

Bhisham Sahni is easily one of the most outstanding of contemporary Hindi writers. He is also one of those rare geniuses who can confidently manage genres as varied as social criticism, drama and fiction. Winner of several prestigious awards for his fiction, Sahni has had many works translated into a number of Indian and foreign languages. In some ways he is a key figure in Hindi literature to have exemplified the rich resources inherent in the tradition begun by Premchand — humanistic, compassionate, and responsive to the needs of a poor society like ours. Sahni was invited in 1993 to the Indian Institute of Advanced Study as its Writer-in-Residence. The following conversation took place on 18 November 1994 in his study at the Institute.

Vijaya Ramaswamy (VR): Which of your works do you consider women-centred and why?

Bhisham Sahni (BS): There are women characters in all my novels but then other characters are also present. I have not tried to specially portray women characters. But the play *Madhavi* and the novel *Basanti* are centred around female characters and their fortunes and may therefore be regarded as more important from the point of view of women's emancipation.

VR: Please say something about the earliest women in your life: mother, sister, or others. Do they find a place in your fiction? Do they figure partially or as whole characters?

BS: Except Madhavi, who is from the Mahabharata, my female characters have been taken from life. I have then worked on them. As the play or novel proceeds the writer becomes more and more free to treat and develop them as he likes. The characters begin to evolve and do not remain confined to their original circumstances. For instance, Basanti was modelled after a girl who used to work in our house. She had many of the characteristics which find their way into the fictional Basanti. She was playful, restless, bold, adventurous. Basanti has these same qualities, but when the plot is woven many other things are introduced into it by the author — her husband's or father's character, for instance. But in its essentials her character retains the qualities of the original. Of all my women characters Basanti remains closest to the original.

VR: In your writings women characters appear stronger than the men.

BS: Not necessarily. My novels

Situating Women: A Conversation with Bhisham Sahni

VIJAYA RAMASWAMY

do not confine themselves to the man-woman relationship. Other factors are also there. My intention is not to make either one superior or inferior to the other.

VR: A characteristic of your fiction seems to be the valorisation of the qualities of long-suffering endurance, patience and love in your women — Kunto, Madhavi and others. But has not this self-effacement been the major factor responsible for their exploitation by men, by Jaidev in *Kunto*, Ghalav in *Madhavi* and Deenu in *Basanti*?

BS: I would agree. Women's finest qualities — Madhavi's trustfulness and sincerity, for instance — are exploited by Ghalav. But Jaidev does not have an axe to grind, he does not aspire for something for himself. He may not be a strong person but he has a conscience. He marries Kunto and holds her in great regard but is not able to overcome his attraction to Sushma. Hence his vacillation. Although he is faithful to Kunto he cannot break away from Sushma. If he arranges her marriage with Girish, it is to ensure her happiness, and after that he does not intrude upon her. It is only when Girish leaves Sushma that he ventures to meet her, and that too because he thinks her to be suffering. Jaidev is decent enough not to play with either of them.

VR: An articulate female victim still remains a victim. She is very much the object of patriarchal use and abuse as in Madhavi or Basanti. Would you comment?

BS: Yes, both are very articulate. But when a woman loves, she begins to cling to the man, begins to have unquestioning faith in him. Perhaps a woman's nature is such that she relies on the person she loves. Yayati (Madhavi's father) gives her the first shock when he gives her away to Ghalav. Her second shock comes when Madhavi has her first child and is separated from it. She has to leave it with the king with whom she has spent a year and she realizes that Ghalav is indifferent to her suffering. She finds that Ghalav is already thinking of the next king with whom she would have to live. Despite this she is consistent in her resolve to help Ghalav fulfil his vow of *gurudakshina*. Ghalav always talks of his own

problems and dissatisfactions and pays little attention to her very trying situation. This continues till the end. Even when Madhavi says goodbye to Ghalav she does not wish him ill, though she is disillusioned totally with the man and sees through his deceptive utterances. She nevertheless quietly walks out of his life instead of trying to teach him a lesson or to take revenge. It reflects the generosity and liberality of her mind, her thinking that the person she is leaving behind is one whom she has loved deeply; she wishes him well.

VR: Why is it that your most admirable and lovable characters — Rukmini in *Maiyadas ki Mari*, Jasbir Kaur in *Tamas* or Kunto in *Kunto* — have to die in order to be valorised? This seems to be part of the Sita syndrome.

