

## MA READS

Translated by Ira Raja from the Hindi original, '*Ma Padhti Hai*' by S.R. Harnot, *Hans* (New Delhi: Akshar Prakashan, April 2002): pp 52-54.

I have gone to the village after many months. Ma lives there all by herself. The door of the house is ajar this morning. On most days Ma is up early and out of the house, the door shut behind her, doing outside chores. Her mornings are spent in the cowshed, feeding and watering the animals, milking the cows, throwing dung.

Even now Ma's not inside. I have walked into her room. The first rays of the morning sun fall in her room. Today, I am here with the rays. As intimate as her room seems, it also looks a little forlorn. But it's crammed with all kinds of things—in the same way as it is with the morning light. The wooden ceiling above has cobwebs hanging from it—a few flies caught dead in them. The walls are in a similar state—layers of cobwebs and dead insects pressed against them.

There are things scattered everywhere. Nothing is in its proper place. On the right side of the door, as you walk in, there is a clay pot for churning milk, covered with a dirty cloth. Ma must bring it here after she's done with the churning, next to the hearth. On the left side is a basket stuffed with unspun sheep wool. A few wads of wool sit on top of its pressed layers. A spindle is lying on the side. Date leaves are strewn in one corner and amongst them lie a few mats made from plaited date leaves. An old, small table, with a TV on it, is placed in another corner. Right next to the pillow is a canister with a shabby cover thrown over it, and a telephone on top. Insects have totally taken over the electric bulb. It's all discoloured.

From the wall, above the bed, hangs a strip of wood holding an oil lamp. A long line of soot travels all the way up to the ceiling. Ma probably lights it when there is a power-cut. There's the smell of *bidi* hanging in the room.<sup>1</sup> I look under the cot and find lots of bits and

---

<sup>1</sup> A type of cheap cigarette made from unprocessed tobacco wrapped in a leaf.

pieces scattered there as well—half-smoked *bidi* butts and burnt matchsticks. There's dried *anardana*<sup>2</sup> on a date board. A few gooseberries. Some walnuts. Five ripe, unpeeled cobs of corn tied together—the first corn from the harvest, perhaps saved for the deity. Several bundles carrying a variety of dahls . . . All these things live with Ma. They are linked to her; her friends and companions. Only I sit here amongst them like a stranger. They look at me as if they are trying to place me. At times I wonder if they are mocking me. Ma . . . home . . . courtyard . . . gate . . . fields . . . granary . . . land . . . property . . . they are all mine but how far away I have come from them! The sun has drifted beyond the edge of the terrace. The rays have gathered themselves up and edged into the courtyard, drawing away the light from the room . . . I can sense the darkness in this hour of the morning. It's much darker within me though, than it is without. Even though I am in Ma's room, sitting on her bed, soaking in the fragrance of her love, the sense of living away from home for years keeps that love from reaching me!

I don't even remember that I am carrying a 'packet'<sup>3</sup> of books in my hands. I have brought these as a present for Ma. To this day I have not given her a single book I've published. Nor have I been able to invite her to any of the release functions. Whenever a new book arrived, I had it launched by the Governor or the Chief Minister of the State, knowing fully well these people had nothing to do with literature. Exactly the way those who shout from platforms slogans about abolishing poverty have nothing to do with the poor. Or those writers, for that matter, whose pages exude the sweet smell of rural life but who have little to do with the dung and earth of the village itself. That is, an apparition, a false display. Or shall we say, it's like setting one's house on fire in order to watch the spectacle.

It wasn't as if I didn't want to invite Ma. Or that her memory wasn't constantly with me. But several fears had lodged themselves in my heart. I felt that the times had changed. How would Ma 'adjust'<sup>4</sup> amongst these big people!

To begin with, even her getting on to a bus is akin to inviting trouble. She'll start feeling sick right away. Will start vomiting. On finding some relief from that, she'll pull out a *bidi* and matchbox from

---

<sup>2</sup> Pomegranate seeds.

<sup>3</sup> Appears in English in the original.

<sup>4</sup> Appears in English in the original.

her pocket, light it deftly under cover of her shawl and begin to smoke. A few puffs, and she'll start coughing so badly you'd think she was drawing her last breath.

If somehow or other she manages to reach the ceremony she'll be under constant scrutiny from the other guests. Her crumpled clothes, her plastic shoes will draw sneering looks. And the whole time there will be the smell of *bidi* on her breath. Her hair would be in a mess. Even though she'll keep her head covered with a shawl, strands of gray hair will hang untidily down, blades of grass and dry leaves caught in them. As soon as people find out my 'mother'<sup>5</sup> has come they'll approach her to offer their congratulations. They would want to talk to her. Some may ask her questions. Writers and journalist friends will of course seek information. I can't imagine how Ma would speak. She might say something quite foolish. And everything will be ruined if she gets a coughing fit in the middle of the conversation. And then if she feels the urge to smoke, she'll promptly light a *bidi* and start to smoke right there. When tea and refreshments are served she will obviously not be able to eat with a fork and knife. Everyone's attention will be drawn to her hands. Cutting grass, throwing dung, churning milk, chopping wood, baking rotis, her hands will be full of cracks . . . and they will also smell of cowdung and mud . . . people may not say anything to my face but they are bound to gossip . . . this is the mother of the great writer—utterly ill bred. . . . and even if I put up with all this, I'd still have to deal with harsh words from my children.

**L**ost in these thoughts, I lie down on Ma's bed. I feel my childhood returning. As if I am resting in Ma's lap . . . she is cradling me to sleep . . . it's been years since I have felt such love and comfort. My heart says I should lie still . . . never to rise.

