


**Modern Indian Writing in Translation**  
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**The Man Who Could Not Sleep: Part - 4**

**Length: 17:23**

Just a few closing pointers, and there is no larger thematic framework to what I am saying, I am just pointing out certain features of the text structurally and thematically and then we will move on.


(Refer Slide Time: 0:29)



**The Man Who Could Not Sleep.**

● ‘So, how is the work progressing?’ he enquired  
of Murugesan. In fact, he had been closely  
measuring the progress of the house  
whenever he passed that way. He knew it  
even better than Murugesan. Even, so he *had*  
to begin the conversation this way, didn’t he?  
(emphasis in original)

Why does he  
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this way?





So this is an interesting excerpt from the story, The Man Who Could Not Sleep. “ ‘So how is the work progressing?’ he enquired of Murugesan. In fact, he had been closely measuring the progress of the house whenever he passed that way. He knew it even better than Murugesan. Even, even so, he had to begin the conversation this way, didn’t he?” Even, so he had to begin the conversation this way, did he not? So the emphasis is in the original.

So why does he have to begin this way? That is a question to which you can offer some answers. And look at the way he is closely measuring the progress of the house, even more so than the owner, the builder. So, this is something that we didn’t know at the start of the story, this idea is being gradually introduced to us as we kind of know more about the story-world and the psychological makeup of this Muthu Pattar. We know these details, which are worrying his close observation of the house, is somehow worrying and is causing havoc, we realize. Causing havoc on his peace of mind. Next one, please.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:57)

### The Man Who Could Not Sleep

●It's such hard work to build a small house with a tiled roof. We can only imagine the trouble that people who put up those big palaces must go through.





So this is Murugesan. “It’s such hard work to build a small house with a tiled roof. We can only imagine the trouble that people who put up those big palaces must go through.” So, the comparison between different class systems in terms of the kind of houses that they can build. So, you can see the layered nature of society through such material productions. So, and Muthu Pattar kind of works it out that there is a kind of an unconscious or a conscious desire to climb up the social scale. Yeah, next one.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:45)

### The Man Who Could Not Sleep

●If the wife walked away in a huff, she would go to her mother's house; the husband would 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, we talked about this one. “If the wife walked away in a huff, she would go to her mother's house.” This is the cultural assumption on the part of the husband in most rural economies and in some urban economies too. She has to go to the mother's, so where else would she go? “The



husband would 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 it is very interesting that he is trying to bring these two things together as a possible, not as a possible, he is trying to place these two ideas together on the same plane. The wife who walks away, and the sleep who disappears. And that reminds me of the earlier comparison that we had about his comfort level when he sleeps on his cot in the eastern corner. He feels as if he is being hugged by his absent mother, his long dead mother. So it's very interesting that these comparisons have a similar character and tone to them. Next one.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:04)

### The Man Who Could Not Sleep

- 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.



Okay, we talked about this. A string of fine needles piercing through the roof and disturbing the occupants making life miserable for the occupants. So the metaphor, no, the simile is pretty sharp there. Next one, please.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:22)

## The Man Who Could Not Sleep



● 'It's my fate to spend all my days in this shed. **Not for nothing do they say**, "You can live in a weeping house, but not in a leaking one." But what's the sue? This was destined to be my lot,' the old woman would hint obliquely.



And we saw this one too. We were talking about translation context of this one. You can live in a weeping house but not in a leaking one. And then the wife complains and moans and then Muthu Pattar is forced to kind of cadge funds to repair the roof. Okay, next one.

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● He was already building a house with a tiled roof. He spoke about the toil of those who built palaces. It must mean that a plan for building a palace was already incubating in his mind. Oh, he might even do it. For someone who built a tiled-roof house at twenty-five, would it be such a great feat to build a palace at fifty?



So the worry of Muthu Pattar is voiced, clearly through the narrator's voice. "He was already building a house with a tiled roof. He spoke about the toil of those who built palaces. It must mean that a plan for building a palace was already incubating in his mind." The plan to build a house and that guy is working in a mill and he has a patch of land and it is not likely that he is going to build a house all of a sudden. But that is a possibility, a theoretical possibility and that massively irritates, and annoys, and kind of destabilizes the psyche of Muthu Pattar.


