


**Modern Indian Writing in Translation**  
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**The Man Who Could Not Sleep: Part - 3**


**Length: 19:18**

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### A World of Exceptions

- I wrote my first story in 1988, and I have written more than eighty short stories so far. This book is a selection of ten stories, and the only criterion for their selection is the successful realization of the form.
- All these stories are about exceptions. Therefore, I place them, radiant as they are, with the seductive allure and fresh perspectives characteristic of exceptions, before the reader.



So he says here, “I wrote my first story in 1988, and I have written more than eighty short stories so far. This book is a selection of ten stories, and the only criterion for the selection is the successful realization of the form.” Okay so, in terms of form, they are perfect. That is what he believes. Structurally, they are great. But at the same time all these stories are about exceptions too. Therefore, I place them, it should be them, I place them, radiant as they are with the seductive. Again, the idea of seduction is recurrent. I place them, radiant as they are, with the seductive allure and fresh perspectives characteristic of exceptions, before the reader. So they are formally perfect, radiant, full of energy, excitement. It is, they are tempting, and they are seductive as well and on top of all these, they are exceptional in terms of the subject matter. So my question to you is, what are the exceptions that you find in *The Man Who Could Not Sleep*? Karnalius, what do you think? What are the exceptions? Not all day. He has a good night's sleep.

Student: (())(1:52)

Professor: Yes.

Student: (())(1:54)

Professor: Yeah, can you move on to the next one? I will come up with that passage, The Man Who Could Not Sleep, 183.


Yeah, it is an interesting point. The very fact that he could sleep, 183. “Once he lay down, he would fall asleep instantly as if by magic. No matter how loudly the cattle bellowed and the dogs barked, the old woman still had to wake him up, sleeps like a wretched corpse. So that is a simile that Sourav was raising earlier. “There is so much noise around but it does not affect him,” she would grumble.

From his childhood days, sleep was always a big asset for him. They would never send them to guard the cattle pen or the threshing floor because he might fall asleep. “Even a drunk wakes up at night, but this boy will open his eyes only after sunrise.” they said. And he never ran short of that sleep.”

So on the surface, this does not seem to be an exception, but within the story world, the fact that he could sleep and sleep really well without being disturbed at any point in the night is a kind of an exception. It’s magic that is what the writer compares it to. It’s magical the fact that he could sleep like that, like a baby that somebody said, without getting up at all. Any other exceptions?


Okay, we will constantly explore this idea, because it is important to the central concern of this tale. Sanchaar, what do you think? Okay, come back to the next one. So where does he sleep? So this is his bed, the rope cot. “He didn’t know where that glorious sleep had vanished.” So when the story begins he has lost his ability to sleep well.

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### The Man Who Could Not Sleep

●“Lying with his six-foot frame  
scrunched up in a rope cot that sagged  
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“Lying with the six-foot frame scrunched up in a rope cot that sagged in the middle no matter how many times the ropes were fastened, he looked like a small baby fast asleep in the cradle.” He looked like a small baby fast asleep in the cradle. He’s a tall man, six-foot, but when he sleeps on this cot scrunched up, he looked like a small baby fast asleep in the cradle. It is a very weird simile in retrospect, once you have read this story and come back to the simile, it is an exceptional one, I would say.

“He would lie in the same position neither tossing about nor rolling over in his sleep. If he heard someone whining about not being able to sleep, he would say with genuine surprise, is that even possible?”

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What is the old man's attitude towards sleep?

"Slothful idlers who lolled around at home all day might lose their sleep, but how could it happen to a man who wandered around with bulls and calves without a moment to stand still? 'Walk in the fields and groves to exercise your legs and have a look around. You'll get sound sleep,' he told them."





Slothful idlers who roll, who lolled around at home all day might lose their sleep, but how could it happen to a man who wandered around with bulls and calves without a moment to stand still? "Walk in the fields and groves to exercise your legs and have a look around. You will get sound sleep," he told them." Can you go back to the next one? No, the following one. So how does the village see his famous ability to sleep soundly? How is it even possible?

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How does the village see his famous ability to sleep soundly?

● "The man doesn't mull over things in his mind and confuse himself. That's why he gets such blissful sleep,' men of his vintage would remark enviously."




It is possible because, "The man does not mull over things in his mind and confuse himself. That's why he gets such blissful sleep," men of his vintage would remark enviously." So this is what the villages think about why he could sleep. But if you look at the old man himself, he says that, "I walk around quite a bit, therefore I am able to sleep well." There are two things

here. He thinks that physical exercise would automatically make you sleep and then followed by this, you have to unload all your worries before you go to sleep. So worrying about something will not let you sleep, it is a simpler understanding. Worrying about something will not let you sleep.


The village believes that and this man too. And suddenly, he is worried, which is why he is not able to sleep. I am interested in how sleep is physically located in the story. He sleeps at a particular spot. A spot that he has been used to sleeping since he was a baby, since when he slept next to his mother. Can you come to the next section please? And the next one please? And the next one.

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### The Man Who Could Not Sleep

● His rope cot lay in the **eastern corner of the thatched shed**. Rain or sunshine, he always slept in the **eastern corner**. When he was a little child, his mother used to keep her cot there and sleep on it, **hugging him to her side**. Sleeping there made him **feel safe** as he had felt in his mother's arms. But he never told anyone about it.



So the cot becomes a cradle in some sense for him. “His rope cot lay in the eastern corner of thatched shed. Rain or sunshine, he always slept in the eastern corner. When he was a little child, his mother used to keep her cot there and sleep on it, hugging him to her side. Sleeping there made him feel safe as he had felt in his mother's arms. But he never told anyone about it.”

