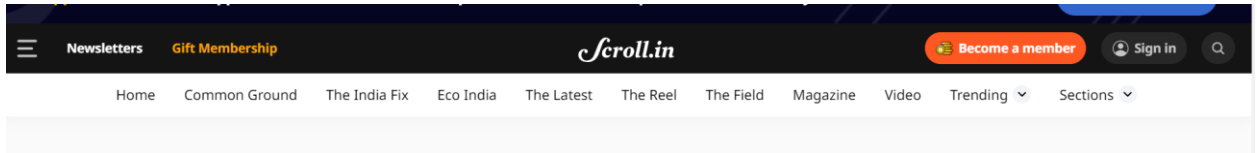


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BOOK EXCERPT

Fiction: Meet this family of three generations of Badagas who have remained untouched by modernity

An excerpt from 'When the Kurinji Blooms,' by Rajam Krishnan, translated from the Tamil by Uma Narayanan and Prema Seetharam.

[Rajam Krishnan](#), [Uma Narayanan](#) & [Prema Seetharam](#)

Yesterday · 05:30 pm



A Badaga family in the Nilgiris, 1909. Image used for representation. | Edgar Thurston / Public Domain

From the time he is born till he stands on his feet, the child draws strength from his mother's love and father's all-embracing support. Infused with self-confidence, he aspires to be independent. Where there is no parental love, there is a void and the disappointment dims the spark in him. It was Rangan's lot in life

to endure constant barbs instead of loving words. The good fortune of his companions made him seethe with anger. Bitter disappointment and envy gnawed at him and he was seized by a sudden violent desire to show that he could become greater than all the others.

This rush of feeling impelled him to cross the stream and descend eastward into the forest, heedless of the buffalo's pathetic cry. "Why not run away from Maragathamalai for good?" he thought. His aunt lived in Mookkumalai, so did his uncle. Or why should he not go off to Othai? In tune with his heartbeat, the bangle tucked in his waist seemed to say, "I'm here, I'm here!" He could get a whole silver coin if he sold it to the labbai.

One whole silver coin! Rangan knew that there was a pawnbroker's shop near the Englishman's estate beyond Keezhmalai. Surely there would be one in Othai? Third house Dharman had told him how young boys carried baskets for English people when they bought vegetables at the shandy, the weekly market, and were paid in silver coins. Dharman worked in a road gang at Othai, earning as much as six annas a day that he saved and brought home. What was there for him in the hatti? In his fantasy world, that one silver bangle was transformed into stacks of silver coins and then into countless gold mohurs.

He meandered into an unknown forest path. He breathed the eucalyptus-scented air. He had heard that there was a path leading to Othai, but he had never seen it. His destination lay beyond Mookkumalai, Mottamalai and Pulikunru which could be seen to the north-east of Maragathamalai. Once he reached Othai, he would earn silver coins. When he had saved enough, he would return to Maragathamalai in triumph. The whole hatti would be wide-eyed with wonder when he arrived on horseback, resplendent in a serge coat and turban. Suddenly aware of the isolation of his surroundings, he checked his princely stride. The rustling of leaves; the frightened chirping of fledglings as he approached the bushes; the descending darkness; the paths suddenly petering out – all these combined to sap his courage, urging him to turn back.

But Mookkumalai had seemed so near when viewed from Maragathamalai! How could he possibly cross all these forests? "Re, Ranga, what brings you here?" It was the voice of Belli's elder sister. She was tying together the twigs she had gathered. Five or six girls from the hatti gave him curious glances. Could they have guessed his secret intentions?

He was inwardly nervous. "Have you come to gather twigs? Have you come looking for wild guavas and berries?"

"Where are the wild guavas? There are hardly any blooms on the bushes."

"Has your chinnamma come for twigs? Have you come with her?"

