firstly is never uttered; secondly it is said in hushed whispers. The grandmother of the author was traditional in attire the typical white mundu-chatta-kavani the lungi and blouse that is worn by the elderly women of Kerala, was a symbol of dignity. Though traditional by dress in society she was condemned for her lack of social code and values. Rules were always

broken by her. Breaking the societal norms and conventions were a strict no-no in Syrian Christian families and if this was done by a single woman it was taken to be a sin. Women were accorded only secondary status by the men in this community. Ponnumpurackal was the traditional house name of the author. The House of Gold it literally translates itself to! It lived up to its name-al the children, grandchildren of the house revered in each other's company, made merry and fun, lived in love and peace and had a heart of gold. Annammachi (Grandmother Anna) "She danced with the little ones and sang merry old Malayalam songs for them"(12:4).

This in all probability defines Anna Ammachi's vigour for life. Cakes and other baked delicacies were being prepared for Christmas. Syrian Christians have almost a month long preparation for celebrating Christ's birthday. They keep ready the cake mix almost a month in advance. Though Annammachi prepared delicacies like any other grandmother, she offered it to her grandchildren first. Food, clothing and shelter are the three primary needs of life, in the Syrian Christian community it was religion, food and shelter, and then came clothing. God is the creator and maker of each one's destinies; this was the popular belief of these people. Very religion bound they were! In fact Annammachi was the first one to narrate Bible stories to the grandchildren.

A secular living was also instilled in their young minds. As most child psychologists say; when children are instilled the right values at the right age, they grow up to be good and responsible citizens. Alongside the Bible stories tales from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Panchatantra were being told.

Numerous other stories that of fact based ones were narrated like the Titanic and its maiden journey. At the end of it, moral of the story was hinted and emphasized by her. Here it was "pride goes before a fall". The Onam story or legend was narrated as a primary base to the marxist philosophy. The king Mahabali was an exponent of Socialism, says the author. Abundance was his ideal and philosophy, this lesson was beautifully handed down to the children.

"Maveli naadu vaneedum kaalam

Manushrellarum onnu poley" (14:1)

It translates as when King Mahabali ruled the land men were equal in every aspect. The end or goal of this onam festival is to bask in the splendor of unity in diversity or giving land and riches to the poor in order to improve their financial status. The festival of prosperity onam its message according to the author was "Give him an inch and he will take a mile- this applies not only to men but to Gods as well" (15:2).

How innocent yet mature was the author's moral for the legend of onam! In order to bring in this intellectual interpretation of things, Annammachi often asked lots of questions like suggesting a suitable moral to stories and the like. Intellectual discussions of this type were stimulated in most Syrian Christian homes after of course the religious grooming. Annammachi (Grandmother Anna) kept a proper code of conduct for the girls. She told Amita one of her grandchildren to stop screaming like a fish wife and speak with dignity and decency. Sheela was instructed to sit with her legs crossed. This indicated diligent behavior and Sumita was asked to try and be a proper Syrian Christian lady prim and proper.

The author was a perfectionist and had nothing much to do with lack of physical conduct or nothing of that sort. This made her an odd one out hence she took in Annammachi Women in the Syrian Christian community were always monitored by men. They were asked to be decent both in appearance and conversation; then only would all graces be bestowed upon them. This was strongly the belief that men in the community held. The author had been inquisitive about her ancestors and this inquisitiveness turned into reality when Annammachi began explaining about her life and all the four generations past, the author had now understood why despite her exterior being so soft and mushy her interior was rough. Yet the best part was Annammachi was so warm and nice filling

everyone with love so vast as an ocean. She was actually the author's grandaunt (father's mother's sister) who took care of these children as her own.

Annamachi was also a friend, mentor and guide to the author. She was her whole and soul; and since the author's father died, she kept a watch on the spiritual as well as the psychological growth of the girl. The worldly father was now equated to the heavenly father who is the giver and provider of all things. Hence, the earthly father transformed into an eternal well-wisher and care provider. Her father was the dearest to God hence he was called early to perform his heavenly duties.

