

Khandahar: The Ruins

by
Bhisham Sahni

Translated from the Hindi with an Introduction

by
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Bhisham Sahni (1915-2003) was a distinguished Hindi writer, playwright, translator and actor, best known for *Tamas* (The Darkness), the thought-provoking Partition novel for which he was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi (the Academy of letters) Award in 1976. He was associated with the All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA)¹ whose contribution to Indian intellectualism and political activism peaked from 1936 until the late 1940's. As a writer of short fiction he, along with Amarkant, Markandeya and Shekhar Joshi, wrote with emphasis on social realism in the manner of the grand master of Hindi fiction, Premchand. He was also associated with the 'New Story' movement² in India, writing as he was during the 1950's, though he did not much appreciate New Story's concern with the exploration of experiential inner reality, choosing instead to depict realities and sensibilities in a much larger social context. In his autobiography, *Aaj Ke Ateet* (2003), he recollects: "I was never able to understand the finer nuances of the 'New Story Movement'." (177) "For me it was enough to identify the "story-ness" in the story and appreciate that it reflected the truth of life and was authentic, natural and realistic." (210) A few pages later he says, "It was becoming difficult for me to define 'New Story'. I could grasp some of its elements but I did not think that they were the attributes of 'New Story' only." (212) He wrote seven novels and his short stories, published in nine collections, number over a hundred. He edited the literary journal *Nai Kahaniyan* from 1965 to 1967, and penned a biography of his brother, the actor and writer Balraj Sahni. Many of his books have been translated into major Indian and foreign languages.

Written in Sahni's unique language and style, the present story "Khandahar: The Ruins" from his short story collection *Wangchu* (1996), is one of his many Kashmir stories and does not exactly fall into the category of progressive-realist fiction; rather, it comes closer to the tenets of "New Story". Nostalgia for the childhood home left behind in Kashmir forms the crux of the story. The sight, sound, smell of the streets, of loving and living in an extended family arrive like a flood of memories and overwhelm the narrator who has returned to Kashmir on a visit with his friends. The story is autobiographical to a great extent, especially because of its Kashmiri setting and

¹ Later called Progressive Writers Association (PWA). Progressive literature is characterized by the belief that "literature is an instrument of fundamental transformation". The Progressive writers were concerned with the actualities of life and reflected the problems and issues of contemporary society. For further details, see Coppola 1988, 1-41.

²The New Story or 'Nai Kahani' became the representative modernist form, and the appropriate vehicle for the contemporary concerns of the creative writers at this time. In the 'Nai Kahani', action was basically centred on the consciousness of the central character, his frustrations, lack of communication with others, and the feeling of loneliness. (Bodhprakash 5: 35).

atmosphere. Sahni's childhood was spent mostly in Rawalpindi, now in Pakistan, and he had fond memories of Kashmir which fascinated him and influenced his writing. The reason is obvious. In his autobiography, he reminisces that when the harsh winter set in Kashmir, enveloping the Valley in snow, his cousins would come down to Rawalpindi and it would be the most eagerly awaited and the most exciting time of the year. To little Bhisham, or Mattu as they called him, all the fair complexioned female cousins from Kashmir looked like fairies from the heaven which nestled somewhere in the blue mountains. They would take pride in talking about their lives in Kashmir: how they drank salted *kahwa*³ with *bakarkhanis*⁴ dipped in it, kept themselves warm with their *kangaris*, and rode in *shikaras* during the summers. Bhisham would sit mesmerized through their evocative descriptions of the frozen lake and the snow fall, the *samovar* and *bukhari*, the *shikara* and the *kashti*, and the beautiful flowering season of the saffron plant known as *shagufa* - all these details made Kashmir an exotic land or "Neelam Desh", a veritable Shangri-la (51-53). The characters in the story are simple, life-like but fictionalized recreations of the members of his extended family. The sorrowful songs that the narrator's mother often sang, his joyful sisters who played around drawing marks on the doors and windows with chalk, the untimely death of a sister, have their equivalents in the author's own life. Even the narrator of the story seems to be modelled on the writer himself.