BS: No, it is not. It appeared to be more logical and satisfying to have them die. It is not really the wish of the writer but the force of circumstances. All these three characters were taken from true-to-life situations in which all three of them had actually ultimately died. It is true that after Rukmini's death I had begun to ask myself whether I had done the right thing. I would have liked to take her story forward. Even after the publication of the book I wanted to add a chapter, to make her live longer, to show her involved in activities relating to her teaching work and her husband. To me also her disappearance seemed very abrupt.

VR: Would you regard the heroine of *Kadiyan*, *Promila*, and to some extent also *Basanti*, as women characters who get out of the 'victim' situation?

BS: In *Kadiyan* the girl breaks away from her husband and decides to stand on her own. In this case the girl is weak in the beginning but through suffering regains her confidence and achieves a sense of personal dignity. Her initial weakness was because of her middle-class upbringing, a family atmosphere which did not give her much self-confidence. But Basanti is a resolute character right from the beginning. She shows more initiative because she has had a rough life. In *Kadiyan* the girl realizes her self through suffering.

VR: This is a somewhat tricky question. Feminists believe that it is

difficult for a male writer to get inside his female characters. As a woman reader I have felt that in your portrayal of both Basanti and Madhavi you speak in a woman's voice and not in a male voice coming through a woman. But this ability to get under a woman's skin, as it were, is absent somewhat in Kunto or in the depiction of her sister-in-law Thul Thul. How successful do you regard yourself in getting inside your women characters?

BS: Ultimately it is the imaginative sympathy of the writer, whether male or female, which counts. In a man's life woman always holds a special place, whether he exploits her or not. He is drawn irresistibly not only in the biological sense but because it is innate in his character: he is drawn by her beauty, her tenderness. This is very natural. So far as experiences go every child brought up by his mother begins to understand her quite intimately. The rest is imaginative sympathy. A man can admire another man but the kind of soft corner he has for a woman is unique. So far as doing justice to a woman character is concerned, the repression to which she is subjected in our social life is also very obvious. Not that women have not practised high-handedness, but on the whole in a male-dominated society woman is at the mercy of man's whims, dependent on him, the result of laws operating in a patriarchal society. I have seen cases of women who undeservedly suffered at the hands of men. All these influences help a writer to portray women within the framework of a patriarchal society. As to how much one is able to get under her skin and understand a woman's psychology — well, as you write and as you identify with the character, the character begins to reveal itself to you. For instance, take Rukmini. I merely placed her in that situation in which she is cruelly married off to an invalid. I believe it was Rukmini who was asserting her individuality after that. I had not drawn this character from my own life: it was my mother who told me her story.

VR: A brief question on Thul Thul — portrayed as an uncouth, uninteresting, illiterate woman. Did you intend to portray a pitiable object of contempt and scorn or a deeply wronged woman?

BS: Firstly, I have taken this character from life. Secondly, if her husband finds himself in a dilemma it is to some extent justified. Why? He

Towards the end of the 1960s the Indian Institute of Advanced Study organized a seminar on the tribal situation in India. The proceedings were subsequently edited by Dr K.S. Singh, the distinguished scholar and administrator. As the volume encompassed the whole gamut of tribal problems at both regional and national levels, an entire generation of concerned researchers, administrators and activists have had repeated dialogue with its contents. It continues to be in demand and has already gone through three reprints. The overall thrust of the volume, with a couple of exceptions, was to grasp the tribal economies, cultures, politics, policies and administration so as to formulate such integrated social and economic development strategies as would eventually integrate the tribal peoples into the national 'mainstream' and thereby consolidate the Indian nation-state.

In late 1991, after nearly a quarter century, the IIAS aptly decided to review achievements and failures and

The Tribal Predicament

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persisting and emerging issues in the tribal scenario through another seminar. The book under review contains around forty papers presented at that seminar. Although it covers as broad a range as did the earlier volume—and, indeed, incorporates a couple of new dimensions—a shift of emphasis and focus can be discerned. The assumed universal model of development/modernization and the notion of nation-building through cultural integration are transformed by the perspective of the compatibility of diverse cultural practices with a multiplicity of models of socio-cultural development. Perhaps this reflects changing theoretical

and ideological perspectives on the one hand and, on the other, a growing realization that tribal scholarship has immense potential to contribute to overcoming environmental, cultural and cognitive crises. Besides, as Dr Singh indicates, there is a change from the perspective of tribal homogeneity and regional specificity to a complex differentiated and stratified tribal scenario. The shifts, however, should not be construed as any radical departure. There is in fact a conspicuous continuity in tribal studies.