Most Syrian Christians possess a big house which is handed down from posterity. The Ponnumpurackal family was a renowned one from a place called Kuttanad. A 'nadumuttom' or an open frontyard was constructed in the front portion of the house. This nadumuttom was built in the olden days in order to have discussions with the neighbours or a chance interaction. However the present generation of Syrian Christians do not have an interaction with anyone nor do they construct a nadumuttom. For that matter most of the malayalees in Kerala migrate off to other countries hence no connection with their motherland exists.

"Affluent, agrarian and aristocratic was the Ponnumpurackal house being defined as (23:5). Most Syrian Christians fall in this category. They firstly produce sufficient income for the family, then the remaining time is spent on the agricultural produce or production of food crops. Better still the next Syrian Christian family tradition of a get together or 'kudumbayogam' was prevalent. As a young child I too have had the privilege of attending my father's family get-together at Pathamuttom near Kottayam. Songs, dances and other cultural programs were being organized and that's when we would even get introduced to our second or third cousins!

We get a firsthand traditional feel of the Syrian Christian community here. Routine prayers along with some sharing of rich family experiences would culminate in a joyful, merry cheer of socializing along with family members after donkey's years. Earlier the traditional mindset of a Syrian Christian was that a son would further his family and not only that he would be a resort or a tower of strength to his parents when in need. In the current setup, the thinking is that a son ceases to be a son after he brings home his wife but a daughter would instead be a refuge in parents' old age. In the novel also Mathen the chief character says to his wife "your sons will cease to be sons when they bring home their wives, but a daughter –she will be your guiding light when you are old and frail." (26:10). Marriage itself brings with it lots of responsibilities but in the current scenario we experience that daughters-in-law don't integrate well with the family of their husband, hence create unnecessary problems. It is a saddening fact that sons split away from their mothers just for the reason that their wives don't get along with the family of their matrimony. It is a serious societal shortcoming. In the previous years the Syrian Christian households would get very good daughter-in-law who would be very obedient and concerned regarding the family members but now it is not so. Syrian Christian parents instill strict marriage conventions in their daughters. They teach their daughters to be respectful and kind-hearted to the members of her husband's family. Fathers were very close to their daughters and confided everything in them, particularly in the Syrian Christian homes. They were the apple of their father's eye. At present it is not the same; firstly because daughters have no time and secondly their husbands would keep their wives away from their fathers. The birth of a girl child in the Syrian Christian home was a time of joy and celebration and she was the most pampered of all. In this novel all the three brothers Varghese, Unni and Kurien molly-coddled their sister Anna. However, when this same girl grew up, she would be made to take up lot of domestic work for the family. This was the only static and unchanging tradition in Syrian Christian homes.

Saramma was forever busy in the kitchen ;(33:2) this was the line which describes the palate of the Syrian Christian head of the family. He always instructed his wife to make lots of dishes everyday in order to satiate his hunger and craving too. The Syrian Christians are known to have a great affinity towards food. They are wonderful cooks too and would be perfect hosts for occasions such as Easter

and Christmas. Sumptuous yet tasty and nutritious are their meals; it is a generous mix of vegetable curries and non-vegetarian ones usually. Mathen of Ponnumpurackal was very generous towards his farm labourers; he was a Marxist. Venu, Yoshua and Kuttan were born and brought up on his land; huts and other rooms were built for them, in all comfort they lived and hence were given food and other benefits. In order to further their generation, Mathen even arranged matches of similar family set-up's for them. Kuttan's wife was from the next farm. Yoshua got married to someone from Saramma's father's estate. The only limit put on these labourers was direct touch with food wasn't allowed.

May, the time of the church festivity began. St George was the patron saint of that village. He was very powerful. A legend goes that he slayed the dragon and sits high atop a mounted horse. He drove away all evil and hence saved many a people from self- destruction. Mathen's grandfather's features resembled that of the saint. Syrian Christians are all avowed with religious fervor and great devotion when saints Remembrance Day is celebrated. They pledge doing good deeds and also sponsor food items to the church and its members. For instance we see Saramma making food items like banana chips, karimeen (prawn pickle, red fish curry and achappam(a fried snack item).

