

**Modern Indian Writing in Translation**  
**Professor Dr. Divya A**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology Madras**  
**The Man Who Could Not Sleep: Part - 2**

**Length: 23:35**

So today we will look at Murugan's short story, 'The Man Who Could Not Sleep.' It's a very visceral story in the sense that you get some of the baser human emotions in a very raw manner. When I read this story, I was reminded of one other story written by a Tamil writer but that story was written in English in the first place, and that is R. K. Narayan's story, 'The horse and two goats.' On the surface, they are not very comparable because R. K. Narayan's story apparently talks about the conflicts between the eastern and the western mind. And we have representatives for each categories in that story in, almost in a stereotypical way.

But if you look at the representation of the village Gridam or Krittam, you can find some parallels in terms of the human conflicts that happened in the village. So, my advice would be to read that story as a companion piece to this one, and see how the dynamics of a community in a rural village, in a very poor rural village is explored in Narayan's vision, and compare that with Murugan's story. It will be a very interesting exercise.

This story by Murugan in Tamil is titled Kombai Chuvar, which means it's a gable. Kombe means gable. So two slanting roofs coming together and a wall that supports it that is the title of the Tamil story Kombai Chuvar.

And Kalyanaraman has translated it as 'the man who could not sleep', he doesn't go to the very literal translation of that idea in the original. So the title is interesting because in Kalyanaraman's translation, he gets to the heart of the matter by referring to the central character in the title itself. So, you can see how these two versions bring to the surface or not bring to the surface, the crux of the matter. So, even a choice of the titles will tell you what the writer wants to highlight or suppress. So, when we read this title, we are immediately concerned about the central character. So who is this man who could not sleep? And why is he not able to sleep? So all these questions will roll out in our minds pretty quickly.

But if you look at Kombai Chuvar, that Tamil title, we would be led into a route or led down a path, which will make us think of different kinds of housing, domestic housing. So I am not saying that one title is better than the other, I am just saying that these two ideas are pretty

much important to the story. Domestic speciality is as important as the central character who is quite complex, but I am just saying that we get different avenues into the heart of the matter. So translations are kind of interpretations. We come back to the same idea that it is a kind of a reinterpretation of, quote unquote, the source text. These excerpts are from the preface that he wrote, Perumal Murugan wrote to the collection, 'The Goat Thief.' He wrote an essay titled, 'A world of exceptions.' It is a very interesting essay.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:12)



### A World of Exceptions

● Whenever I think of writing a short story, I am reminded of the art of drawing kolams practised in Tamil homes. After spending a long time sweeping and cleaning the front yard you pick the kolam powder, and the idea that strikes you at the moment will take shape as the kolam. The simple one drawn with just four dots by a hand that weaves and crosses between them can be beautiful as never seen before.



And in this he tells us his rationale for writing, how he looks at the world of writing, and what are his concerns when he writes, and he titles the essay, "A world of exceptions". We will come to that point about exceptions shortly.

So he says "whenever I think of writing a short story, I am reminded of the art of drawing kolams practiced in Tamil homes. After spending a long time sweeping and cleaning the front yard, you pick the kolam powder, and the idea that strikes you at the moment will take shape as the kolam. The simple one drawn with just four dots by a hand that weaves and crosses between them can be beautiful as never seen before."

I thought this was a very charming way to compare the art of writing to drawing or weaving a kolam in front of your house. And I was struck, it's a very simple comparison in some ways. But I was struck by the domestic imagery, it is a very domestic act, isn't it? To draw or weave a kolam. It's a domestic act and usually performed by women very rarely, very, very rarely we see men coming out to the front of the house to clean and draw a kolam. So I was thinking how

Murugan is comparing the art of writing to a feminine act. So, it becomes a very private realm, the art of writing becomes a kind of a private realm in this metaphor.

So, that in itself tells you a lot of things about Murugan's character, Perumal Murugan's character and how he sees his work. It doesn't come through as a very masculine or a public act, so we can see associated characteristics of submissiveness, being reserved, not trying to push one's way into the public domain. So that is interesting in terms of the metaphor that he uses.

The other thing I was reminded of was that kolam is not very, very unique to Tamil homes, we have other states both in the South, as well as in the North who practice this. Can you give me some examples? In the Hindi, the equivalent would be, in Hindi speaking regions, rangoli? Yeah? Is rangoli drawn in front of the house every day or only during auspicious special occasions? Special occasions. But here it's very common you do it every day. So, when you think about that repetitive act, then again it becomes interesting in the sense that writing also becomes a very repetitive, regular, mundane, ordinary act for Perumal Murugan's context. He has written a lot of stuff, he is a prolific author. You can even go look up the number of works that he has produced, maybe we can do a biography later, a short bio of Murugan. So he is a prolific writer. So he doesn't draw exceptional qualities to his writing, in some sense. There are exceptions, but those exceptions pertain to a particularly different context, we'll come to that.

