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Translation

Mother India

Mahasweta Devi (original author in Bengali)

&

Arun Pramanik (Trans.)

[Translated by Arun Pramanik from the Bengali Original *Standayini Ebong Annyanya Golpa*, Karuna Prakashani, 1997]

Mother India is eighty years, blackish-copper complexioned, curly small-haired. Every line of her face looks splitted like the visible mud on the banks of the river Ganga over which millions of earthworms have just moved after the ebb. Two hazy eyes look like the dead stars. Those two stars died long ago, yet they think that they are still shining as the earth pays no attention to them. A torn and tattered cloth wrapped twice on her back, and the end rounded on her neck.

Her name is Mother India. How many years ago when a cinema picture was frequently seen on the walls, and she used to sit on the footpath and only cry for days after days, nights after nights for her sons, then Sidhu told her, *Masi* you're Mother India. It was Sidhu who gave her a place in this footpath. It's to be fortunate enough to get a permanent place on Kolkata footpath. Every year those who come from the south can't manage such a place.

They float from one place to another for days after days. She got such a place only for Sidhu's grace. Sidhu said, I've called her *Masi*, so she must stay here. Sidhu is no more, he is dead. But before his death he bequeathed her the wood of his own packing box and the sackcloth tent.

Sidhu is not a son from her womb. Though he is not a son of her own, yet what he has given to her is not given even by her own sons.

At least a mere shade, space and the name too.

Sidhu even managed for her the means of getting rice. But she could not keep up that. She used to cook for four or five beggars like Sidhu. In the afternoon, she used to broom the marketplace and bring the cabbage leaves, spinach leaves, and the entrails of goats. By using three bricks as a furnace, she used to cook manna for these beggars. The mistress of the nearby building used to buy the begged-rice. She used to cook these in her house for the casual visitors of her relations. She did not know that her maid used to give Mother India salt, chillies etc. In exchange Mother India used to relief her from sciatica.

Mother India somehow could manage food then. But now for many years she can't. With the passing of time, the new beggars are now her neighbours. Now Fullwara cooks for them.

Now Mother India supplies dried cow dung. Feels terrible back pain to bring the dust from the timber yard. She mixes mud with the wood-dust, and makes them big charcoal balls. Now in the neighbouring houses, the people use these charcoal balls. Wood balls emit lesser smoke than cow dung balls.

Putting these handmade balls under the sunrays, and sitting on the throne of the packing box she keeps a close watch on these. The whole body feels burnt in hunger. Like a big scorched tree. In those far old lost childhood, she used to go with her *baul* father to offer *puja* to the Bonbibi. Crossing three fields and two canals. She could get to see a badly scorched peepul tree every year. In every rainy season, new branches began to sprout with fresh leaves. But in the summer days, the leaves became dried up.

The father used to say, the banyan and the peepul tress are god-like. That's why these don't die even when dying. This is really strange.

Her body gets burnt like that tree. In the fire of hunger. Yet when it gets wet by the memory-water, still so many memories of those ever-lost past begin to sprout.

When she gets lost on those memories, the lines of her face become blur, and she looks calm. By this time she does not know that she looks like the goddess Manasa. Like her she is still waiting for worship only with handful rice, cupful oil and a mere cloth to cover her nakedness. She is like her whom nobody understands, only drives away saying as unlucky and unadorable 'Go away, you ugly blind woman'. The people drive away – only drive away, that's why her begging for handful rice never ends.

Now her appearance looks stern. From those blurred eyes, tearless cries seem to come out. She had three sons, but everyone is lost from her. By whom? Still she does not know which mighty force has taken away them from her.

Is that a recent story? It seems so many decades when Shashi Dhara and his wife Patul went with their fellowmen to cultivate in the land acquired from the Manna family. Shashi Dhara's wife never accompanied them before. Her *baul* father did not allow her. He said, does anybody go there with the young ones? Besides, this is not right.

Why? Why not right?

Do you not know?

Like a hooded snake, Gagan Bauli looked at his son-in-law's face with his fierce and red eyes, and said,

Do you not know that this Golbadan Manna does not evict those people who were cultivating the lands in other places for eleven years? One gets right of the land after cultivating twelve years. That's why in the eleven year, they are kicked off. So these people are prior to claim the land. Would they leave you?

Knodding his head Shashi Dhara became silent with his helpless smile. But he did not give up his tenacity. He said, They have to get much pain to evict us. We have *babus* behind us.

But Shashi's words proved false. Uncultivated forest land leads to ferocity, strife and anger. Those who once succeed to capture the land, and begin to cultivate, and if they are evicted later from that land, their anger knows no bound. The people like Shashi are to fight long against these evicted people, and the other exploiters of the forest. Then a long bloody war filled the air followed by the smell of autumn rice. The evicted forest like the evicted people felt defeated and was forced to go back.

