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Medallion

SINGAI MA
ELANGKANNAN

FLOWERS
AT DAWN

A NOVEL

Translated by
A. R. Venkatachalapathy



Flowers at Dawn

A Novel

**SINGAI MA
ELANGKANNAN**

FLOWERS AT DAWN

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Translated from the Tamil by A.R. Venkatachalapathy

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of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my grandmother, Nagammal,
my father, Mayandiambalam,
and my mother, Ponnammal

THE SHIPS AND boats scattered golden flowers of light, erecting shining pillars in the sea. Lady Singapore, her neck adorned with golden necklaces, sat augustly, smiling above these luminous pillars, displaying her luxuriant form.

The stars high up in the sky seemed to be winking at her.

Anbarasan glimpsed, for the very first time, the resplendent beauty of Singapore, buoyed in this flood of light. As the ship lay anchored in the sea after its long voyage from Chennai, he gazed at Singapore, which looked to him like a barge floating on the divine, milky ocean, new and dazzling.

A cool breeze wafted over the ship, somewhat soothing his agitated mind. After surveying the seas for a while, he turned to look at those lying on deck. He was disturbed to see his fellow passengers curled up on the deck like leeches, herded up like cattle in the airless alcoves, throwing up due to seasickness, their stomachs sunken.

In a corner, Muthiah lay curled up on a palm-leaf mat.

Muthiah was supposed to be Anbarasan's companion. After retching repeatedly, however, Muthiah could barely lift himself. As it turned out, Anbarasan was now his escort.

Muthiah had just gotten married barely six months before. With poverty snapping at his heels, he had dared to venture to Singapore.

The moment he started making plans for the voyage, his wife's eyes began to stream with tears; even after her eyes had turned red and her cheeks were puffy, she couldn't stop sobbing.

Muthiah wept too. His weeping had commenced in India, and continued as he boarded the bus with Anbarasan, on the train and on the ship. He sobbed all throughout the voyage. As the ship tossed at sea, his retching only added to his misery.

With the pangs of separation adding to poverty's torments, one could now count Muthiah's bones. Having taken leave of a young wife, he resembled little more than a walking skeleton.

Beside him lay a passenger on a woollen rug, his head resting on a trunk and his hands tucked between his legs. At his feet was a tin cup, which he'd bought when they'd boarded the ship at Chennai in Tamil Nadu. The man had found it unbearable to see his asthmatic father suffer; he could not hope to buy his father medicines if he stayed back and did not take the ship. This man from Madurai had narrated his sad story of pawning every valuable thing he owned. Unless he found work in Singapore, he had no hope of earning any money to buy his father's medicines.

As Anbarasan's eyes moved from passenger to passenger, their heartrending stories crossed his mind once more.

He turned his eyes away, towards the sea.

His mind revolved around the words spoken by the freedom fighter in the Gandhi cap at the public meeting in Chennai: "As long as the whites rule our motherland, our country cannot progress. Nor will inequality and poverty be uprooted."

"Don't you ever sleep?" asked Muthiah.

Anbarasan smiled. "Haven't we been sleeping all these past five or six days? If we keep slumbering, what will become of our future?"

"Enough of slumber! Awake! Arise! That our motherland may be freed!" The words he'd heard at the Chennai public meeting still rang in his ears.

"Well, what else can seasick people do but lie down! If a person's bile increases, can he even lift his head?" answered Muthiah.

"You're right. It's because we do not rise that the whites are ruling us, and we are wandering around as coolies!" said Anbarasan.

"That's not our business," retorted Muthiah. Both their eyes were now set on the sea.

Muthiah pointed and said, "That light over there is the Cathay Building. That's Beach Road with its row of lights. Your uncle's home is over there."

The moment he heard mention of his uncle, Anbarasan thought of Manimekalai. Those who had come to Tamil Nadu from Singapore had spoken of Manimekalai with pride. From their words, Anbarasan had drawn a portrait of her in his mind. This portrait not only overshadowed her photograph, it seemed to throb with life.

He looked at the lighthouse with Manimekalai in his thoughts.

Muthiah turned to where he was looking and pointed. "That's Poomalai!"

The moment Anbarasan heard the name Poomalai, the hill of flowers, or Fort Canning, the sweet smell of flowers wafted through his heart. As the sea breeze brushed against him, the hours after midnight seemed to slip away in happiness.