Courtesy and great welcome was accorded to the guests visiting the Ponnumpurackal house. Mathen was on the church committee heading the proper conduct of the arrangements for the feast. Through all these instances we get a first hand feel of the deeply religious fabric that Syrian Christians possess. They have great devotion to saints and revere them with pure hearts and minds. Most importantly, they are grateful for whatever blessings get showered on them after beckoning and praying. Without the Lord's knowledge nothing in this earth has a purpose or doing. Miracles too are possible with God's abundant graces only. Anna was once saved from drowning in the river as an accidental dip she undertook. Saint George came here in the form of Yoshua and saved the child's life. If one believes in the Almighty very firmly he might convert all things for good and put very few trying moments in front of people.

Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy that God is dead, is contested against here. Thereafter exists a Supreme Being much greater than us mortals He is the one who is behind all this wonderful creation called man and other things. Hence it is our duty to thank him and live in unison with our maker. Anna enjoyed her schooling years and occasionally stayed home. That was when her mother would declare that girls should be married off quickly This, is the Syrian Christian mode of thinking .They believe that the earlier the girl is married the sooner she would settle. The most traditional line of thinking of the Syrian Christians is seen here. Now with a changing mindset, this community is going in for late alliances for their daughters as education, career and then matrimony follows. Fathers in this community played encouragers to their daughters. Here Mathen challenges his wife that Anna would go beyond being a barrister. Anna was an all-rounder with an expertise in debating. In Syrian Christian churches usually competitions like debate and singing are organized by the women's league to encourage their co-curricular skills. Anna won the best speaker award too. She was into a fancy dress competition and played the role of a kaakathi(a gypsy woman) predicting the future of people, she foretold that the chief guest would have two sons. This tradition of foretelling one's future did not exist in the belief of this community's members. In fact it was just the creative fancy of the author.

The people of this community usually have a large heart. They are true blue Marxist people as Mathen gifts Yoshua's family ten cents of land and a hut for their committed service to generations of the Ponnumpurackans. They got converted to Christianity by European ministries too, though they were originally pulayas. Yoshua's son got an education too with the great help of his master Mathen. Mathen's daughter believed in Socialism and equality; in class she had seated herself beside Yoshua's son Thoma. Yet the teacher spanked Thoma as he could not tolerate a poor boy sitting next to a rich girl. In fact the teacher is the one who constructs lives of the students here he is seen destructing the psyche of tender minds. The teacher is seen here as a tyrant and not a Marxist. The feeling of rich and

poor and the privileged and underprivileged people of society continued to haunt him. He somehow consoled himself that not all the rich people were rude to the poor class. Marxist Socialism was greatly being practiced by the child Anna. In the break time, Anna took Mathen's hands in hers and consoled him. Anna coaxed her friend Pushpa to remove the anklets and the nose-ring as it represents slavery. In the initial days, anklets were considered to be a sort of jewelry worn as handcuffs the elders and men folk would keep track of the women's goings on and punish her severely if she strayed from the path. Here Pushpa was a judge's daughter but they were quite conservative Hindus and had a steeped in tradition kind of an outlook towards life.

In the Syrian Christian household tolerance for other religions is a firm belief here. This is a Marxist quality. Annamma for instance takes part in the Thiruvathira dance, the traditional dance of Kerala performed on Onam. Mathen, who otherwise was a socialist democrat disowns his son Varghese when he marries a European girl. Syrian Christians never believe in cross-cultural marriages. In fact they would not even wry for a person of any other denomination. The purity of the blood and race was maintained through all eternity. As soon as Varghese united in matrimony he negated all ties with his own father Mathen. How very painful thing for a father to take? Drop dead traditional and family loving are the Syrian Christians but surely they would not give up their honour and pride for anything else in the world. Vergis became an anglicized version of his typical Keralite name Varghese. In a modernized world there are very few takers for tradition and Annie Varghese's granddaughter was interested in the Syrian Christian dress the mundu chatta kavani. Mistakes once committed should not be repeated again. Once bitten, twice shy goes the saying. Hence the second son Mathen was sent to Lahore to study dentistry. A servant too escorted him and kept control of Unni's whereabouts. He ultimately married a girl called Gracie the daughter of a magistrate. Unni married from within the Syrian Christian community, parents strive and strive in order to bring up their children and in the end even search for a good soul mate for their sons who would keep the family tree going. But when the children marry out of the family, it is an insult as the purity of the race goes haywires. Not only this, adjustment problems begin to flow in.

