

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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The Man Who Could Not Sleep: Part - 1

Length: 15:40

I want to start by reading an excerpt from an edited collection. The excerpt is from the introduction to the edited collection, the title of the book is, Short Fiction from South India. The excerpt talks about Indian writers in English and Indian regional language writers who appear in English. So the excerpt is discussing ideas in relation to these two categories. One in English, the other translated into English.

“There is a difference between Indian writers in English and Indian regional language writers who appear in English. The former have already translated themselves. They are writing for readers whose mental picture galleries hold only those words that describe, match and link up Indian experiences in English without hitting speed breakers.

Many discomforts can be explained away in the body of the text itself, such as, ‘She took care not to touch the puja items, because she was in her period, a condition considered polluting.’ I repeat, many discomforts can be explained away in the body of the text itself, such as, ‘She took care not to touch the puja items, because she was in her period, a condition considered polluting.’ In a regional language text, the second half of the sentence wouldn’t be present at all, because there would be no need to explain why the puja items had to be left untouched. In an English translation of a regional language work, these lines would mystify the non-Indian reader who would be unaware of this custom in Hindu households, but not a single Indian, no matter what his or her religion, would need the explanation.

This is the reason Indian writing in English is so attractive to those readers outside India who cannot read our languages, but yearn for the exotic and layered flavours of the material aspects of our country. They are under a powerful illusion that these Indian flavours are reaching them in English.”

So as I read the second half of this passage inevitably, I was reminded of R.K. Narayan, the way he kind of transforms his region in the works that he writes in English. There are particular words coined by him to capture Indianisms, quote unquote, that’s what we call these attributes associated with India, Indianisms. So I wanted to pick up on this idea of

explanation that comes through in the works in English and the suppression of information because it is widely understood by the readers.

There is a similarity or a similar parallel in Murugan's story, which I wanted to bring your attention to, page 190. So if you remember the story, Muthu Pattar is getting the help of Songa Pattar to kind of get this bad omen off him. He believes that he has been kind of hexed by somebody and it is because of this hex, he is not able to sleep at night. So "during the chanting Songa Pattar mocked him, "What's up, Muthu? You are not getting any sleep, is it? If you tell anyone, they are going to laugh at you." It was only after much pleading from Muthu that he was persuaded to believe it himself and do the chanting." So there is some ritual chanting going on.

"The sleep demon, which had possessed you when you were little has left you only now,' he teased Muthu. But the sleep that had got away seemed to stay away permanently. If the wife walked away in a huff, she would go to her mother's house, the husband could go there after a few days, beg and cajole her and bring her back. How was he to find out where his sleep had fled?" So in the Indian context, if the wife leaves the husband's house, she has no other place to go, except maybe to her mother's house. It's a cultural stereotype, something that would appear really alien to a foreign reader, a Western reader. The woman who walks away in a huff, the wife who walks away in a huff does not necessarily have to go to her mum's house, she might go to a friend's place. So this is something unique. This is something very unique in an ironic way that is common to the fate of Indian women, Indian rural women, most likely and perhaps in the case with urban women to a great extent, if not with all cases. And there is other references in the story. For example, "Muthu Pattar says, "What does she know? What did she know anyway apart from the dung on the cattle shed floor and smoke from the wood stove?" Smoke from the wood stove, dung on the cattle shed. So, the implication is that she cleans up after the cattle, she does all the cooking. The second part might be clear, the first part is what we will be immediately made aware because we understand the rural context. So the cleaning up also is done by the wife here.

Is there anything else that is really interesting in terms of the language? I have a couple of more examples that I wanted to share with you. Okay, page 189. Once they sprouted wings, he had sent his young ones out to seek their own food. So he is talking about his sons, who once they grow up, he sends them away with a piece of land for them and so once they sprout wings, there is a Tamil saying, which Kalyanaraman is kind of literally translating word for

word. 'Rekka molachi piragu' (to sprout wings). So he is literally translating those words here. And there is one other example in this context, there is one other context, which brought a smile to me. Page 197, maybe perhaps this is not the ideal way to translate, but 197. He is talking about, I am saying he is talking about, but this is not first person narrative, this is third person narrative with a focalization on Muthu Pattar. You can see the mind voice of Muthu Pattar through the third person's narrative.