The present story is marked for its sensitive and sympathetic treatment of the theme that human relations do not matter much in a materialistic world. Time moves back and forth, homecoming turns sad, memory takes hold, echoes rebound, and silences deepen only to be counterbalanced by the joyfulness of Sharat and Rachna. The latter pair's delight in the archaeological remains of temples and monuments is juxtaposed with the narrator's nostalgic remembrance of his old childhood home, now forgotten and abandoned, and of the ruined life of his aunt (Choti Bua). But what a contrast! In fact, like Nirmal Verma, Sahni resurrects the past in this story through accidental and involuntary memory, recalling a very Proustian⁵ conception of life in the mingling of the past and the present.

³ A traditional green tea consumed in Kashmir made by boiling green leaves with aromatic herbs like saffron, cinnamon and cardamom. It is served with sugar or honey and crushed nuts usually almonds or walnuts.

⁴ Kashmiri *bakarkhani* is a thick spiced crisp and layered flat bread sprinkled with sesame seeds and consumed hot during breakfast

⁵ As a way in which to explore such moments in Bhisham Sahni's short fiction, I have referred here to the Proustian "privileged moment" in which a madeleine causes Marcel, the narrator, or Proust, the author, to experience childhood memories of his (imagined) village, Combray, where on Sunday mornings his aunt would dip the madeleine in her own cup of tea and offer it to him. The sudden burst of memory generated by a taste of the madeleine dunked in tea has become one of most famous metaphors in French literature.

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Khandahar: The Ruins

On our visit to Kashmir we did not head straight to Srinagar. As Sharat is passionate about ancient temples and monuments⁶, we first looked around the Valley and visited the ruins of the Martand⁷ and Avantipur⁸ temples. Sharat had read *Rājatarangīnī*⁹ and was well versed in archaeology. Deeply fascinated with the art and history of antiquity, he observed each and every object with awe and wonder. He saw the past in the relics of Kashmir. Even the garments that the Kashmiris wear carried the stamp of the ancient Greeks, and in their speech he heard echoes of different languages. Behind every image of the present peered the hoary past. When we came to the Martand Temple, what stood

⁶ Since early times, Kashmir has been a renowned centre of Brahmanical and Buddhist philosophy. It is also well-known for the development of Tantric Saivism, through the work of, for example, the 10th century philosopher and aesthetician, Abhinavagupta. The Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism also flourished there.

⁷ One of the important archaeological sites of Kashmir, the majestic Martand (Sun) Temple was built by the king of Karkota Dynasty, Lalitaditya Mukatapida, in the eight century A.D. The architecture of the temple blended the Gandharan, Gupta, Chinese, Roman, Syrian-Byzantine and Greek styles. It had a colonnaded courtyard, with a shrine in its centre, which was 220 feet long and 142 feet broad. It was surrounded by 84 small shrines. Except for the colossal 13th century Sun Temple at Konark in Orissa, this was the largest temple dedicated to the sun in India. It was also the largest Brahmanical temple in Kashmir. The temple was destroyed by Sikandar Butshikan in the early 15th century.

⁸ The two temples at Avantipur were built by King Avantivarman and date back to the 9th century C.E. They are dedicated to Shiva (the Avantipura temple) and Vishnu (the Avantiswami temple). The Shiva temple has been renovated and is used, while the Avantiswami temple is in ruins. The Avantipur temples and the Martand Temple are an attraction for people interested in history and archaeology. Their style is unique, being heavily influenced by the Buddhist Gandhara school of art, which in turn was influenced by Greek and Hellenistic art and architecture.

⁹ *Rajatarangini* ('River of Kings') is a historical chronicle of early India, written in Sanskrit verse by the Kashmiri Brahmin Kalhana in 1148. It covers the history of the Kashmir region from the earliest times to the date of its composition.

before us was merely its skeletal remains – damaged and dilapidated, but for Sharat, it was not a temple in ruins but a whole, magnificent structure, intact and in one piece. It looked as though he visualized everything clearly – from the entrance gate to the sanctum sanctorum, each and every column, every figural sculpture, and every image carved on the walls, although not a single figurine had survived, and barring a few columns, everything had fallen to dust.