All those past still come to her memory. As though someone unties the canvas of the tale of Shashi Dhara and his wife for a moment before her eyes, and then rolls back. Shashi married and had a family. They had three babbling sons. Seeing their domestic life, Gagan Bauli said, My son, they would evict you after eleven years. You rather come and settle in my house.

The words proved true. When Sashi and his family were evicted, by that time Gagan Bauli has left this world.

The people like Shashi make the uncultivated forest land fertile, but when they are evicted in the eleven years, they usually fight. And this time Shashi fought too. In the struggle between scythe and gun, the people like Shashi usually die. This time it happened too. Being desperate, Shashi's wife too came out with the scythe. But she was taken to the jail. When released from the jail, she goes to the mother-in-law. The mother-in-law told, My son is dead. And your elder son too died with him. You can stay here. But it would create more trouble. The police would not leave you.

Shashi Dhara's wife then could understand that she is drifting by the full tide. It's like the swift tidal flow of the river Matla. During the high tide, the river merges into the sea. This tide of life took away the helpless woman, and threw her into the big world. But the struggle of the people like Shashi did not stop. That's why the policemen were frantically pursuing these criminals. So, Haran Samanta told her, Is there no place in this world? Not any place? Let's flee in the darkness of the night.

Many of them came to Kolkata. The old village man Haran took them to different places for a shelter. Once in how many places this Shashi Dhara's wife succeeded to capture the highland; how many paddy-fields of the fortune's favourites were filled with crops in the sowing of her own hands; how many days lowering her back for hours after hours, she used to plant in deep anger. In the days of the goddess Bipattarini, in the offering days of the Lotansasthi, Shashi Dhara's wife used to clean the paddy-fields in almost knee-dipped water. During the harvesting time of the Pous month filled in the chilly air of the Pous Lakshmi, she used to harvest the golden paddy crops, and fill others' farmyards – everything is now in the canvas of a village painter. Neglected. Disgraced. Blurred portraits after portraits.

It's now difficult to remember that how many times they became anxious in the fear of being driven out as soon as they could see the coming of the new farmers. But

when Shashi Dhara's wife tries to remember these repeated evictions, she is reminded with the days of those far-old childhood time. Her *baul* father is going to offer his prayer to *Bonbibi*. The mother-lost dark-complexioned daughter with him. The small boat moves slowly in the canal. The shades of the mangrove tree get reflected in the water. The girl could see how the grasshoppers took shelter on the floating leaves after leaves, and how the leaves gradually merge in to water as the boat passed leaving the grasshoppers in water. She can still remember the water's smell like the smelly fish-mixed dry earth wetted with rain water, and the smell of oil and tobacco of her father's body.

And she can remember the smell of cooked rice. The greed of this smell of cooked rice made Shashi Dhara's wife inhuman and wretched too. As Shashi Dhara told her when he left, Let me go. But you would never leave the scythe, they can do everything possible.

And that was the last time when Shashi put the scythe in his wife's hand and left with his eldest son. From then Shashi's wife does not leave the scythe. Before going to the jail, she put it in the leafy roof of her mother-in-law. As soon as she came out from the jail, she took out it.

Last time when Shashi Dhara's wife was evicted from the land, she came from Midnapore to Kolkata with the mere cloth in her attire, the scythe and her two growing sons. *Babus* brought them with the words, Come with us to join in the procession. Then Haran told, This is rather good *babu*. They said, Such are the flags, and the processions are like this. You would get bread, you would get money.

Does the procession take place every day?

Shashi Dhara's wife became scared. The procession does not take place every day, and they too don't get bread every day. But she did not like to return to her village although her sons tried to take her back. She said, Should I devour the saliva which I spat earlier? What do you have there?

What do you have here? Who are with you?

I can't float anymore, my sons. I would stay here.

What would you eat mother.

Whatever we would get to eat.

The sons said nothing after that. They are absolutely dependant on the mother. Shashi Dhara's wife brought up her sons in hungry and fierce love. The sons are still tied to her as they were tied once to the biblical cord. Such dependence of the grown up sons on the mother is very rare in this hard and floating life. Shashi's wife asked her sons once, At the end . . .

What mother?

Would you put Ganga water when I die? Here the whole city is on the river Ganga.

Still then they used to live at the corner of this footpath. Sidhu did not say them to stay there. He did not even give them shelter under his canopy. He did not even drive

away them. He told the other beggars, See. They are not permanent. Temporary. They would go away.

