

M. Mukundan

ON THE BANKS OF
THE MAYYAZHI

WINNER OF THE CROWNSHIELD AWARD FOR INDIAN LANGUAGE FICTION IN TRANSLATION

COSTE DE MALABAR



M. Mukundan

M. Mukundan hails from Mayyazhi (Mahe), a former French territory in Kerala. He is a well-known Malayalam writer with over twenty-five books of fiction to his credit. The French government conferred on him the title of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in 1998. He lives in Delhi and in Mayyazhi.

Gita Krishnankutty

Gita Krishnankutty has translated the novels and short stories of several Malayalam writers, including M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Paul Zacharia, Anand, M. Mukundan and Lalithambika Antherjanam into English. She won the Central Sahitya Akademi award for the translation of N.P. Mohammed's *The Eye of God* and the Crossword award for translation for M.Mukundan's *On the banks of the Mayyazhi* and Anand's *Govardhan's Travels*. She lives in Chennai.

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Translation

Gita Krishnankutty



DCBooks

English Language
Original Malayalam Title
Mayyazhippuzhayude Theerangalil
English Title
On the banks of the Mayyazhi
Novel
by **M. Mukundan**
Translated by **Gita Krishnankutty**

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First published February 2012
E-book edition February 2012

Cover Design
D C Design Studio

Publishers
DC Books, Kottayam 686 001
Kerala State, India
website : www.dcbooks.com
ebook website: ebooks.dcbooks.com
customer support: ebooksupport@dcbooks.com

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ISBN 978-81-264-5535-5

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On the banks of
Mayyazhi

CHAPTER ONE

LONG, LONG AGO, that is, before Dasan was born.

Today's jostling Rue de la R sidence was a narrow, uneven little street. So were the Rue de la Prison and the Rue du Gouvernement. Neither the white wall of the pier that now separates the sea and the river from the shore nor the row of electric lamps that run along the wall, lighting up the water, were there in those days. Oil lamps burnt sullenly on the widely spaced lamp-posts in certain important streets like the Rue de l'Eglise and the Rue de la R sidence. They generally burned themselves out by midnight, plunging Mayyazhi into darkness.

However, in Big Sayiv's house on top of the hill, lanterns continued to blaze even after midnight. The sea lay at the back of the bungalow. On calm nights, the light from the lanterns fell in window shapes on the placid water. If you stood on the beach at sunrise, you could see Big Sayiv's elegant bungalow, surrounded by pine and eucalyptus trees, reflected in the sea.

No one except Big Sayiv had a car in those days. David Sayiv, Notary Leslie Sayiv, Mayor Chekku Moopar and Sergent-en-retraite Kunhikannan drove horse carriages. They had their own horses, carriages and carriage drivers. Leslie Sayiv, who was part-French, had the finest horse of all. It was white and had a silvery mane.

Kurambi Amma would say, 'Leslie Sayiv's horse, now there's a horse for you! Watch it lift its head and speed away.'

Big Sayiv's car had arrived from France in a ship. The Mayyazhi folk had never seen a car before. A bus went through Mayyazhi twice a day, spitting fire and smoke. It went north

to Thalassery in the mornings and south to Vadagara in the evenings. The only other motor vehicle they ever saw was a lorry that sometimes went to the Vadagara shandy and returned through the village.

‘Kurambi Amma, aren’t you coming to see the car?’ Kunhichirutha called out from the road. Dressed in her finest clothes, she was on her way to the beach. A well-known courtesan of Mayyazhi, her fame had spread east to Pondicherry and north to Mangalore. David Sayiv was her most important admirer.

‘Kunhichirutha, I want to see the car too.’

‘Come with me then, Kurambi Amma.’

Kurambi Amma hesitated. She had been impatient to see the car ever since she knew it had landed. But she had to get permission from Damu, who had gone to work early in the morning. She was waiting anxiously for him.

‘Come in for a minute. Damu will be back by the time I make you some tea.’

‘Ayyo! I have to be at David Sayiv’s by ten.’

‘You go along then.’

Kunhichirutha left in a hurry, wafting behind her the heady scent of a perfume some white man had given her.