Obviously, the form is what is getting importance here, not the content, he comes to the content a bit later, but here the importance seems to be the elegance of the form. And you can see that the phrase, the idea that strikes you at the moment, it seems to be a sudden inspiration to come up with a particular story, not a very thought-out product that he is writing. So sudden inspiration, emphasis on the form are some of the qualities that come through in this excerpt.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:47)

A World of Exceptions



These are the abstract kolams that we see in front of Tamil homes even to this day. If you go to the rural areas you can see this, in small towns you can see this.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:02)

A World of Exceptions



- The grand one drawn that is as wide as the street and drawn after hard practice over long hours can turn out to be an unsightly mess. Looking at the finished kolam from a distance, you may feel that something is amiss. A stray flower, picked and placed at the centre, can erase the flaw and bring perfection to your doorway.

Now he is kind of trying to make a comparison between the extended writing, which can translate as a novel or novella, and the short story, which is a short write up. “The grand one drawn that is as wide as the street and drawn after hard practice over long hours can turn out to be an unsightly mess. Looking at the finished kolam from a distance, you may feel that something is amiss. A stray flower, picked up and placed at the centre, can erase the flaw and bring perfection to your doorway.”

And sometimes that works and sometimes that does not work. The idea of putting a stray flower in the centre of a kolam might work, might make the short story interesting, a kind of an odd detail in a story might make the story work, sometimes it will not and you move on to a different project, so that's the apparent comparison.

The word that strikes me in this excerpt is the word, stray, stray flower, something that is not part of the regular routine, something that is outside, something that is in the margins. So that exception, that marginal aspect, something that is thrown away and being brought to the centre might make the whole piece significant in some sense.

So I was struck by that reference, that resorting to something which is unusual to make the mundane work. And again, you can see I mean, the grandeur in writing is slightly critiqued. There is an argument that small is beautiful, that kind of argument is quite apparent here. Now he comes to the idea of content, he realizes that the content is more significant than the form.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:12)



### A World of Exceptions

- I set aside the problem of form and started paying attention to the theme of the story. I realized all stories fall into one of two categories. The first category focuses on the problems of living according to the rules of society, while the second concentrates on exceptions to these rules. Both strategies have their advantages and disadvantages.

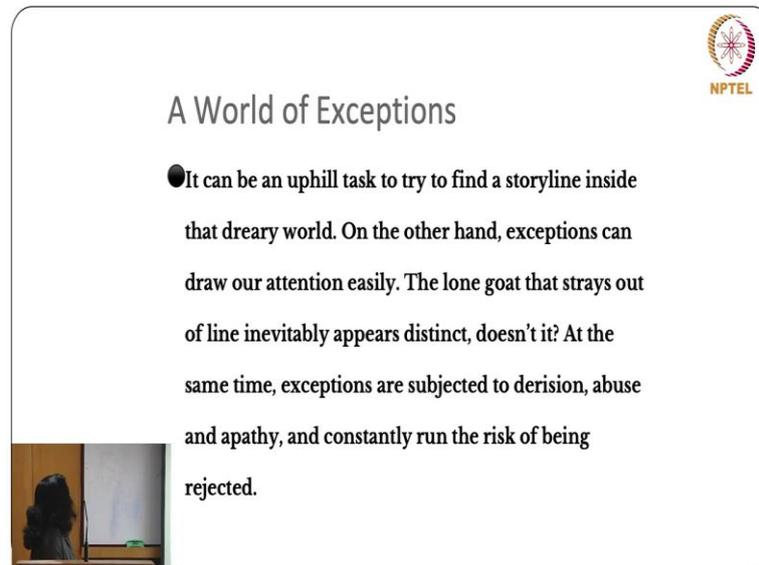


So he says I set aside the problem of form and started paying attention to the theme of the story. I realized all stories fall into one of the two categories. The first category focuses on the problems of living according to the rules of society, while the second concentrates on exceptions to these rules. Both strategies have their advantages and disadvantages. So this is Perumal Murugan's own unique way of distinguishing between two kinds of content, two kinds of concerns, or two kinds of subject matter. So its own peculiar way of differentiating.

So he says the first type of content, or subject matter, or concern will adhere, will stick to the rules of the society and the second will not. The second category would be made up of

exceptions, not the norm. And he is especially attracted to the latter than to the former. And you can sense that he is thinking always, already of One Part Woman as he is writing this brief theory of the short story.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:33)



**A World of Exceptions**

- It can be an uphill task to try to find a storyline inside that dreary world. On the other hand, exceptions can draw our attention easily. The lone goat that strays out of line inevitably appears distinct, doesn't it? At the same time, exceptions are subjected to derision, abuse and apathy, and constantly run the risk of being rejected.

The slide features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner and a small inset image in the bottom left corner showing a person standing at a whiteboard in a lecture hall.

“It can be an uphill task to try to find a storyline inside the dreary world,” that dreary world is a reference to the first kind of subject matter, which is about accepting the status quo, following the rules set by society. “On the other hand, exceptions can draw our attention easily. The lone goat that strays out of line inevitably appears distinct, doesn't it? At the same time, exceptions are subjected to derision, abuse and apathy, and constantly run the risk of being rejected.” So what is exceptional is attractive to a writer, he or she is automatically drawn to that. And he gives an example there, a figurative example there, the goat that strays out from the crowd is what is more interesting than the rest of the crowd.

