

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

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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