In their recapitulation of the diversification of tribal studies in India, one would have expected the editors of the present seminar

proceedings to also acknowledge the limited theoretical and methodological developments of the last couple of decades. Being oblivious to the fact that no leading discourse or practical implications have emerged, despite India's having the second largest number of anthropologists in the world and its immense ethnic diversity, will certainly prevent us from engaging in any earnest academic or activist enterprise. At the same time some of the classical methods of intensive fieldwork are degenerating into insensitive, quick and crude quantification and statistical jugglery. With honourable exceptions, tribal researchers are so alienated that they have never lobbied for nor endorsed the genuine assertions and struggles of the tribal peoples. Conceivably this is the critical reason for the near-stagnation in tribal research.

The optimism of the past exercise and the recognition of tribal and

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had fallen in love with a beautiful, accomplished and highly educated girl but was being forced to live with a girl who was physically clumsy, virtually illiterate and who had very few personal charms to boast of. But she was brought up in a traditional family. She was always looking up to her husband to give her his attention, to find accommodation in his heart. I wanted to show the contrast between the two girls and place this boy in a natural situation—rather, convincing. Thul Thul is a secondary character. She meets with a rather painful end, does not assert herself. Being placed in a joint family she at least has a corner to live in, her situation is somewhat similar to that of her eldest sister-in-law whose husband has gone off to Germany.

VR: This combination of gender and class oppression in Basanti is very interesting indeed. Where does your emphasis lie—on structural inequalities or on gender oppression or both? Would you acknowledge the influence of Premchand or Yashpal or any other writer on your handling of such themes? Or is it due to your own radical left leanings?

BS: So far as influences go, they remain in the subconscious; and if you look at it from the angle of class conflict, Basanti belongs to the exploited class. The impression people get is

because of my Marxist outlook but this is not deliberately done. Once you pick up a character from amongst the poor people, naturally the entire treatment has to be viewed in the context of the struggle of her class also. I have picked her up from the street—from the migrant labourers. She belongs to that class. Her struggle is partly the struggle of that class as such. But the novel does not merely portray class struggle. It portrays a woman from that class struggling for survival, building her future. She imbibes the qualities of that class—endurance, courage, and such initiative as that class has. I picked her up from that *basti* taking into account her peculiar personal situation.

VR: I would like you to take these two questions together. Do the problems of morality in Basanti have anything to do with a diasporic situation—the shifting, uncertain future of migrant labour in big cities? Secondly, Basanti seems to posit a difference between male and female notions of morality. Take Basanti's insistence on observing the forms of marriage with Deenu while his silence is proof of his dishonest intentions. In fact a gendered notion of morality seems to stretch through many of your novels. Would you comment?

BS: Poor people do not have the middle-class kind of prudery so far as morals are concerned. But Basanti's moral attitude differs from Deenu's.

Basanti's insistence on having a proper marriage is perhaps a universal weakness in every woman. She feels psychologically secure if she is properly married, the result of ages-long belief in a proper marriage ceremony. Men, whether of the middle class or otherwise, do not give as much importance to the ceremony part as women do. There are other traditional influences also upon Basanti. She had been living in a compact family. She would not like to live a wayward, rudderless life with Deenu. So it is not a question of morality so much as one of physical, personal and psychological security for the woman.

VR: The influence of TV and the media on the working classes is a significant motif in Basanti. Basanti exists simultaneously in a harshly realistic world and also in a make-believe world of film heroes and heroines. This is also true of the heroine of your short story, "Radha Anuradha." Where would you place Basanti—a movie-smitten teenager or a realist?

BS: You are very right. Radha was another girl from the same *basti*, though less of a fighter than Basanti.

VR: This pertains to the accommodative spirit in your heroines—Basanti in relation to Rukmi, Kunto in relation to Sushma, etc. Would you regard this as a sign of weakness, a compromise with the inevitable or their magnanimity?

BS: It is because they love their men so intensely. It is for their men's happiness. So it is both. Inwardly the woman may be resentful. She may feel that the person she loves does not belong to her totally. Also, Deenu is an unreliable kind of person. There's very little consistency about him.

VR: Finally, would you regard yourself as a feminist writer? And whom would you rate the greatest among the Hindi novelists writing about women?

BS: I do not regard myself as a feminist writer. I think that in people whose writing is socially oriented, attention is bound to go towards the injustice being done to women. I liked Yashpal's *Divya*. I translated it into English. I also translated a few short stories of his. He wanted me to translate *Divya*. Marxism enables one to fix the individual in a social context. Why, even earlier, Bharatendu and Premchand adopted a social perspective in their writings, although Premchand till 1925-26 was Gandhian, not Marxist. Sharatchandra was not a Marxist but he dealt very sympathetically with women. With Marxism this crystallizes into an awareness of class and gender conflicts.

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