“Look! the entrance is shaped like an arch. Well, arched entrances were not common in ancient India; we borrowed the style from others...”

I wasn't sure if he only derived intellectual delight from history or he was also emotionally drawn to it. But surely he was going crazy over antiquity.

Sharat's wife, on the other hand, had not much of an interest in the past, neither in temples nor in history. She was more interested in going out and collecting flowers. Wherever she found a Kashmiri family sitting together, she would drop in, have some tea from their samovar, and enjoy their *bakarkhanis*. By the time we reached Srinagar, she had collected a lot of Kashmiri memorabilia. Sometimes she would walk in holding the hand of a Kashmiri child, or would happily appear in a traditional Kashmiri attire. She was truly thrilled. During our stay in Srinagar, she went out alone, took a *shikara*, strayed into the smaller channels of the wide Lake, peeped into Kashmiri homes, and made friends with lots of people.

My emotional state was different from theirs. My childhood and teenage years were spent in Srinagar, and I had now returned after a gap of three years or so. As soon I entered Srinagar, a strange frenzy overtook me. I felt as though I had fallen into a whirlpool of strong emotions. The moment we crossed the Amira Kadal Bridge¹⁰ and turned towards Munshibagh, my heart raced. Every shop here was known to me. Memories were linked to each and every spot of this neighbourhood— the familiar aroma of the *nanbai*¹¹ shops, the typical smell of the river-water... And each pore of my body throbbed. You shouldn't revisit the place where you've spent your childhood after too long a gap lest memory overwhelms you. Every now and then, remembrances soaked me in the fragrance of flowers or pierced my heart like a thorn.

A pain shot through me when I entered my old home; it looked so ancient and dilapidated. The floor of the verandah had cracked. The roof, walls, windows and doors— all had suffered the ravages of Time. Weeds sprouted from many places on the stone wall of the courtyard. Which place is this? This doesn't look like the house where I had spent my childhood. Yes it was, but where was my mother? My brother and father were all gone, my Bua¹² whose laughter brightened up the whole house wasn't here either. The house stood before me desolate, like a ghost from the past.

My mother is anxious. Things will now turn sour between father and son. “I don't like arguments around this house. I wish you would listen to what I say, Son,” she tells me.

¹⁰ Built in Srinagar in 1774-77 by Afghan Governor Amir Khan Sher Jawan, the hunched-back Amira Kadal Bridge on River Jhelum has been a witness to many historical events and connects the two parts of Srinagar.

¹¹ Little street side *tandoors* or ovens where *naans* or breads are baked.

¹² Father's sister.

Hearing this, my father chuckles, “Now, what have I said? I didn’t even utter a word. Let him do as he pleases. We aren’t going to be around forever anyway. It’s his house, his property after all.”

I open the door and enter. The moment I step in, it seems everyone — my mother, father, brother, and Choti Bua—flies away. The room is dark and musty, and full of cobwebs. I step forward and open the window. A blue curtain still hangs on it. As soon as I touch it, it crumbles and falls.

On the adjacent wall hangs a thin, narrow strip of wood fixed with six hooks to hang clothes on made by my brother, waiting to fall down. I know even if I try to fix it back on the wall, it won’t stay put as the plaster is peeling off.

The cupboard on the wall is half-open. I open its doors and look inside. There’s a wooden tray with one edge broken. A big metal kettle stands on it. Once, this could easily carry ten to twelve cups of tea at a time.

The wooden doorpost still shows marks etched by a knife — tiny horizontal lines, one above the other. Every year on my birthday I was made to stand beside the doorpost and a new line would be drawn above my head to check if I had grown any taller.

“Ok, *Ji!* Don’t have high hopes! This year you haven’t grown even an inch taller. Now you’ll remain short all through your life...”
My Bua teases me as she measures me and laughs merrily.

Memories do not appear in sequence; they arrive like a flood of rustling autumn leaves. A picture flashes before my eyes and the very next moment it breaks into tiny fragments. But I am lost in a whirlpool of memories and keep on losing myself.