"He couldn't afford to thatch the roof once in 3 or 4 years, he tried to cope with the rainy season by inserting an extra frond of palm on the leaky side of the roof and covering the roof with jute cloth. Even then, raindrops would pierce the roof and descend into the house like a string of fine needles." Look at the choice of words to capture the harshness of the raindrops which leaks through the roof, string of fine needles, very prickly in effect, piercing in effect like pin needles. "It's my fate to spend all my days in the shed, not for nothing do they say," who says, not for nothing do they say, like people in the village, people in the community. "You can live in a weeping house but not in a leaking one."

This is, you get that gist when you read it, you kind of work it out what she is trying to say. But I believe in a sense, in the original, it is, the reference is not too literally a weeping house, it is to a funeral house, a house which has seen a funeral where everybody is weeping. You can even live in such houses where there are funerals, but you cannot live in a leaking house. So that is the content which has been translated in this fashion by Kalyanaraman. And the following line, not the following, the line that begins in the next paragraph, "But this boy Murugesan was so young as they said, he hadn't even sprouted three leaves yet." He had not even sprouted three leaves yet.

So this is again a literal transliteration, a word for word translation 'Innum mulachi moonu ilai vidalai.' (Even three leaves haven't sprouted yet). So again, so at one or two places he does this, so you kind of get the flavour or you hit the speed breaker as the editors of this book Short Fiction from South India say, you hit a speed breaker and then you try to work it out. And that alien exotic touch comes through in these sayings, in these proverbs, in these cultural cues as to how they see things.

At a formal level, this is interesting, significant, tells you the practice, tells you more about the practice of translation. But at a metaphorical level too this is interesting, why? It is interesting because these sayings give us an indication of the major concern, the central concern of the story. The competition between the young and the old is at the heart of this

particular story. So what this culture, and what Perumal Murugan is doing is that he is drawing his analogy from the elements of nature, from the leaves that sprout, from the plant that rises, from the birds that leave the nest. So the young, the emphasis, the attention given to the young and their place in society, especially in relation to the old who are on their way out, is signified through these choices of cultural matter, that are sprinkled, woven into this kolam of a story. So in that way, this story is significant for its choice of a figurative language, its similes and metaphors.

So, the wife, I think I will stop with this one, the wife of Muthu Pattar, consciously or unconsciously, figures out the base nature of Muthu Pattar when she compares him to the snake that slithers on the ground. It's a very interesting, very apparent at some level but she figures out the base natures which is why that figurative comparison comes through very easily out of her mouth. So there are a lot of animal imagery in this story, the wife being compared to lizards and there is comfort as well as annoyance for Muthu Pattar when he hears the noise of the lizards and the jabberings of the wife.

It tells you about the nature of that world. It is a very competitive world, it's a poor world, it's a rural world. There is a lot of dearth of material riches, but it is also a world which is full of angst, resentment, bitterness, jealousy, and Perumal Murugan says that, he said in the 90s that what matters to him the most is the character of the human beings who populate his world rather than the nature of the incidents, which he builds in his story. So he is interested in the ways in which human beings behave, and react, and relate to one another. And in the previous class, I was talking about how important this domestic spatiality is to these characters. If you read the story, there are multiple references to houses, different kinds of houses, from thatched sheds, to tiled roof houses, to palaces, to fortress. So it is a major concern of this particular story.

The lack of proper housing, the desire to own a house, the status associated with good housing. You know, how soon could you get a house built for you and your family. So all these are foremost in the minds of the people of the community, but they kind of suppress it and play games with one another. There is an immense amount of hypocrisy. If you read the story very closely, the hypocrisy of Muthu Pattar comes through and this kind of observation is remarkable in this story, so you get the rawness from the regions in, and the stories of Perumal Murugan.

Okay, I will stop here.