“Oh, he might even do it. He might even do it. For some reason who, for someone who built a tiled-roof house at twenty-five, would it be such a great feat to build a palace at fifty?” So what then? What if he did, in fact, build a palace? What is your problem? So why should you worry this much? That should be our natural question. So you can see that kind of competition.

And I did a little bit of digging up, there is a reference to a goddess there in the story. So there is a reference to a goddess and if you know more about the context, you would realize that that goddess is a clan deity or a deity which is, which prays to that particular deity, Karyakali. So a particular community in this part of the region of Tamil Nadu prays to this clan deity and that is also a Gounder caste. Kongu Vellalar Gounder, they pray to this deity and this boy, Murugesan is also from the Gounder caste.


So, they belong to the same caste yet, there is a visceral chasm, a massive divide between the members of the same community. So there is a kind of a clash between class mobility, that there is, there is a problematic of class mobility within the same caste. So just because you belong to the same community does not mean you kind of have (sympathe) sympathetic appreciation of the mobility, the upper mobility of your own members from the same caste.

So, that kind of point of view emerges when you do a little bit of research in terms of the details. So it's not overtly told in the story that they belong to the same caste, but certain indications tell you that there is no divide in terms of caste affinity or community affiliations. Next one, please.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:50)



●He cast a glance towards Murugesan's house. It was a small house with two rooms. The brick walls had been raised to a man's height.



Okay, why this passage struck me was again, the analogy. “The brick walls had been raised to a man’s height.” The brick wall has, the brick walls had been raised to a man's height, so that the comparison between a man and a house comes through. And in this context, if you go back to the final sections of the story, this story becomes really deeply disturbing. 202. So, he wakes up in the middle of the night, sneaks out of the house, doesn’t want to disturb the wife. So he gets out, walking slowly, he went and stood in front of the house. The house of Murugesan, the brick walls had been raised to a man's height and then the gable walls or the gable roof had been put up.

“He looked around once, he entered the space enclosed by the walls. Because there was no roof,” so the gable has come up but there is no roof covering the entire structure. Just to be clear, we should realize that. “He entered the space enclosed by the walls. Because there was no roof, moonlight shone brightly inside the house too. He touched and caressed the walls. He felt the pleasure of hugging a child to his chest.”


Look at the way the pleasure of touching and feeling the house is described, is compared to. The house is compared to a man’s height, the house is compared to a little child which is growing up. “He rubbed his cheek against the wall. A pleasantly cold feeling spread throughout his body. He stayed like that for a very long time.” It’s not momentary, touching, he stayed in that kind of contact for a very long time. “A hen crowed somewhere,” possibly it is dawn.

“He came to the wall they had built after erecting the scaffolding earlier that day. With great difficulty he climbed onto the scaffolding.” He’s an old man, he does this with great difficulty.


“He made a fist and punched the gable wall they had finished that evening. He made a fist and punched the gable wall they had finished the evening. With the punch, some bricks came loose and dropped down. The few teeth that were still left in his mouth, gnashed together. He punched hard again. In spite of his calloused fingers and knuckles, he felt the pain with the second punch, as a cascade of bricks came thudding down.” And then he goes back home and rest really, sleeps well, after a long time. “‘The old man is finally cured of his madness today,’ his old wife said to herself.” So we want to know what sort of madness was he possessed of, what sort of madness prompted him to destroy this half constructed house which is compared to an associated set of ideas, which are maternal, which are associated with the growth of children and things like that?

So he is destroying a house built by a very hard-working young man from his own community, who is kind of reckless even of his health in order to build a house for his family. So I will leave the rest of the interpretations to you. Can we move on?

(Refer Slide Time: 11:55)



- He felt as if his whole face was smeared with that ball of spittle.
- Then, why are you slithering around like a hungry snake?
- Her jabbering fell on Pattar's ears merely as a series of incoherent sounds. Even if she wasn't there, her voice would keep reverberating all over that thatched shed. He knew what it would say at given moment. He would make sense of it by combing it with the noise of house lizards.



