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

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Kamaladevi Aravindan's *Sembawang: A Novel* (translated from the Tamil by her eldest daughter, Anitha Devi Pillai), comprises a historical fiction-cum-romance novel set in Singapore's Tamil and Malayalee communities sometime around the 1960s. The title of the novel derives from a region of the island serving as domicile for a then closely-knit neighbourhood working at colonial Singapore's main naval base. Behind the closed doors of this locality, a matronly figure tyrannises her daughters-in-law, a lonely Keralan yearns for his forbidden love, and at the novel's shifting centre, a runaway migrant domestic worker from a Malayan rubber estate craves to hold the young son she abandoned à la Moll Flanders in a disastrous quest for love. Inter-racial love almost destroys an unknowing spectator. To up the ante, the previously relatively tranquil life of this Sembawang village is unprecedentedly ruptured, first by a male mob's violent assault of two midwives near their clinic, and then by the sudden demise of a beloved neighbour. This chain of catastrophes further unites the previously bickering village. In her critical appraisal of the novel, Chitra Sankaran plausibly compares Indian workers in colonial twentieth-century Singapore to African slaves, but I wonder if *Sembawang*'s recollections and descriptions also point forward to similarly poorly fed and poorly paid Bangladeshi construction workers in the Singapore of 2021?

And yet this summary does not do justice to the exhaustive range of voices, perspectives, and quotidian events we encounter in this fast-paced, hyper-informed, wide-ranging, and highly readable epic from 'below'. The strategy is a relatively nuanced way of approaching the past. Wider historical details of Singapore and Malaysia (including the horrors of Japanese Occupation 1942-45, the tragic failure of an Irishman's promising humanitarian experiment at a prison on Pulau Senang ('the Island of Ease') in 1963, Separation in 1965, the rising popularity and later loss of a local hotwell (when commandeered by a postcolonial military) connect the novel's action to a vibrant, times-are-a-changing context. Kamaladevi Aravindan's thoughtful and rich writing is complemented by Anitha Devi Pillai's deft translation, the latter expertly surmounting the tricky challenge of enabling Tamil and Malayalee characters in the novel to speak as pungently and as tellingly in English, negotiating between transcreation and literal translation (in their lovemaking, are Tamil men, like bees, trapped in *honey*, or *nectar*?). All in all, the novel makes for something of a time-travelling experience

for the reader. The vast cast of characters (the novel is prefaced by a detailed six-page list of characters and family trees – and that is only of the main personalities, excluding children!) are relatable and down-to-earth, foregrounding and presenting the lives, thoughts, and feelings of individual characters. Within and at the heart of these adroitly woven life histories, the thoughts, and feelings of strong graceful women under pressure are foregrounded, speaking their minds, taking action, and grabbing every opportunity to become. What makes the novel uniquely gripping is the gritty and grim portrayal which avoids merely floundering in reminiscences. Thus, we are immersed in a domestic microculture that includes well-developed and complex characters who are overbearing, rumour-mongering, larcenous, deceitful, licentious, intoxicated wife-beaters, as well as the entrenched prejudices and injustices of 'the good old days'. The best writing in the book has a 'pregnant' moving economy and restraint, as this description of the childless nurse of Margaret's baby,

> *Muthuletchmi cooked Margaret's meals every day, with the herbs as Manju's mother had instructed her. Only after she finished the cooking would she retire to her room. Her quiet moments were punctured by an unexplainable longing in her heart. She found it unbearable that her whole body smelled like the baby. Unable to hold her tears back, she found herself crying whenever she was alone.* (95)

For me *Sembawang* makes a doubly valuable contribution to Singapore writing. Firstly, as a rich, fairly deep, and definitely wide bricolage of local history. Second, it recovers and affectionately captures a vivid, highly moving, and authentic depiction of a long lost, regrettably never again so forceful immigrant microculture at a vital instant in Singapore's history. A uniquely colourful minority within minority culture is captured at the very moment Singapore's process of cultural desertification commences in earnest. The harmonious microculture fragments tragically as spacious kampong living yields to prefab, high-rise HDB housing and to Babylonian diaspora and exile, and accompanying trauma, for this Malayalee community. The novel's empowering subaltern-gynocentric lens trained on an often staggeringly brutal, poisonous patriarchy-dominated workaday locale at Thirteenth Mile over half a century ago illuminatingly reverberates with many present-day Singaporean questions and challenges. Its emphasis on the need for empathy and kindness might seem obvious but is resonant and much-needed in today's progressively more amnesiac and intolerant Singapore. The author's compulsive, long, and painful journey writing the novel, Anitha Pillai's tale of her painstaking investigation for and curation of this transcreation of her mother's novel discussed in the sections which frame the novel add further, vitally enhancing, coatings and dimensions to this rich, engrossing book. There are also dense endnotes, a joy for this historicist reader of local texts. To top it all, there is the wonderful wealth of photographs Pillai has culled carefully from a range of sources she has traced and charmed. Note especially the photos of the stall holder with an airmail letter tucked proudly in his lungi, the movable hawker

drinks stalls, Thaipusam festivities in Malaysia in the magical year of 1975, and the author and her sisters-in-law as young women posing in all their finery at Tong Lam Studio, 13th Mile in the 1970s. Look how far we have come? Look how much they have lost. I was also struck by the satisfyingly ambiguous whiff of the text set off by the tensions between saluting but also critiquing Singapore's 'progress' particularly over the issue of rehousing from circa 1968.

If anything, I would welcome an even more textured sense of 1960s Sembawang and its spaces, the noises the smell, odd snatches of overheard conversations, refrains from songs and music from the films, going even further perhaps in capturing the quirky uncanny nature of the moment from below or from the side. We do thankfully have 'kati', the Macbeth witches' resonant 'hurry burry', Malayalee messes, and other lovely details of the time. Then again, as it is, there is a danger of losing oneself in the rich endless perspectives replaying the same events from multifarious angles. The informative notes tell us that the hot springs of Sembawang were originally discovered by a British soldier, but wasn't he in fact W.A.B. Goodall, the "Robinson Crusoe of Singapore", or at least of Pulau Serimban? As at the heart of the novel is a woman's regretful yearning for her (ultimately rather ne'er do well) son, it would have been fitting to have offered more of a sense of children's lives at this time, as well as, among the countless viewpoints, their unique and ingenuously beguiling lens on what was going on.

Sembawang makes an invaluable contribution to Singapore historical fiction. I hope we read more from the same source very soon.