On the verandah at the back, someone is singing in a soft, sweet voice. It’s Choti Bua sitting with her feet up on the bench and singing. My Bua is a happy-go-lucky, woman; she’s always cheerful, but whenever she sings, her songs are full of sorrow.

*“Kidhro aayian nee bediyaan, Saudagar Ranjha
Kidhro aaye mallah, nee Heere?
Purbo aayian nee bediyaan, Saudagar Ranjha
Pachchmo aaye mallah, nee Heere...”*¹³

(O merchant Ranjha! Where have these boats come from? O Heer! Where has the boatman come from? The boats have come from East, O merchant Ranjha! And the boatman has come from the West, O Heer!)

¹³ A stanza from the tragic romance of the legendary lovers Heer and Ranjha, popularized in 1766 by the Punjabi poet Waris Shah. The legend of Heer and Ranjha is one of the four popular tragic romances of the Punjab that have helped to shape folklore in the Indian subcontinent; the other three are Mirza-Sahiba, Sassi-Punnu and Sohni-Mahiwal. In this tale of true love, beautiful Heer and her lover Ranjha would rather die than live without each other. The physical beauty of the young lovers acquires a universal charm and their anguish a universal agony. Waris Shah’s *Heer*, which has enthralled and fascinated generations of listeners and readers, is not only a great literary achievement but also a spiritual testament.

When she sings one can actually feel as though the merchants' boats are going from the East to the West with no moorings anywhere. Even Ranjha and Heer had lived here once, where are they now?

I wonder why Choti Bua sings such heartbreaking songs. Is it because she is getting ready to go somewhere? Does she know that she has to go? No, I don't think so. Even today she will go out with others and look around to buy small presents for her family. If she loses or spoils something, she lovingly puts her arms around her mother and implores to be forgiven. She never resents anything. But when she sits alone and sings, my mother bites her lips in anguish because Choti Bua sings only when her pain becomes unbearable.

If I go to her, she will stop singing and laugh, and look as cheerful as ever. Sometimes Mother sits with her and tries to convince her to be a little more worldly-wise. She says, "Stop pampering him. The more you pamper them, the more arrogant men tend to become. Sometimes let him know that you are hurt. Stop talking to him. Go away from him for a while so that he realizes that this girl too has some self-respect." Choti Bua looks at Mother's face puzzled, with her doe-like eyes.

"If he speaks with me, why shouldn't I? I wait for him the whole day. When he comes home I should keep away from him! How can I do this?"

"You've gone crazy. Learn to have a hold over your man." Then Mother whispers to her, "Whenever he comes to you at night, turn your back to him."

"*Hai!* He comes home so tired. How can I ignore him? I say, if this makes him happy, it's fine with me..."

Mother sighs with anguish and shakes her head several times.

"You will suffer your whole life if you don't think about yourself".

But Choti Bua speaks softly:

"Can I suffer more than this? I wish you knew what joy is there in suffering!"

Once again Mother shakes her head in resignation.

"That husband of yours has got into your head! There's no cure for you. You will only wreck your home".

The passion of her youth has licked her heart like a worm.

But now the bench is vacant. Its colour and paint all gone. When shaken it becomes out of joint. Choti Bua is no longer here.

It seems to have grown dark as I stand here like this. The room in which Bua lived with her husband is to the right of the corridor. The curtain on the window flutters gently in the wind and the moonlight is scattered all around. Will Bua rise from her bed tonight and walk in her sleep?... There's a movement in the room. Someone moves around. It is only Bua. She's wearing a long white *kurta*¹⁴ and is walking in her sleep looking like an angel from heaven. She doesn't seem to see at all. She has crossed the room and is now walking across the corridor. The big windows in the corridor are open. Her eyes are shut, and if she leans a little towards the left she'll surely fall down. Looks like she is about to fall. Now, she is moving towards the staircase. Whenever she sleepwalks, it's always in the direction of the staircase that she goes.

But someone follows her. There seems to be a movement in the room. Chote Phupha¹⁵ rushes towards her. Then, he stops behind her for a moment and walks softly so

¹⁴ An upper garment or long loose shirt worn by women and men in South Asia.