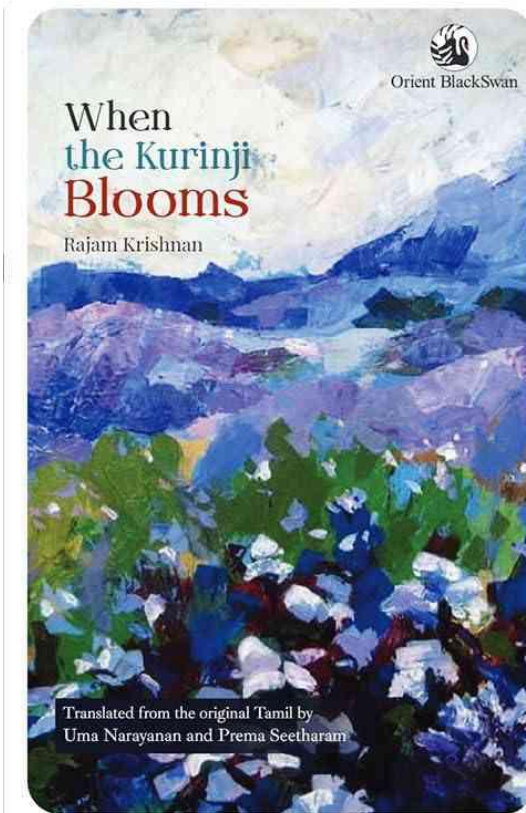
They bombarded the silent Rangan with questions. Dusk had fallen; there was no point in attempting the hazardous trek to Othai now. “We were playing and I lost my way, Akka.” Rangan turned back. As they walked home with their load of firewood, Rangan followed them at a distance. As they crossed the stream and went past the pasture to the hatti, Rangan walked along the riverbank to the fields where Mother Earth was clad in wondrous colours. Darkness descended. Here and there, bare fields proclaimed their owner’s laziness. Plots which were a tangle of shrubs and weeds revealed the discord between the husband and wife who owned them. Rangan was well aware of this.

He identified the owners of the various rectangular, square and triangular plots. The samai, heavy with grain, bent low like a shy maiden. The healthy knee-high potato plants in the triangular patch belonged to Krishnan’s grandfather Kariamalla. Nearby, plump radishes pushed their way out of the earth as if rebelling against their confinement underground. Lingayya had recently acquired the little square near Kariamalla’s land. It belonged to Jogi. The cauliflower plant, like a protective mother, shielded with its leafy arms the flower inside from the harsh sun. So did the cabbage. Jogi’s father Lingayya was a true son of the soil; Jogi’s mother believed that tilling the earth with her own hands was a reward in itself; what Jogi’s grandmother sowed, she reaped ninefold. The sight of Lingayya’s land and the thought of their house was like a thorn piercing Rangan’s heart. Madhan’s one and only buffalo was sickly. His land appeared parched and barren. The soil in that area was red and infertile.

However, Jogi’s father had worked on his barren land till it gave forth in abundance. He also had two cows and three buffaloes, so hunger was unknown in his household. And, to the south, where the stream curved, the land belonging to Krishnan’s grandfather was dark and fertile. Rangan’s father Madhan was too lazy to work on the land; nor did his stepmother put in much effort. If she worked for two days at a stretch, she would disappear for a week with her baby and take refuge with her brother in Kothai.

Rangan’s father would occasionally work as a coolie in Othai, squandering the six annas he earned on drink. Seeing the contrast between the two patches of land, the resentment and anguish simmering in Rangan flamed anew. In his fury, he pulled four or five plump radishes out of the soil. He washed them, crunched them with relish and walked on.

He halted at the watch platform. In the light of the burning torch, the injured buffalo was visible. Someone was standing beside it. Who was it? Could it be Chithappa? He was afraid that Chithappa would spot him and he furtively looked up at the platform. Two short poles and two longer ones supported the platform on the slope. Steps led up to the top. Armed with flaming torches and horns, two men accompanied by their dogs normally kept vigil over the fields at night, from on top of the platform. Blowing the horn kept away the porcupines that dug up the tubers and the deer that nibbled at the young leaves. Whose turn was it to keep watch today, he wondered. Rangan shrank from the thought of going home. He finished eating the radishes and took refuge from the cold and the dark in a corner of the platform.



Excerpted with permission from When the Kurinji Blooms, Rajam Krishnan, translated from the Tamil by Uma Narayanan and Prema Seetharam, Orient Black Swan.