This is a strange story in the sense that when we read the story up until this point, up until we meet Murugesan, we are on the side of the old (woma) old man. We are on the side of the old man. That's how the narrator leads us, there is a kind of a subtle, unexplained sympathy for this old man who is able to sleep well. And this is some, this is a very common psychology. We believe that if somebody sleeps well, oh, he has no worries, he may be is, all is well with him, in terms of how he relates to the community. He bears no grudges, he is not mean or she

is not mean, therefore that person is able to rest well. So that is the common psychological understanding of somebody who is able to rest. And when we read the story up until we meet Murugesan and further, we sympathize with the old man and we sympathize because of certain similes, the similes that Sourav earlier pointed out like sleeping like a baby, the old man is being compared to a baby.

The six-foot man who is kind of scrunching up his big frame onto that sagging cot, which is kind of compared to a cradle, all these details makes us sympathize with him. And look at that little anecdote. When he was a little child, his mother used to keep a cot there and sleep on it. The evocation of the mother of the old man that image that comes to us when we read it, hugging him to her side.

So all these details, we immediately visualize a mother securely holding a baby, a small child. And our sympathies are provoked, prompted. Sleeping there made him feel safe. The idea of security against a big bad world, the idea of security. Sleeping there made him feel safe as he had felt in his mother's arms. And he never told anyone about it. So even to this day, he sleeps on that particular spot on the eastern side, so that the desire for security, the desire to be as close as possible to the lost mother, all these narratives are put there to somehow cheat us the readers. Because as we read the story, we see a very sharp turn that this narrative takes. So these details are something which must be probed.

The desire for security is there and the desire for security is connected with domestic speciality in this particular short story. And we can very clearly see that this man doesn't get it. For him, security, comfort is associated with a particular spot, and it's not even a covered spot. It's kind of limited to a particular cot, which is sagging like a cradle. So look at the deprivation, look at the deprivation that he has undergone since he was a child.

They sleep in uncovered places, open to the skies, so the security is offered by just that motherly figure, that figure of the mother. So the subtext to this story is a narrative which talks about the lack of proper domestic accommodation. So, you can see at different points in the story, there are evocations of different kinds of houses. At one point, he says, am I living in a grand palace? So would that man Murugesan be able to build a big palace for himself, a big structure for himself? So all these references to housing, plays a kind of havoc on the mind of this old man.

Our instinctive reactions to this text, those who have read it, how many of you have read it? Yeah, yeah. It is a very interesting kind of jealousy. This is an old man at the fag end of his

life. And he is envious of this young man who is of the age of his grandson, more or less. So, we do not usually associate jealousy with an old person. Especially, the old person being envious of a younger, younger generation.

So that idea, that exceptional idea, this uncommon idea or it is uncommon in the sense that it has not been presented in literature before. We have sexual jealousy, we have professional jealousy. We, if you think about jealousy, we are immediately reminded of Shakespeare's Othello, where Othello's sexual jealousy is provoked by Iago's professional jealousy of Cassio. So, all these things come together there. But an old man being very jealous of a young man, it's a very interesting thing. Okay, is anybody else? Katherine, what did you think?

Student: ( )(14:15)

Professor: Yes, yes, yes.

Student: ( )(14:29)

Professor: Yes, correct, correct.

Student: ( )(14:35)

Professor: Yeah.

Student: ( )(14:44)

Professor: Yes.

Student: ( )(14:54)

Professor: Yeah.

Student: ( )(14:56)

Professor: Yeah, yeah.

Student: ( )(15:03)

Professor: Yeah, yeah.

The hidden depths to that jealousy that is kind of brought to the surface here in the second half of the story. Something that is, and the fact that you can hide such jealousies, bury such jealousies deep inside your heart is also kind of indicated here in the story. The fact that human beings are capable of such kind of jealousies.

And there is nothing romantic about the setting. He kind of de-romanticizes everything in terms of this particular setting. There is a large scale derision going on in this story. People are constantly mocking each other. If you look at the characters in the story, the wife is constantly deriding the husband, the husband is constantly mocking the wife comparing her to creatures such as the lizards, and then you have other characters, Songa Pattar mocking Muthu Pattar and so that is a constant here, the ridicule, the sarcasm, the mockery. And so we really are far away from any kind of romantic notion about a close knit, rural community in Perumal Murugan's works. So deprivation, jealousy, being underprivileged. So all these, underbelly of society is what is kind of highlighted in his works.

Student: Student query

Professor: Yeah.

Student: But why do people not show emotions like jealousy.

Professor: Yeah.

Student: Pride and all those coming up, that is why at the, in spite of the dark, he went out and destroyed the wall.

Professor: Yeah, it is very interesting the way that moment is described in the story. He does not go straight away and punch the gable. He goes and hugs the structure, he hugs the structure just as he would have hugged his mother. So that house is security for Murugesan. That house is akin to a hug he would have with his mother, probably. That is what is culturally, psychologically possible. So this man, this old man goes and destroys that security, that security which Murugesan would get from that house.

And that house is the outcome of his hard work, isn't it? Extreme hard labour, labour that kind of puts his own health at risk. He even sells the palm jaggery that is given to him at the spinning meal, at the spinning mill so that it would prevent tuberculosis. So the house is the result of that kind of labour, not just any labour, it is a labour that kind of is full of self-sacrifice. And



that house is what he destroys and he hugs it before destroying. It's like, if you take it further, it is like destroying the figure of the mother. The figure of the mother who protects and offers sanctity and security to younger generations.