Unni was a pragmatic man who believed in love after marriage, practical living was his forte. His wife and he landed up in Delhi for a job assignment. However they both got killed in a car accident. How very pathetic and rude was destiny to them. Syrian Christians are very positive people because of their religious life. Despite all these tragedies Mathen was a strong man. He always read the Bible and looked to God for his solace. He read the verse, "Happy is the man who has his quiver full" (61:5). The next heart attack was about to come to Mathen. Supposedly his dear daughter Annamma was having an infatuation to the servant Yoshua's son. His most trusted servant he was. Annamma was in two minds. Her father would never forgive this. The all conventions and set rules of tradition were about to be broken. Thoma the low caste servant's son and Annamma the master's daughter would have no difference now in every sphere- mentally, physically, psychologically too.

The egalitarian principle is highly prevalent in Syrian Christian families. In other aspects like marriage, inter caste marriage is not allowed or encouraged. The purity of the race as well as adjustment problem is foreseen by Mathen. That way Mathen is all concerned about his daughter's future. Foretelling or warning about the future is a characteristic feature of all Syrian Christian families. They are very firm and particular about marrying from within the community in order to avoid all societal blunder. Saramma, Mathen's wife was an epitome of all endurance. She was a hyperactive woman with all the energy and vigour of a typical Syrian Christian woman. But the day she died, she had not died without any rime or reason. In fact her overworking attitude and behavior became a cause; so said the people. And to top it all, her three sons weren't present for the funeral. Sons, put their mothers to endless hardships while they live on the earth; but once they are no more they do not pay them any respects, even though the very crux of a good Christian life is to care for the dead soul to rest in peace.



Mathen's whole and soul was his wife, Saramma. He mourned for her in fact was highly dependent on her emotionally. When once we lose something or someone we love dearly, we realize its true worth! Wives in Syrian Christian households were kept their secondary place after of course the head of the family but in other matters like marriage and so on, they would take centre stage. Annamma reveals to her father finally about the liking for Yoshua's son Thoma. Mathen walks up and down frantically. This would be the last thing that any Syrian Christian father would want to hear. For the first time though, Thoma felt one or an equal with Annamma mentally in status and even psychologically too. But in the eyes of Mathen, his master he would be a loser and an unkempt man. Societal differences or discrimination here becomes an individual's strength and advantage. Things got complicated as Thoma was sent away to a far off place in the high ranges and never came back.

Yoshua never questioned his master for the death of his son. With drop dead sincerity and appreciation for his master, he died. Usually fathers go far beyond and satisfy their daughters with gifts and others here Mathen never wanted to fulfil his daughter's one wish of marrying this girl to Thoma, the low caste and ruin her life; all Syrian Christian fathers are ultra-protective about their daughters and wish well for them but at the same time they also put a limit to their likes and dislikes without giving a vent to anything and everything or encouraging wrong things.

Munnar was the place Annamma was being sent away to for healing the wounds of her mind as well as forgetting all things and undergoing past life regression as well. Rosamma, her aunt would come to her rescue. She'd be confined to Rosamma aunty's confinement in order to better her mind. Here we see a drastic difference in Rosamma's non-traditional life. Her husband and she became European like in their lifestyle. Normally Syrian Christians are known to adapt to the traditional style of living (Syrian Christian) wherever they go. Praying, traditional thought and action and lastly a decent, good life were all their tenets. Annamma did deliver her illegitimate child but it was said to have lived for merely two hours and it became an inseparable part of her. A child is a child no matter what and its pain is the mother's pain too. All her good memories with Thoma were washed away and she had to come to terms with reality. As the Book of Revelations in the Bible says "The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born".

Annamma was drowned in a sea of sorrow with all but tragedies touching her life. It was the right time to go to Munnar and make peace with herself and society. She wanted to become a teacher and fulfil her ambition of enrolling for a training course and also never wanted to get married. Mathen finally washes his hands off his daughter's life and took it as time is the best healer of wounds.