¹⁵ Bua's husband.

as not to awaken her. Once he comes closer he takes her in his arms. Bua, still asleep, rests her head on his shoulder and heaves a sad sigh. With her head still on his shoulder, she walks slowly towards her bed as though lost in some intoxicating dream. Phupha holds her very carefully. But when Bua lies down on her bed, he ties her foot to the bedpost with her *dupatta*¹⁶ lest she ventures out in her sleep again.

What kind of drama is going on between the two of them, so ironical and so tragic!

When Bua gets up in the morning and finds herself tied up, the first thing that she asks her husband is, “Did I bother you last night?” With her doe-like eyes, she looks innocently at her husband and tells him, “Next time lock me up in a room at night so that when I walk in my sleep, I bump into the wall and wake up. Why should you be bothered because of me?”

I enter her room. It’s empty. Her clothes are no longer strewn on the bed nor does the glow of her presence brighten up the room. This room, too, is cluttered with broken furniture, a chest of drawers, a pair of large boxes filled with old, discarded things. Just above the bed from which Bua would rise to sleepwalk, her photograph hangs on the wall. The golden frame is discoloured and the cardboard under the photograph peeps out of the frame. After Bua’s death, it was Phupha who got her photograph framed!

But now this room looks as though the shadow of death still hangs around, the death of Choti Bua.

Bua is sitting on her bed and telling my mother something:

“You know I am expecting. It’s my third month now.”

“Oh! Really?” she exclaims with joy.

“But it doesn’t mean anything to me!”

“Why didn’t you tell us before? God bless you! Such good news! Did you show yourself to a doctor?”

“What’s the need of going to a doctor?” Then she holds my mother’s arm and implores, “I was going to tell you myself. Will you give me something to get rid of this?”

“Go away you wretch! Have you gone crazy?”

“He doesn’t want a child so soon. He says— ‘What’s the hurry? Why can’t we have it later?’ But now I am in the family way already.”

“How terrible! You love him so much and yet you want to kill his baby? Just don’t listen to him. Let the baby come and he will change.”

“I don’t know! Just get me some pill to get rid of this.”

“I tell you, don’t ever dare to utter such words again!”

Though Mother reprimands her, she herself shivers from top to toe. She finds herself helpless before Choti Bua, and trembles with fear to think of her...

Today Bua sings listlessly lying on her bed. Of late, she has become very pale and thin.

*“Kidhron aayein nee bediyaan, Saudagar Ranjha
Kidhron aaye mallah, nee Heere...”*

¹⁶ A long scarf is essential to many South Asian women's suits. A symbol of modesty, it is traditionally worn across both the shoulders. It can also be worn like a cape around the entire torso.

Mother says, the poison of love has gone to her head. She is repentant that she didn't act soon enough to avert it. Perhaps Bua would have lived!

Someone is climbing the stairs. It's Sharat's wife, Rachna. It looks like these people even love climbing stairs, the way they sprint up with delight, all charged up. Rachna starts chattering from there.

"What's wrong with you? You came to Kashmir to enjoy yourself, or to sit brooding the whole day in this house? I feel suffocated here. If I stay here another day, I'll fall sick for sure."

Then she saw me staring at Bua's photograph and looked at it.

"Oh, so this is your Bua of whom you spoke so often!" She shook her head and said, "But she isn't so pretty. And you always spoke so highly of her beauty! Look at the way she has done her hair. Just like the matron of some Arya Samaj School¹⁷... Now come along, we are leaving for Gulmarg.¹⁸ Arrangements have already been made, let's go..."

There is a pile of bright coloured stuff on the floor – a Kashmiri *samovar*, a *kangri*,¹⁹ a red and green *phiran* that Kashmiri women wear over their attire. She has even bought a *hookah*,²⁰ and a pair of shoes made of bark and whatnot!

For a week we wandered in the valley and then returned to the old house. It was time to leave now. Rachna has bought her favourite things and put them together in a corner of the room. These days Sharat spends more time in museums or goes alone to see some ruin and returns only by evening.

