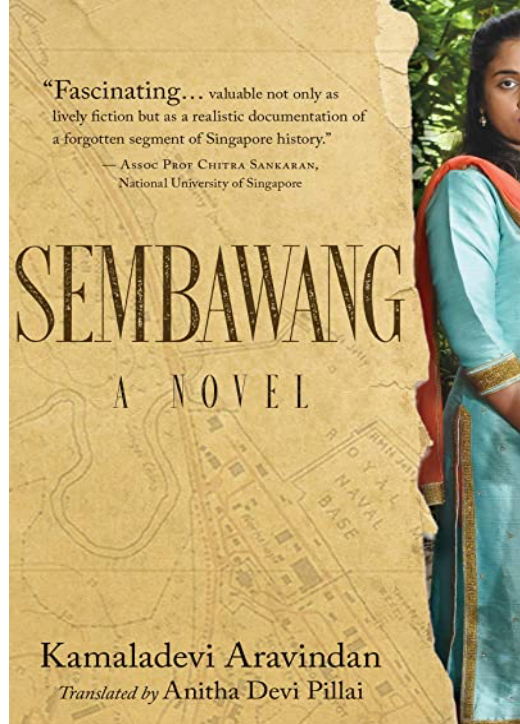


**Kamaladevi Aravindan, *Sembawang: A Novel*. Trans. Anitha Devi Pillai. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 2020, 327 pp. ISBN 9789814893282**



Kamaladevi Aravindan's *Sembawang: A Novel* set in 1960s Singapore adroitly weaves fiction with history to recreate the nostalgic fabric of a bygone era. A prolific writer, Aravindan has published widely and with much critical acclaim. While this novel celebrates the triumph of an accomplished past, it also yearns with wistfulness for a return to those long-lost days of *kampong* (village) life replete with the throbbing spirit of a diverse community. Aravindan casts an unflinching, critical and yet maternal glance at the eclectic episodes which marked 1960s Singapore. In *Sembawang* we witness a slice of Singapore life devoted to the members of the Indian diaspora. Originally written in Tamil, it has been translated into English by her daughter Anitha Devi Pillai, making it a distinctive collaboration.

*Sembawang* can lay claim to a seminal position in postcolonial literature by retelling history from the perspective of subaltern characters, who, as argued famously by Gayatri Spivak, have hardly been allowed the privilege of speech. Aravindan liberates history from the confines of cold textbooks. Instead, it

emanates from the souls of marginalised members of society, particularly Kaaliyamma, a woman doubly oppressed by the forces of patriarchy and the *Kanganis* (Indian managers) in the fictional Malaysian rubber estate of Anjarai Kattai. While there is evidence of detailed research which brings historical authenticity to each page, the “personal becomes the political” effortlessly, thereby locating macrocosmic historical events within the microcosmic lives of the characters. This, combined with the cinematic vividness of the novel, absorbs the reader into a deeply immersive and poignant reading experience.

Although the novel takes one back to a golden era of community living, it does not fail to underscore the fact that the past, though attractive, also grappled with uncomfortable truths. There are visceral descriptions of the brutalities of Japanese oppression, of the exploitative treatment of “coolies” on the rubber estates, and of grotesquely disturbing episodes of domestic violence. The novel offers no simplistic binary between British oppression and Indian resistance, which defines many postcolonial remembrances. In Singapore, the British are considered good employers at the naval base, while the Indian *Kanganis* lord it over the indentured workers at Anjarai Kattai. Despite working for the British naval base, most members of the diaspora never loosen their grip on cultural traditions and indigenous beliefs.

Aravindan problematises the notion of a heterogeneous “Indian” identity by depicting its diverse branches. This is achieved by positioning Kaali as the Tamil protagonist from Malaysia to whom Malayalee customs are exceedingly foreign and exotic. The novelist consciously chooses to celebrate the idiosyncrasies of each community, chiefly through the metaphor of food. Both as a marker of culture and identity, food plays a vital role in the community and nourishes the very foundations upon which it stands. Trying Malayalee food becomes a rite of passage for Kaali, whose initiation into the Singaporean way of life and Singaporean culture is marked by different stages of consumption. Her definition of comfort food transitions from dried fish and beans on the rubber estate to a range of Malayalee delicacies, which in turn symbolises her adaptability and resilience.

Aravindan’s detailed description of the taste, colour, aroma and texture of food is a delight, as it stimulates a vividly vicarious sensory experience in the mind of the reader. As a text with a strong feminist slant, the *keusini* (kitchen) is the queendom of the women, where they rule, at times by choice and at others by coercion. The power-dynamics of the *keusini* become an important study in the gender politics of the community. Meenaatchi Paati is compelled to cater to her husband’s culinary whims, but it is her skill as an epicure which enables her to help all the new mothers of Sembawang. Her carefully prepared meals and her knowledge of indigenous herbal ingredients both empower and strengthen the women who receive her benefaction.