Mostly in Syrian Christian homes, when the father is unable to do anything good to the children he washes his hand off things. He now let Anna go her way. However Anna too felt rejuvenated and relieved to be amongst children and teach them.

What was a very happy and peaceful setting became a dull and dreary life as Mariamma his other daughter was given in marriage to a humble Syrian Christian boy, a graduate school teacher. However this boy's family was very dominating to her. Prayerful and true Syrian Christian girls never get their equal counterparts. They may be quite the opposite- not God fearing and having a non-virtuous life.

The centre of all locus of control within the Syrian Christian household is the father but here in Mariamma's house it was the mother-in-law to which she wasn't used to. The mother controlling the affairs of the family would bring in a curse to the family name and other things; the father was just and impartial, whereas the mother wouldn't live up to these qualities nor do justice!

Mariamma's luck was in her favour as after her husband died of cholera and she being pregnant with her third child went back to her father's house, Ponnumpurackal. Fate later had it that she too passed away in child birth. What came as a blessing in disguise became a curse in secret! How much of a tormenting life she had to bear with. Annamma on the other hand took to maternal duties and brought up her sister Mariamma's two orphan children. Annamma was directly promoted to this motherly

status. In most Syrian Christian homes the mother's sister would take care of her sister's children while the mother was away or died in child labour.

The spirit of sacrifice was inborn in the Syrian Christian women. They have the mental stamina to live through anything and everything in life and are also bold enough to face challenges of any sort. However the present generation of Syrian Christian girls are not sacrificial at all.

Kurien, Mathen's son died and he was devastated. Probably he was experiencing pain and suffering for his cruelty against Yoshua's son Thoma. Syrian Christians had a notion that if one is not virtuous in life then the same non-virtue would follow a person. Hence the religion itself teaches its practitioners to be virtuous and just.

All names of the ones with amma at the end came to an end. In fact Syrian Christians are highly conscious of their social standing as well as the family name. Now it became improvised such as Amita, Sumita etc. Even the author marries from outside the caste, a Tamil Brahmin and a Syrian Christian unite.; this was not approved the least by the elders. But Annammachi did. She approved of the author's marriage to Karun. Intermingling of cultures is the new characteristic feature of the present Syrian Christian family. They are slowly opening their eyes to the fact that we are all living in a globalised world and that life in isolation is a bad thing.

The Gold house of all tradition, love, concern and vigour became now a house of modernity, lovelorn, no concern and dull because all of its members went in search of greener pastures. The terminology or nomenclature also changed to its modern version-Grannammachi was the new term coined by the author's daughter Laya, a portmanteau of grandma and ammachi. However Annammachi had confessed to the author that her illegitimate son was living and that he was sixty five years old at the moment, Mathen Yoshua. She wanted to see him as her last wish. Every dying soul would wish for a most longing and dear thing and so did Annamma; even though she was an illegitimate mother. Her son was doing well, had married and had two children named Sarah and Mathews. Annamma's own father kept her son and husband away from her. And Mathen kept receiving letters which said "please give me back my Anna"(130:13). This was a most desperate plea for help and everyone including Mathen would not kill Thoma for those touching words uttered. This was the most woeful experience of a mother who sees her own son at sixty five years at her death bed and that too for the second time since he was born. What a shattering experience it was for both the mother and child. She just spent two hours with her and died. What a peaceful day it must have been for Anna for the very first time in all these years!

Mathen's future generations had no sons they were all daughters merely. The Syrian Christians considered it as a mere curse if the generation stopped and did not proceed. The Ponnumpurackal land would be sold off and Gulf returnees would buy it and make a fresh history there. The conclusion therein of the Syrian Christian family life and the generational gap is that despite all the trials and tribulations of one's life, one must be confident enough of its doings and the consequences also. The biggest precept of the Syrian Christian life is one should be traditional in thought as well as culture, only then would success follow. Atheism is the current trend of the day; nevertheless one should adopt religion for a virtuous life; this in all probability, is the greatest of all riches. The House of Gold would have still remained the house of gold if its beings had adhered to the strict conventional values of life and society!

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