I am surprised at myself that there is a village in my works, the whole gamut of village life, poor people, fields and granaries. And Ma. Her love . . . but I have come a long way from those certainties . . . a long, long way . . . Lying on Ma's bed, I start to search for the writer within me . . . but he's not to be found. He has many faces. And perhaps those faces are hidden behind a string of masks. To enhance my stature in an urban milieu and 'elite society'<sup>6</sup> . . . *to make a name for myself . . . to earn kudos from people . . .* But that achievement, honestly, has no relation to my true self. Unconsciously, my hand

---

<sup>5</sup> Appears in English in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Appears in English in the original.

reaches for the books lying on the side. The touch conveys me once again to the peak of my success. . . . So what if I didn't invite Ma . . . It's okay. Everything's okay. We are living in the twenty-first century. Why, then should we carry the burden of past traditions on our shoulders? Hills and villages, cowdung and earth, fields and granaries look good on the back of the printed page. In real life they are hell, they are . . . ? . . . And all said and done, I have come here to honour Ma! There are writers these days who have either split from their parents or handed them over to old age homes . . . I'll place these books at Ma's feet and seek her blessings . . . I will repent. She'll be happy to see what a great man her son's become? He's a writer . . . these books appear to bolster my ego even further.

I am caught up in these thoughts when my hand falls on Ma's pillow. I sense something hard underneath. Still lying on my back, I stretch my right hand to reach under the pillow. I am startled. I rise hurriedly and push the pillow to one side. It looks like a book. I pull it out and I am stunned by what I see. My eyes sink deeper into its covers. My breathing becomes laboured. As if all the blood in my body has frozen in the veins . . . This is *my* book. Like a madman I start to pull away the layers of raggedy linen next to the pillow and drag out all the books buried beneath . . . they are all mine. For a moment I wonder if these are the books I had brought with me, accidentally placed here next to the pillow. But my 'packet' is untouched. It's still with me. The copies by the pillow are Ma's own.

I take the first book in my hands. I turn the pages. Pressed between them are blades of grass, butterfly wings.

When Ma goes out to cut grass, she must sit there leafing through the pages of this book.

I pick up the second book. It carries the sweet smell of mustard flowers . . . I flip through and find yellow flowers stuck in places. There's also an occasional sprig of wheat in there.

When Ma goes to the fields to pick greens, she must sit there and turn its pages.

Now I pick up the third book. It's a novel I wrote. The fragrance of *Raat ki Rani* starts to fill the room. Suddenly, my eyes drift across the courtyard and I spot the plant. How tall it's grown! Its branches are spread in all directions. My mind wanders to the past. Summer nights, awash with the light of the moon, often saw Ma haul me on to her lap and tell me stories . . . Flowers from the *Raat ki Rani* are preserved between the pages.

Ma must sit under its shade and read this book on moonlit nights.

The fourth book is immersed in the smell of buttermilk and flour. The pages carry the impressions of fingers still sticky from dough. In places words have become illegible from butter grease.

Ma must look upon it while cooking rotis or churning milk.

The fifth book is now in my hands. Its pages have the whiff of the dark about them, the smell of *bidi* seeped inside. I observe the pages, turn them over. The words have dissolved and disappeared in places. In between is the residue of ash from a lit *bidi*. A dead firefly is stuck at one place.

. . . perhaps Ma holds it in her hands on a moonless night and reads. Perhaps, remembering me, she cries a little and then sits up, late in the night, smoking.

Now I drag the sixth book from under the pillow. I feel restless. I start to lose my calm. Beads of sweat form on my forehead. This book has several pictures of my father too. There's either Ma or myself in them. Ma must share her writer son's success with his father in her memories.

I put this to one side and start searching the pillow again. In the folds of the bed I find yet another book. I take it out. This is my seventh book. My surprise knows no bounds. This is the new book that was launched only a week ago. Its pages smell of cowdung. Impressions of dung-stained hands are left here and there. Strands of white sheep wool are stuck in a few places. Ma must sit in the cowshed, amongst the animals, and look at it.

My eyes are streaming. I can't remember having cried as much in my life before. As if this wealth, status and arrogance inside me were raining down on Ma's bed. Like a wretched bed-bug I feel I am sinking and drowning in its layers. Every pore of my body is filled with shock and shame. My head is falling between my legs. In spite of my pathetic state there is some comfort that I draw from crying which prevents me from sinking any lower. It seems as if all the objects in Ma's room are pouring their love into me, helping me regain my composure. I steady myself. Surprisingly, my heart feels lighter. Just as in my childhood, crying for some object, I'd drop off to sleep in Ma's lap and wake up without a trace of grief remaining.

Suddenly a voice breaks the silence.

'Dadi! Dadi!<sup>7</sup> . . . Newspaper'.

---

<sup>7</sup> Paternal grandmother.

Ma is throwing cowdung. On hearing the voice, she promptly drops the basket and grabs the newspaper from the hands of the postman. I get up from the bed and look out from behind the door. He is Amar Singh Postman. His house is not far from our own. He visits Ma regularly.

Everything is becoming clearer. Ma is looking at the newspaper. And the postman is pointing something to her in its centerfold. Ma carries the newspaper inside and puts it down somewhere in the cowshed, and starts to throw dung as before.

I begin to assemble the books spread on Ma's bed and place them by her pillow. With my 'packet' of books in hand I walk out. I feel I am carrying a huge burden on my head. I feel ridiculed by all that is within me.

Having finished all her outdoor chores Ma is now about to step inside . . . I slip out, softly like a cat.

*Ira Raja*  
New Delhi  
India