Disappointed, Kurambi Amma waited for Damu, dreaming of Big Sayiv’s limousine.

Damu came back at noon.

‘Damu, my son, can I go and see the car?’

‘Wait until evening, Amma. All Mayyazhi is at the beach now, looking at it.’

That evening, after the crowd had thinned out, Damu took his mother to the beach. Kurambi Amma feasted her eyes on the car. She longed to touch it but it was guarded by armed French policemen.

Coming back, she called out even before she entered the house: ‘Kowsu, it shines like a mirror! You can look into it and put on your pottu. What a pity you didn’t see it!’

Kowsu, Damu’s wife, smiled.

Kurambi Amma sat down on the verandah and stretched her legs out. The car filled her thoughts. People were still on their way home from the beach. Unni Nair was among them. He asked, 'Did you see it, Kurambi?'

'Yes, I did, Nair. How it shines!'

Kunjakkan, who limped along behind Unni Nair, said, 'There are better cars in France.' Kunjakkan was the municipal lamp-lighter. He lighted the lamps on the tar-covered wooden lamp-posts. He always carried a ladder on his shoulders and an oilcan in his hand.

Kurambi Amma paid him no attention. She could hear the clatter of horses' hooves in the distance. Leslie Sayiv's carriage turned the corner. Its wheels creaked as they spun and the bells on the horses' neck jangled.

The carriage slowed down in front of Kurambi Amma's thatched house. Leslie Sayiv peered out. 'Kurambi, will you give me a pinch of snuff?'

Kurambi Amma had a snuffbox made of ivory.

'Of course, Sayiv. You don't have to ask.'

Kurambi Amma stood up. All she wore was a mundu that came to her knees. She had big thakkas in her ears.

Leslie Sayiv got down from the carriage. He wore a hat and coat and trousers. Leslie Sayiv was the most fashionably dressed man in Mayyazhi in those days.

'Sit down, Sayiv.'

Kurambi wiped the bench clean with the tip of her mundu. Leslie sat down, took off his hat and held it on his lap.

'A tiny pinch will do, Kurambi.'

Kurambi Amma took the ivory snuffbox from her waist and held it out. Leslie Sayiv shook a pinch on to his palm. His palm was as red as blood. Which other person in Mayyazhi who was part-French had such a beautiful complexion? Leslie Sayiv looked like a real white man.

Leslie inserted the snuff in his nose. His face, red as gulmohar flowers, grew redder. He closed his eyes in ecstasy.

'Sayiv, I have a dream.'

‘What is it, Kurambi?’

Leslie’s eyes were still closed. He always closed them tight to savour the delight of the snuff.

‘You must buy a car, Sayiv.’

‘A car?’

‘Yes, a car like Big Sayiv’s. One that shines like a mirror, so you can see your face in it.’

Why, Kurambi? Isn’t my horse carriage enough?’

‘How I wish you had a car!’ Kurambi Amma’s wish had been born the moment she saw Big Sayiv’s car. She had been dreaming of Leslie Sayiv in a mirror-bright limousine ever since.

Won’t you buy one, Sayiv?’

More people owned ships in those days, they were easier to buy than cars. Leslie promised to think about it. Kurambi was happy. She moved closer to him and asked affectionately, ‘Another pinch?’

‘Just a tiny one.’

Kurambi shook another pinch onto his palm and he closed his eyes again.

‘Sayiv, will our Vazhayil Koran get better?’

‘He has cancer, Kurambi.’

‘It can’t be cured?’

‘How, Kurambi?’

‘Oh God! His wife and children will be homeless.’

Vazhayil Koran was a coolie. He had a wife and three very small children. The cancer had struck without warning.

Leslie Sayiv and Kurambi Amma talked of village matters until dusk, helping themselves now and then to a pinch of snuff.

‘I’ll leave now, Kurambi.’ He stood up and put on his hat.

‘You have to go?’ Kurambi’s voice was sad.

‘You know I’ll come back tomorrow.’

He turned his carriage towards Big Sayiv’s bungalow. Drinks and dinner were served there every day. David Sayiv, Chekku Moopar and Sergent-en-retraite Kunhikannan were