The novel resounds with examples of strong women who act with unprecedented levels of courage and determination. Kaali shocks domestic and maternal sensibilities when she chooses to elope with Chandran and leave behind her young son Raasu with her husband Munusamy in Malaysia. What is most compelling is the novelist's non-judgmental treatment of female fallibility and vulnerability. She boldly acknowledges the existence of female desire and sexual pleasure – often ignored in patriarchal landscapes – by sympathetically encapsulating the diverse components which haunt the female psyche. Kaali epitomises the complicated construct of femininity. She embraces motherhood, and her amorous liaison with Chandran is not a rejection of motherhood as much as it is a rebellion against a constantly inebriated husband who has very little time for her. The attention Kali and Muthu receive from Chandran and Appunni respectively, makes them feel wanted, attractive, and special. Their advances reignite their awareness of their potential as young women. The bitter irony lies in the fact that the men who seem to be their liberators eventually perpetrate the monstrous unfairness of patriarchy. The male ego is sometimes unforgiving and inflexible, resulting in tragic ends and rough realisations. Motherhood, a marker of identity for so many women, becomes the reason for Muthu's tragic end, while Appunni makes an easy escape. Sadly, some of the male characters seem to be able to repent and relent only when they are completely dependent on their partners physically, financially, and emotionally.

A driving force of this novel is the power of redemption. The restorative quality of the Sembawang hot springs, where people used to go for regular ablutions to cleanse and purify themselves, stands for the resilience of the characters who can always start anew. The ability to rise from the ashes is often depicted as a key life skill, as seen in the lives of the three men who commit a violent sexual crime in the local maternity clinic. Kaali redeems her past through arduous and dedicated labour, and her acceptance of Munusamy's unforgiving treatment of her when he comes to Singapore. Munusamy too begins anew as a successful moneylender in Sembawang. Aravindan redeems men through her characterisation of Chinthamaparam, in whom we see a man who does not subscribe to regressive patriarchal notions. His kindness, intelligence and generosity become legendary in the suburb. His personality is not unlike the Irish General, Daniel Stanley Dutton who created the Pulau Senang (Senang Island) jail to reform former criminals. Unfortunately, it was a sad experiment in kindness as the seemingly reformed convicts brutally murdered him in 1963. By placing this painful historical episode against the fictional reformation of the character of Massilamani, who, shaken with remorse, pledges to stay away from crime, Aravindan shows how public events can lead to profound personal transformations.

While translating *Sembawang* into English, Anitha Devi Pillai has preserved some indigenous words to imbue the text with local flavour and complexity. This enriches the text by tearing into the supposed universality of the English language and allows the reader to delve into varied linguistic treasures. By preserving endearments such “Akka,” “Paati,” and “Ayya,” the intimate and specific human relations within the community are underscored and retained, in a world which is becoming increasingly mechanised. This is what *Sembawang* seems to lament the most, as the *kampung* spirit begins to make way for nuclear units. Even though injustice and crime are prevalent in Sembawang, camaraderie and mutual affection thrive. Though the appeal of the famous hot springs changes over time to become increasingly commercialised, and the Holy Tree Sri Balasubramaniam Temple becomes the site of the MRT station, Anitha Devi Pillai is rightly reluctant to let go of the nuances of the native tongue, which breathe life into the story and immortalise it.

The novel’s strengths lie not only in its skilful handling of complex themes like feminism, oppression, and the effects of alcoholism, but also in its geographical setting. There is a strong sense of place in this novel, as Sembawang itself becomes a veritable character, silently witnessing everything and everyone, much like “The eyes of Dr TJ Eckleburg” in the Valley of Ashes in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). However, Sembawang is far more hospitable as a place than Fitzgerald’s Valley. It accommodates everyone, provides a home for the displaced, and paves the way for a new cohort of Singaporeans to be raised by the Pioneer Generation.

The carefully curated photographs which appear at the end of the novel are both a treat and a revelation, lending the text immediacy and relatability, as is the map of 1960s Sembawang at the start of the novel. The prologue sets the context for readers to understand what brought South Indians to Malaysia and emphasises the tyrannical motives of Britishers like the character of Sir Thomas Hyslop. The novel grapples with accepting change and preserving the past, moving forward but holding on, letting go, and looking back. Most importantly, it tells us the story of how the Pioneer Generation struggled to secure a stable future for their children and illuminates the gratitude and remembrance it deserves.

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