Dawn was breaking. The diamond pillars of light began to fade. As the mist cleared, a resplendent plate of gold rose from the east and spread its shining light. The birds, taking off from the trees, flew from island to island in search of prey, much like these men who had just crossed the seas.

The passengers woke up, one after another. Some headed for a shower while others returned from theirs. A few were making a beeline for hot water while some made coffee with the Milkmaid condensed milk bought in Chennai. A few others kneaded rice powder with hot water. Some threw their palm-leaf mats and tin cups into the sea. The cups sank and the mats bobbed on the surface of the sea. The green mats, soaked in seawater, waved like green flags to the passengers.

Anbarasan looked at the anchored ships from various countries. A small boat tossed about near a ship. An old Chinese man, in his straw hat wide like an umbrella, was trying to keep his boat afloat with his oars. The man stood atop the tossing boat and Anbarasan was amazed by his fearlessness. Anbarasan remembered the great Tamil poet Avvaiyar's words, "Achcham thavir", instructing one to eschew fear.

"The boat will come in a while!"

"Yes, there it is!"

Such words fell on his ears. In the distance, a small motorboat was moving towards the ship with two big wooden boats in tow. The boats approached and were lassoed to the ships. Soon a rope ladder was lowered from the ship's deck. The third-class passengers, impatiently waiting for the boats, cautiously climbed down, carrying their boxes. As they descended onto the boats, they held on to them for dear life. The boats rocked like cradles to the sea mother's lullabies.

Those tossed about by the sea of life looked up at the ship from below. Beyond their reach, on the upper deck, stood the whites. Their demeanour seemed to proclaim: In our empire, the sun neither rises nor sets! Will these small eddies shake us! Or can these wretches with sunken stomachs challenge us!

Beside them stood the brown sahibs, their faces beaming.

The boats, possibly because they were burdened with people who had trouble traversing the sea of life, were unsteady. The motorboat strained to tow the wooden boats.

As soon as the third-class passengers disembarked, the ship sailed into the harbour to drop off the first-class passengers.

The boats filled with third-class passengers were to alight on another island. To those who voyaged from Chennai to Singapore, Puramalai, or St John's Island, was like Pothiyamalai, the legendary hill of the Tamil country. Only after two days of quarantine on the little hill could they go into town.

A white man, truncheon rolling in his hand, ordered about those who disembarked, "Ay! Where are you going! Here, join this line!"

His words were taken as divine command. The third-class passengers obeyed meekly and marched past, with bedding rolled under their armpits and trunks in hand. Such was the power of the white man's truncheon. Everyone gathered together at the foot of the hill in Puramalai. After everyone's passports were examined, aluminium pots were handed out to be shared by four people each. Vermin-infested rice, sardines, onions and some dried chillies were rationed out.

In a while smoke arose from Puramalai. As this was his first trip, everything seemed novel to Anbarasan.

I'm fated to undergo such ordeals, he thought to himself. Waves dashed against Puramalai as he heaved a big sigh.

"Why are you complaining, Thambi! One should be so fortunate to enjoy this breeze on a lonely island. In our forefathers' time, one had to come to Singapore and Malaya by sailboat and suffer for

months at sea. If six days is such a torment, can you imagine sailing for three months?”

Muthiah's eyes welled up with tears as he said these words, not for the travails of those unfortunate men, but because he was chopping onions.

Anbarasan could hardly imagine the voyages of bygone days. Rain, water, wind, tide, the sun—the thought of these things frightened him. Yet he could underscore the difference. “But then, this is slavery,” he said.

In ancient times, the Tamils conquered Kadaram, Burma and the high seas. But now?

The broken rice was cooked as the water boiled. Muthiah strained the rice and made a curry of sardines seasoned heavily with onions and dried chillies. They were happy, as though they were making koottanchoru, a festive dish of rice, dal and vegetables. In the open stood the aluminium pot. The foursome pounced on the food, but the rice was lumpy.

Anbarasan spooned out the rice and served himself the fish curry with the same wooden ladle. As he raised his hand to swallow the ball of rice and curry, he heard shouts of “Snake, snake!”

Soon someone brought over a baby python, which was hanging upside down.

“It's dead!” said an old man.

“You scared us to death,” muttered someone else.

“It's a snakeling. The mother must be around here somewhere,” said another.

The man who found the baby python was beaming. But suddenly his face contorted. Crying out, he dropped the baby python and held his leg. Clenching his teeth, he raised a broken palmyra frond

and thrashed the ground vigorously.