From there, they went to Behala Market. Shashi's wife used to clean spices in the spices-shops. The boys used to chop wood in the timber yard. Some people announced in mike, and took away them from there. The second son rushed to her, and gave six rupees in her hands. And told, Take this food mother. There is much uproar. Crowds of people are coming from elsewhere. We too are going.

Shashi's wife told, If the disturbance gets worse, then come back my sons. Don't get involved in any disturbance.

Do you think we would stay?

The portrait of her own son's departure from her for ever is still clear in the canvas of her mind. The mother stood on the bus road, and they sons were getting away from her with the smiling face and nodding their heads. Crowds of people on the road.

After that even before the sunset, everything is silent, and looked dumb-stuck like the moment after the death of Shashi Dhara when she tried to hide in the silent forest to avert the police with the acute pain in her heart like the labor-pain felt by a dumb-born woman.

At night some people rushed in the midst of the disturbance. Some gossiped about the firing, and how the farmers rushed aimlessly as they did not know the way, and how the people gheraoed the surroundings when the dead bodies were secretly removed away in cars. Nobody except the dogs could enter the place under the vigilance of the boot-wearing policemen. Huge disturbance.

Shashi's wife like others was not scared at the beginning. She too was in trouble because of her sons. She had to flee away like others from the vigilance of the approaching stick-holders and pursuing boot-wearers.

Her sons knew how to flee.

But the boys did never return. Does she herself not go in search of them? But there were only walls of the red-bricked houses towering to the sky. Nobody could give any news of Nirapada Dhara and Lakshindar Dhara.

Oh *babus*, all of you have returned, but where are my Nirapada, my Lakshindar?

Nobody could answer of her query. The *babus* then arranged another procession with the people like Shashi Dhara's wife. But in the midst of that procession, Shashi Dhara's wife somehow removed herself. She did not follow the path which the others followed. Rather she only howled in search of her sons, Oh Nirapodo, Oh, Lakshindo, why did you go my naughty sons? Thus she repeatedly slapped on her breast, and sometimes fell stumbled on the road.

The fleeting images of the canvas rapidly changed its shape like the deceptive Marichi. Being hopeful, Shashi Dhara's wife used to roundabout in the paths and the Maidan of the city like a tired dung-beetle which circles in bewilderment under the

extreme heat of the sun. Sometimes she remained busy to eat the leftovers of the marriage ceremony, sometimes she asked the passing air, Where are my two sons?

When someone said, Perhaps they are dead, Shashi Dhara's wife at once threatened them saying, I would pierce your body with the scythe. By that time she lost the scythe, although unknowingly. Her mental state became turbid as the blood-mixed mud. But when the words 'they are dead' reach to her ears, she became startled. Her *baul* father used to say, If you don't see anybody to die, then don't believe that the person is dead. As there was still doubt, she thought to tie the sanctified-chanted cloth in her home. As long as the cloth would last, there would be hope.

By this time one day Shashi Dhara's wife comes again on her way to the footpath of Sidhu and the fellow beggars. Sidhu recognized her at once. He said, Such is your condition?

Shashi Dhara's wife frowned and asked, Why?

You've become so. Where are your sons?

They are gone.

Sidhu gave her shelter. Shashi Dhar's wife then goes on begging satisfactorily. She used to put paises on her *anchhal* tied to the belly. She gave money to Sidhu. She did not even know why she gave him money. She could not later understand herself about her own conducts by that time. Then she began to bathe in the hydrant water. She began to eat, and thus one day she looked well. She again came back to her balanced state of mind. But in this intermediate time as she left her scythe, her cooking earthen-pot, her comb and napkin, she too left with these her uncontrollable anger, rage and tenacity too.

Sidhu said, The woman have become silent in extreme grief and anger.

The other beggars said, You are a woman and so angry you were?

Sidhu takes a puff in his *bidi* and said, one thing I have to say, She is no more temporary. She is permanent. And it's the duty of the permanent beggars to give shelter to the other permanent beggars. This is the law of the footpath.

Do you know really?

Besides she would take care of our household activities.

The other beggars became convinced. This is true that their belongings too are increasing day by day – cloth- sack- paper- boards – sandals – kerosin - wooden box.

They became quite ensured. Sidhu is giving her shelter with this selfish motif. If Sidhu told them that it's out of compassion that he has given her shelter, could they really believe him at all?

Sidhu again takes a puff from his *bidi*, and said, Do you see her appearance. Totally Mother India make up.

Sidhu said, Nulo cooks for us. But if you cook then he can go out for begging more and more.

The beggars cook once a day. Within few days, Shashi Dhara's wife became habituated with this. She herself took the charge of selling the alms of the beggars to the nearby building, and giving money to the beggars. Within few days she learnt to sweep the market, and to bring the rotten tomatoes, cabbage leaves, half-rotten potato and the entrails of goats. One day when Sidhu died, she entered into his sack- cloth roofed home. Nobody objected in that. Nobody even questioned whether he has the right or not.