Okay, we saw this one. Maybe the first was not talked about. The first one. “He felt as if his whole face was smeared with that ball of spittle.” Remember he spits after returning home, after meeting Murugesan, he spits on the ground and he feels as if that spittle is kind of smearing his face. So there is a realization on the part of the narrator that what he is doing is completely revolting and disgusting. His attitudes towards this young man is nothing less than disgusting. We talked about the rest. Can we move on?

(Refer Slide Time: 12:48)

## The Man Who Could Not Sleep




● Poor boy. He is saving every last paisa to build this house. Don't betray him, ' he told them. 'If we do, will that money stay with us, thatha? Are we going to build a palace and rule for a thousand years? Whether we are alive or not, our work will stay neat and honest,' the supervisor would reply.




So this is Muthu Pattar's conversation to the construction workers. "Poor boy. He is saving every last paisa to build this house." Paisa, it's a Tamil word, refers to one paise. "Do not betray him,' he told them. 'If we do, will that money stay with us, thatha?'" Were you able to make out what this word thatha means? How? Do you have similar terms in your language to refer to? Thatha means grandfather. Do we have similar terms in other languages? Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada? Thatha is used, okay. "Are we going to build a, are we going to build a palace and rule for a thousand years? Whether we are alive or not, our work will stay neat and honest." There is a lot of irony in that word honest, because honesty is not what is suffusing this entire story. So it's an ironic concept, something we need to think about. So what are the narratives of honesty that run through this village community? Next one, please.



(Refer Slide Time: 14:05)




●When he went to work in the fields and came back, the wall would have risen by half a yard in that one session. It would seem like a miracle to Muthu. In an empty space with nothing in it, **the wall was coming up quickly like an anthill.**




There is another comparison to the wall. Look at the last one, “the wall was coming up quickly like an anthill.” This is Muthu Pattar’s consciousness. And in this one, he compares it to an anthill. So this is not a very emotionally attractive comparison. It is drawn from the wild and it has a kind of a slight repulsion because if we come across an anthill, we would not be attracted to it. There is an undertone of repulsion, In Tamil, we call it Karyamputha. If we see it anywhere near our house, we used to destroy it, to protect our houses from ants and other creepy-crawlies. So look at the way he is seeing the pace at which this house is coming up. So that tells you once again about his attitude towards the house, it is like an anthill. Next one, please.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:08)



### The Man Who Could Not Sleep

● It's on the strength of having you as my neighbour that I am building a house and moving here,' he said. 'I am happy to hear that. Come here by all means. What are we going to carry with us when we die? We are only here to help one another,' was Muthu's generous response.




Here what struck me here was Muthu's generous response. Again, a lot of ironical emphasis is on the phrase 'generous response'. He is nothing but, he is anything but generous, but look at the hypocrisy that he spouts. Look at the hypocrisy that comes from him. "What are we going to carry with us when we die? We are only here to help one another?" Not really, not really. So again, this is something that we usually do not think about, the competition between the older people and the younger generations coming up. You would think that the older people would always look at the younger people with benignity, with lots of affection, but not all the time.

So there would be elements of jealousy, envy, and the fear of being surpassed by the younger generation in the minds of the older. So that is something we might be, we might want to be careful of, wary of. So there is affection, there is benign attitudes from the superiors, from the elders towards the younger, but there are also other subversive attitudes and feelings. So that is also there.

So this story gives you that picture that we do not usually see, or realize, or be conscious of. Next one, please.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:41)




### The Man Who Could Not Sleep

- The *pyol* is a sort of front stoop where Indians often visit with neighbors and watch the world going by.

- <https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/10/19/r-k-narayan-the-guide-1958/>



Okay, this is a reference that I just picked up from the story on Indianism, quote, unquote, this *pyol* school to which Muthu Pattar goes to. So that is there in the story and that is the reference. It's a porch. Porch attached to rural Indian housing on which students are taught, children are taught. On which, the women used to sit and talk or people used to rest. So look at the hybrid function of that space, which is interesting.

Okay, that is it.