“Why, what happened?” asked everyone anxiously.

“A scorpion,” he said as he threw aside the frond. After the scorpion was killed, some looked up at the palm tree. A ripe coconut was hanging from a branch. Someone swiftly climbed up the tree to prepare the coconut as an antidote.

“Looks like this island has everything one needs!” said Anbarasan.

“Yes indeed! Here's a centipede!”

Just as Muthiah had spoken these words, someone else said, “Here's a leech!” Another slapped his own cheek—not in penance to the god Pillaiyar, but because a mosquito had bitten him.

After the meal, some of the men spread out a towel and took out a pack of cards. While some played a game of Tigers and Sheep, a few sat stoically with expressionless faces. Others sat, ruminating on their homes. Some tried to unburden their sorrows on others' shoulders. Yet others seemed scarcely troubled by the scorpions and centipedes; they must have thought poverty far more treacherous than these pests.

Anbarasan mulled over the speech he had heard in Chennai.

2

IT WAS AN evening of yellow sunlight. Manimekalai had bathed in turmeric. Adorning her forehead with a vermillion dot or pottu, she stood before the mirror dressed in pavadai and thavani, full-skirt and half-sari, her long double braid falling to the front. She looked at her beautiful form exuding coolness, and stood mesmerised by her own beauty, proud of her youthfulness.

Her mother was making the French bread left over from breakfast palatable by dipping it in black coffee. The chickens strayed in to the hearth, pecking on the scattered grain. Dropping crumbs for the chickens, her mother called out to her.

Still standing before the mirror, Manimekalai replied, "What is it?"

"Stop preening. Why don't you feed corn to the chickens! They're pecking at my feet!"

Swishing her plaits around to her back, Manimekalai walked with her anklets tinkling. She picked up the tray of corn from a corner of the kitchen and called out to the chickens with clucking sounds.

The chickens roaming around the kitchen and the grassy backyard fluttered to her. Driving away the neighbours' chickens, she scattered the feed generously. The chickens fought amongst themselves as they pecked on the corn.

Nagammal, who lived at the other corner of the quarters, came in

at that moment. She was decked in jewels. A necklace worth over ten sovereigns, ruby ear studs, a nose pin and rings dazzled on her body.

"What's this banter between daughter and mother?"

"As a young boy, my nephew, Anbarasan, would run around with a snotty nose, and Manimekalai can't help but laugh thinking about it."

Manimekalai blushed and continued to scatter the corn without looking up.

Valliammai's heart warmed at this sight.

"When is your nephew arriving?" asked Nagammal as she sat on the bench.

"He should be here tomorrow."

Turning to Manimekalai, Nagammal said, "So, you're thinking of making him tie the knots soon?"

"Of course, he should tie the three knots right away," said Valliammai. Manimekalai didn't look up.

As the sun set in the western sea, drawing in its bountiful rays, the bells of the Mariamman Temple rang out. Darkness crept in. The hen led its chicks into the roost, clucking loudly, while other chickens followed. Suddenly a loud fluttering could be heard. Manimekalai looked up to see Nagammal's rooster chasing a hen. She glared at the cockerel as though she wanted to set it on fire. Her hen, its anger aroused, pounced on Nagammal's rooster, then returned triumphantly after seeing its back.

Just then Nalliah came in on the pretext of looking for his mother, Nagammal. His sights, however, were set on Manimekalai. He gawked at her as though he wanted to devour her with his eyes. His father worked as a kangany, a foreman and recruiter of labour, and that made him arrogant. Nalliah worked in an Englishman's company as a factotum. Given this, he commanded some respect in the quarters.

“I’ve made coffee. Go, have it,” Nagammal told her son.

“Don’t ask me to handle kitchenware,” whined Nalliah.

“Even to pour coffee he needs me...won’t even permit me small pleasures such as chitchatting. Give me a minute, and we can go,” said Nagammal.

Nalliah felt as though he had been served sweet pongal. He stood, hands deep in his khaki shorts, eyes on Manimekalai.

“Why make this boy, who’s tired from a long day’s work, wait?” asked Valliammai. Turning to Manimekalai, she asked, “Is there coffee?”

“No, I’ll have to make it!” Manimekalai replied.

Valliammai now turned to Nagammal, “Our small talk can wait. First give your son some coffee. He looks rather tired.”

Now Nalliah looked as if he had been served tart puliyotharai. He scowled, just as Manimekalai hurried into her house to light the lamp.