Because within these few days, both sides of the river Ganga have been repaired and the C.M.D.A. has begun road work. The slogans on the walls, and the words on the wall of the crematorium become faded. So many days are passed now.

Entering into the home, she tied two rags of cloth on a bamboo blade.

You have entered into the new home. Would you not offer *Puja*? Thus Nulo said. He also said, Would we not get sweet?

She did not say anything. Her bauli father used to say, As long as you've hope, don't untie the cloth. It would work as a force. So long as you know one to be dead can return one day.

After knotting the rags of cloth she said, If anybody unties it, I would not spare to kill.

Why? What is there in it?

My sons' lives.

Would they return any more?

They would surely come. They would quench my thirst of getting Ganga water in my death-bed.

When Shashi Dhara's wife keeps close watch on the cow-dung balls under the sunrays, her life story hovers in her mind. Her mind is like the sun. In the life-sky of Shashi Dhara's wife, this sun has to reappear again. But now she can feel that her life is coming to an end. The brightness of her life-sun gradually moves to twilight. It slowly loses its heat.

Now her neighbours are the new beggars. They come back in the evening. Then Fullwara cooks for them. Fullwara wanders at the bus stand during the day. Sometimes she comes to Shashi's wife for medicine. This woman has gone astray, dirty too. She cannot tolerate the other women beggars. But this Fullwara tied a cord in Shashi's wife's hand, and a scrape in her neck after bathing naked in the hydrant water.

Today after putting the dried cow-dung balls in the basket, she said, Oh Fullwara, call Mokshada to take away these.

Would you not go?

I can't. My health is not well.

What are you telling. Today there is a burnt-offering in *babu's* house.

You go and eat there.

Fullwara became very surprised. The houses where Shashi's wife supplies cow-dung balls, on those houses she is surely invited during marriage, *sraddha*, in the ceremony of the wearing holy-thread and birthday too. And she would not attend in such invitations!

Fullwara asked why are you shivering?

Is it too cold today?

Who told you cold? Let me check your body.

Not much fever, yet the whole body shivers. She said, Fullwara you should rather take the cow dung balls today, and take money properly.

Would you eat sago and molasses?

Hush!

She pulls the curtain of her home. Lay down with folded body.

She keeps a small gap in the sack-clothed wall, and looks at the way. It's as though the salt water of a canal flows through her mind. And the mangrove leaves are falling one by one. Today she is trying to seat on a leaf again and again but whenever she tries to sit on the leaf, it floats away.

Her mind is trying to seat on how many leaves. A leaf reflects the image of excited and red-faced Shashi Dhara just before his last departure. That leaf moves away. Her bauli father says, don't untie the cloth, your uncle would surely return from the tiger's clutches. That leaf too goes away. There is huge torrent in the salty canal now. Santhal *daoals* of murshidabad are ready to cut the crops, but as they flee away with their children, their tree-leaves huts are burnt into ashes. But the sons say now, They would give us meal, give us money, we would return too. This leaf again and again comes back defying the flow of the river. She abuses them, and says, Remember, if you don't return, I would not get Ganga water.

She awakes in amazement. How strange! She did not say these to her sons. She only said, If the disturbance gets worse, then come back my sons. My sons, don't get involved in any disturbance.

Fullwara lights the lantern before leaving.

As she lies on the bed then and there, never rises up. The next day the sun rises. It is gradually becoming bright. After the whole night revelry, Fullwara on her way to bathe rises the curtain and asks, O Masi, are you not well today too.

Then as she bends down, she comes to realize everything.

The beggars of the footpath, and the maid servants on their way shake her head. Sidhu used to call her Mother India. But she is surely from a fortunate and good family. She falls ill and dies in silence. Pointing her thin fingers to the tied cloths. A mere

footpath beggar does not die such. The wealthy people die such suddenly. *Masi* is perhaps from such a wealthy family.

Police brought a carrier for her funeral. She was cremated at the government cost. Before picking up the body by the *dom*, Fullwara and the beggars lifted the body to the van.

Fullwara asked where are you going to burn the body?

The other beggars said, Why are you asking?

The woman longed for Ganga water, but her sons are missing. Would they give her Ganga water in the cremation ground?

Suddenly Fullwara feels deep grief for *Masi*. As she is crying, she can't see the van to take away the body, and the legs of the Mother India lay flat in the open gate. She is going to be cremated as an unclaimed body. And Mother India could not see how a few beggars and a prostitute being grief-stricken on her death are performing 'no work' and desecration.

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