And again, the idea of straying out, stray, deviating, that idea is recurrent. So if you look at Perumal Murugan's work, lots of his characters are strays in the sense that he is talking about here, they are exceptions. So he acknowledges that if you write about exceptions, you are subjected to ridicule, mockery and you will be abused, and then people might be indifferent, and you might run the risk of being rejected, people might not accept your writing or the writer. So you can see that he is kind of justifying the kind of writing that he does in this kind of short theoretical write up. Next one, please.

So, when I am reading all these excerpts, what strikes me foremost is the metaphor that he uses to talk about his theories. His theories might be simplistic, in some sense easily

understandable,. “Oh, yeah, we know this. This is how writers write.” But what attracts me the most is how he conveys the idea, the metaphor that he uses to convey the idea. So the metaphors are important because they capture the cultural codes in a capsule. You might want to think about the kind of courses that you do offer, the kind of parables that you offer, the kind of figurative examples that you offer, because therein lies the meaning, therein lies the psyche of the culture to which you are part of. It could be a very broad psyche or it could be a cultural psyche, which is peculiar or particular to a small community, but it is important to look at the metaphors. Sourav, what do you think? Can you compare such metaphors to the story that we are reading for this class?

Student: What are the metaphors?

Professor: You got to tell me because we are talking about metaphors, what are some of the key metaphors that come up in the story, ‘The man who could not sleep?’ And what does that metaphor tell us about the central character?

Student: So sleep, is one.

Professor: Yeah. Oh, can you specify? Just give one. It is a, yeah, sleep is an important concern.

Student: Towards the end also, they have a lot of. He is sleepless, there is his wife saying that, “Why are you slithering like a big snake in the bed?” So there are a lot of metaphors about his sleep. He could sleep in the beginning.

Professor: Yeah, we have similes, yes.

Student: (18:13)

Professor: Yeah, yeah

Student: (18:15)

Professor: Yeah, yeah that the two similes are very interesting, ‘Sleeping like a wretched corpse.’ And there I am interested in the adjective. The idea of being wretched, not just any corpse, that wretched corpse. And like a snake, so that simile is something which is very, very key to understanding his character. We will come back to that. Thank you for those examples.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:46)



## A World of Exceptions

- Talking about exceptions requires great courage. One false step, and the rules will turn up in their thousands like a giant swarm of ants and tear your flesh apart.
- Exceptions have the seductive power to make you forget yourself. Once we are trapped by the magic of their allure, we can no longer carve our own path. They will take us wherever they want. Everything we encounter along the way is bound to be new: new sights, new beings, new objects.



“ Talking about exceptions requires great courage. One false step, and the rules will turn up in the thousands like a giant swarm of ants and tear your flesh apart.” So here we have a very again, very raw simile here, like a giant swarm of ants. And this is evoked once again in the particular story, the swarm of ants crawling, not only on his body, but also metaphorically on his mind. So it is a very repetitive image and the impact is almost indescribable. How would you describe the feeling of a swarm of ants on your body? So that kind of emotion is evoked very, very easily, quickly by Perumal Murugan.

“Exceptions have the seductive power to make us forget yourself. Once we are trapped by the magic of their allure, we can no longer carve our own path. They will take this wherever they want. Everything we encounter along the way is bound to be new: new sights, new beings, new objects.” Firstly, he is talking about courage which leads the writer to write about exceptions. And secondly, he talks about the power of exceptions, the seductive power; choice of word again, very interesting. The subject matter itself becomes a very seductive feminine subject, which is drawing the writer down a particular way and you have no choice but to follow.

So that idea is interesting too, the seductive power. And once you are being tempted, you are just led along by the story. It reminds me of Nagamandala, the way the story tells this, the tale of Rani and Naga. It's as if the writer has no control but to be led. So here he is describing his narrative of exceptions as something, that he is helplessly doing it. So that creative impulse has a power of its own. So it's again, a very romantic notion of writing. Reminds me of all those romantic writers from The Western Canon, such as Coleridge, who says that, the creative impulse will suddenly break out in his mind and then he has to just pick up the pen and write, there is no control over what he writes.

So that's what he says, it is something similar here. Once an idea strikes you in relation to the exception, he is just completely, he completely surrenders himself to that creative impulse and goes with the flow. And all the sights that he encounters is new, new sights, new beings, new objects. Look at the spatial, this is a spatial version of that creative impulse. So he imagines his writing this (excepti-), writing of exceptions to be something like a journey that he takes down into a new spatial realm. So he spatializes this interesting, creative enterprise. He does all this; all of these comments are because of the controversies that arose out of *One Part Woman*.

So we can always sense in some ways that he is reacting to those controversies and even this passage, new sights, new beings, new objects has an echo with that novel. Towards the finale of the novel, we have the central character, Ponni, who is taking a stroll down the streets which is full of festival cheer on that night and she looks at the world anew, everything is new to her, all those sights, the people milling around, the carnival crowd. And this passage has an echo to that street scene as well. So you can see how much he is affected by that particular novel, which somehow figuratively tore him into pieces.