Nagammal walked with Nalliah following her. After they had walked past a few houses, Nalliah asked, “Amma, what were you talking about?”

“What else! I barely had a chance to ask if the marriage would be performed as soon as that fellow arrives when you showed up!”

Nalliah felt as though molten lead was being poured into his ear. “I’ll not let that upstart win Manimekalai’s hand,” he swore to himself.

• • •

The next day, Thangavelu pulled out a vetti, neatly laundered and folded, from his trunk. He shook off the last bits of mothballs stuck to the shirt before slipping into it. Carefully shoving a folded five dollar bill into the inside pocket, he buttoned the shirt with a gilded link. After putting a few letters from India into his pocket, he walked up to the niche where the vibuti, or sacred ash, was kept. He picked up some small coins, and then smeared some vibuti on

his forehead. Looking at the picture above the niche, he closed his eyes and with ardent piety, uttered the word, “Muruga.”

It was not often that his body knew laundered clothes, and he felt refreshed in his freshly washed raiment. His heart warmed at the thought of his nephew Anbarasan’s arrival.

“As soon as they come down from Puramalai, you’ll bring them home for a meal, won’t you?” asked Valliammai.

“Yes. As soon as we step out of the boat, what else can we do?” asked Thangavelu.

“Shall I make chicken curry? He will be quite weary from the long voyage!”

“When I plead with you to slaughter a chicken, you never heed my words, and you give all sorts of excuses, saying that it’s laying eggs, roosting, etc. etc...Now that your nephew is coming, you want to welcome him with chicken curry. Well...let my teeth bite into chicken bones at least, on account of my nephew,” he said, smiling.

She laughed. “Who else should I make chicken curry for?”

“Did I say you shouldn’t!”

In the company of his colleague and neighbour, Veeriah, Thangavelu set out for the harbour. Relatives crowded towards Puramalai, unmindful of the harsh sun. Some shielded their eyes from the glare with their hands.

“There’s the boat,” said one.

“Yes,” said another.

Someone waved with his shoulder towel. Everybody’s eyes were focused in the same direction.

A small motorboat towed two large wooden vessels. The passengers on the vessels waved back. The wooden vessels bobbed gently and kissed the shore.

Anbarasan was now a big man. Seeing him after ten years, Thangavelu was wonderstruck.

Anbarasan disembarked, his bedding under his armpit, one hand holding a box of dried meat and the other, his trunk.

“How are you? Is everybody fine at home?” asked Thangavelu with deep emotion. He stammered as he spoke. The tears in his eyes glistened in the sun and fell into the sea.

Overcome by emotion, Anbarasan stammered also, and was at a loss for words. He nodded his head as his eyes too became misty upon seeing his uncle.

Thangavelu took his baggage. Veeriah took Muthiah's. And soon all of them were on their way home, walking together. After passing through customs at the harbour, they went to a Chinese teashop.

“What'll you have?” asked Thangavelu.

“Order a dosai,” replied Anbarasan.

Muthiah smiled. “You can't get dosais here,” said Veeriah.

Thangavelu ordered coffee and bread from the Chinese teashop owner, who was dressed in black baggy trousers and shirt. As the shopkeeper walked, his wooden clogs made a clapping noise. In wonder, Anbarasan watched those smoking their pipes and eating with chopsticks.

Soon the owner laid the coffee and bread on the table. They each took a piece of bread, which was toasted and buttered with some sugar sprinkled on it.

• • •

The aroma of chicken curry wafted through the quarters.

The curry ready, Valliammai and Manimekalai stood at the doorway looking out. When the public radio in the square announced

the time, Valliammai exclaimed, “It's twelve and they still haven't arrived!”

Manimekalai tried not to let her anxiety show. Her eyes were fixed on the path. Since that morning, she had repeatedly gone to the door to check for their arrival. Yet neither her legs nor eyes were tired. She longed for him. When will he arrive? How shall I welcome him? How will he call out to me? Her thoughts wandered in the sky of imagination.

In the distance, she saw Thangavelu approaching with bedding under his arm.

“Amma, Appa is coming!” cried Manimekalai.

Valliammai also turned to look at the path leading to their home.

Her husband, Thangavelu, was leading the group. She could hardly see the face of the person behind who was carrying the trunk. Third in line was a tall man, whom she assumed was her neighbour, Veeriah. As the foursome neared, Manimekalai's heart pounded. Impatient for Anbarasan to arrive, she could hardly wait a moment longer. She rushed into the house and hid herself.