Finally, we start packing and decide to put our things in separate suitcases. If there is more left to pack, that will be distributed among us.

The moment Rachna looked at my things, she burst out laughing.

"Are you going to pack all these?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Where did you collect this junk from? Are you sure you want to take it along?"

"Why not, what's your problem?"

But she came forward and picked up each of my belongings and looked at them.

"These broken pegs! Will you carry even these?" And she rolled about with laughter, "But why these? Three of these are already broken. What will you do with them?"

Then she picked up the old kettle from the pile of things.

"Now what are you going to do with this? I know you used to have tea from it once, but now it has only holes left. Don't tell me you want to take back even this!" Saying this, she again burst into laughter.

Then, she picked up Bua's photograph.

¹⁷ Arya Samaj was a Hindu reform movement founded by Swami Dayananda on 7 April 1875. The schools established by Arya Samaj taught Vedic values, culture and religion to its students.

¹⁸ Gulmarg or 'Meadow of Flowers' is a small hill station in the Himalayas, about fifty-two kilometers from Srinagar in Kashmir. It has one of the longest and highest ski slopes in Asia and is called the heartland of winter sports in India.

¹⁹ A small clay pot filled with hot charcoal, carried next to the body as a source of warmth.

²⁰ A pipe for smoking tobacco, consisting of a flexible tube with a mouthpiece attached to a container of water through which smoke is drawn and cooled.

“Are you going to take this home? The frame is already broken and the picture, too, is worm eaten. It’s of no use.” But a look at my face and she checked herself. “If it is so precious to you, you can certainly have it, why should I have any problem? But what’s the use of carrying all the old stuff? How long can you keep it? Even this house will fall to pieces in a matter of years.”

“This is my Bua’s photograph, Rachna. Perhaps you don’t know.”

“Of course I know, but every home has had an aunt like her since eternity. How many of their photographs can one hang on the walls? And, to tell you frankly, I don’t even hold her in much regard after what she did. What kind of love was that? How could she take her own life? What was the use? But forget it, I shouldn’t say anything. If you wish to take it, you may certainly do so. I only said this because there would be little space left in our suitcases. What’s the use of carrying rubbish home?”

Then Sharat came to my room. He was hiding something behind his back. As always, a bright smile played on his face. He came closer and said:

“Shall I show you something? I got it with great trouble.”

He held out his hand. On it was a piece of stone tablet picked up from some debris. Chipped in many places, it could have been a part of an idol, or a piece of a decorative figurine engraved on an old wall. Very aesthetic, very beautiful, though the image was not very clear. It looked as though a beloved was lovingly bent over her lover.

“Wow, we’ll certainly take this home!” Rachna exclaimed with joy. “Where did you get it from?”

“I found it near Harvan.²¹ A lot of them sank into the silt in the deluge. But it seems a few of the stones rolled down. This tablet looks like one of them, and dates back to the Gupta²² period. Could have fallen off a wall!”

“I hope no one saw you picking it up! You know it’s illegal to keep such stuff.”

“It was lying on the road. If it’s unlawful to keep it, it should have been kept safely in a museum. Why did they let it remain there?”

“How beautiful it is!” Rachna was still gazing at it with amazement and delight.

“But isn’t it too heavy? It won’t even fit in the suitcase... But it doesn’t matter we’ll carry it in a bag.”

Then her eyes fell on my belongings. Embarrassed, she justified herself.

“We will have to carry this tablet in any case. How can we leave it here?”

I was silent. What could I say?

²¹ Harwan is a small village located on a hill 21 kms from Srinagar. It is a historic place and is believed to be the centre of the fourth Buddhist Council held by the Kushana emperor Kanishka in the 1st century C. E. It was here that Sanskrit became the language of the Buddhist scriptures instead of Pali. This was also the first time that Mahayana Buddhism received major royal patronage. The antiquities found here include terracotta figures, fragments of Buddha image and few clay tablets bearing miniature *stupa*.

²² Tiles found here, of about the 4th century C. E. display a remarkable meeting of cultures where the styles of the art of the Gupta period from the plains of northern India interact with influences from Central Asia.