“Why are you running away?” Valliammai teased her.

Soon the men reached the doorstep. Valliammai pulled her sari over her shoulders and greeted Anbarasan with folded hands, “Come in, Thambi!”

Anbarasan also expressed his affection.

Thangavelu handed the baggage to Valliammai, and, scooping water in a mug from the bucket at the doorstep, he passed it to Anbarasan.

“You first,” said Anbarasan. But when Thangavelu insisted, Anbarasan took the mug of water and washed his feet.

Thangavelu, who had gone to the harbour without footwear, now

took the mug and washed his feet thoroughly. Shodden feet was against his faith in his lineage god, and therefore he never wore slippers.

They went into the house and sat on the reed mat. Betel leaves and nuts were soon laid out.

Manimekalai, who had hidden herself inside, didn't dare peep out. She could hear Anbarasan's voice, however. On hearing him speak, her heart yearned to see him, but her bashfulness restrained her. As she stood on edge, biting her nails, her teeth sank into her fingers and she cried out in pain.

Anbarasan, meanwhile, searched for Manimekalai. Pretending to look at the picture frames on the wall, his eyes sought her out, but he was disappointed when she was nowhere to be found. How will she look? In her childhood she used to sing sweetly like a sparrow! The girl in the picture is not to be seen in the flesh! She must now be a young woman. Such thoughts sweetened his heart. Where is she? But he felt too embarrassed to ask his aunt or uncle.

Manimekalai peeped out through the curtain. A thin moustache. Curly hair, combed and parted. A well-built body. Wide chest. She was lost in his masculine charm. None noticed her as they were chatting endlessly about domestic matters.

"Let's eat," said Thangavelu, feeling the pinch of hunger in his belly. He salivated at the thought of chicken curry.

"It's getting late. I wanted to meet the kangany after lunch. Only if we meet him today can we go to work tomorrow," said Muthiah.

"That's right," said Thangavelu.

Valliammai called out to Manimekalai.

"Why is she hiding?" asked Muthiah.

"She must be in her room!" said Valliammai.

"Is she shy?" asked Veeriah.

Anbarasan looked down when the conversation turned to Manimekalai.

"Enough of your bashfulness! Come, spread out the leaf plates," said Valliammai.

Manimekalai felt apprehensive. She could hear her heart beating and could barely plant her feet on the ground.

"Come," said Thangavelu.

Manimekalai gathered her courage and stepped out gently without raising her head. Her legs were hesitant. As her anklet bells sounded, Anbarasan looked at her feet from the corner of his eyes. She stepped out of her room and quickly sneaked into the kitchen.

As Anbarasan went into the kitchen to wash his hands, he sneaked a look at Manimekalai. He was amazed by the wonders that nature had wrought on her. Her anklet bells continued to sound sweetly in his ears. Manimekalai stole a glance at him too.

She felt a cold wind and bristled at its unexpectedness. As Anbarasan shook his hands after washing them, droplets of water sprayed on her, cooling both her body and her heart. When she thought of this, every cell in her body felt ecstatic.

After he had left the kitchen, she said, "Amma, please serve them."

"You're the one who's going to marry him! Why so shy?" asked her mother.

Manimekalai served the food bashfully.

As old memories were renewed and new dreams flourished, the evening hours slipped away quickly.

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To them and also to those who made the original Tamil version, *Vaikarai Pookal*, possible, I owe a deep sense of gratitude. Vanakkam!

War is looming when Anbarasan arrives in Singapore from Tamil Nadu in the 1940s. Stirred by charismatic Indian National Army leader Subhas Chandra Bose to take up the struggle for India's independence, he fights alongside the Japanese against the British in Southeast Asia. In this moving novel of an early immigrant's political and sexual awakening during World War II, *Flowers at Dawn* uncovers a little-known period of Singapore's history with drama and realism.

M. Balakrishnan has written six collections of short stories and six novels in Tamil under the pen name, **SINGAI MA ELANGKANNAN**. His work has been translated into English and Malay, broadcast on radio and made into a television drama. A winner of both local and international short story writing competitions, Balakrishnan was the first Tamil writer to receive the S.E.A. Write Award in 1982. He has won the Tamizhavel Award (Gold) and the Singapore Literature Prize. He was awarded Singapore's Cultural Medallion in 2005. This is his first book to be translated into English.

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