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## Book Review

**Title of the Book:** *Rupture- Stories on the Sorrows of Kashmir*

**Author:** Rattan Lal Shant

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press.

**Year of Publication:** 2022

**Pages:** 168 pg

**Reviewed by:**

**Saira Tak**

“Mr. Shant has brought to bear his deep knowledge and intimate experiences of life in Kashmir and outside (as a refugee) upon these stories” (Professor Kapil Kapoor).

*Rupture- Stories on the Sorrows of Kashmir*, records the oral testimonies of the Hindu-Muslim socio-cultural blend and the subsequent fissure due to the political unrest in Kashmir. It is a collection of 12 short stories written originally in Kashmiri by Rattan Lal Shant, a renowned author, and Sahitya Academy Award winner, and translated and edited by Javaid Iqbal Bhat, an academic and cultural critic. The collection is an incorporation of pre-migration and post-migration stories. Despite this fact, all the stories reflect the “same pain of restlessness” and “unremitting suffering” and each story beads an emotion that communicates itself through its characters and their fractured memories. The author recounts the days of togetherness followed by political turmoil in Kashmir, which devoured the peace and tranquility of Hindus and Muslims alike. The author furnishes the collection with the dedicatory lines:

For all those hundreds of unknown people

who

Gave their life to guard those testimonies

Which for eternity will keep on showing

There was connection before separation.

These lines vividly describe the agonies of Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims and the experiences which politicized the Kashmiri Pandits, forcing them to flee from their birthland. Several attempts have been made by writers to disseminate this trauma of exodus but the resulting narratives serve the function of a “political genesis” which further accentuates the split. The author promises to present a narrative unlike others and uses the metaphor of tracing instead of the unending web of archives. In the foreword, Professor Kapil Kapoor, chairman, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, states how “these stories will draw the reader away from the official descriptions of ‘heaven’ and ‘paradise’ into a world of ruptures, gaps, silences, and alleys of desolation.” The translator also in the Translator’s note claims that the characters in the stories “desire to guard the testimonies of mutual connectedness which were present before getting separated.” The fabric of separation binds all these stories together into a garment that nestles the frayed condition of Hindu-Muslim geniality.

In one of the stories titled *Water*, Kishan Lal and his wife, Duura, returning to Kashmir after ten years, find themselves bewildered Kishan Lal narrates,

“We had landed in some strange and unknown place where no one was our own. Our condition was like that of those forest animals which are captured alive by the honest and sympathetic police of the Western countries from the baiting hunters and then carried in covered vehicles and put in some other forests.” (66-67)

A passing visit to their motherland, their neighborhood, and the confrontations with their people leaves them in doubt and they sense an inevitable death of hope. Kishan Lal mourns this state and says, “...the condition of our Home is hopeless.” (62) Again, the emotional encounter between Kishan Lal and Abdul Rasheed is paralleled by the ongoing tussle between pebbles thrown by Rasheed into the water full of duckweed. The imagery of pebbles trying to create a hole in one place in the water and the quick movement of the common duckweed to fill that same hole portrays how Kishan Lal wants Rasheed to speak his heart out and fill the abyss of emptiness created between them. But Rasheed keeps resisting this encounter and it is narrated, “Immediately Rasheed would hit another pebble at the same spot as if a race had started between Rasheed and the duckweed. Will he make a hole or will the duckweed not allow him to make a hole?” (62) This passage evokes the readers’ sentiments, lulls them and pitches them into the train of thoughts associated with Rasheed and Kishan Lal. Rasheed tries to conceal his surfeiting passions again by “pulling the handfuls of grass and hurling them towards Dal. The grass was gathered on the duckweed.” (65) The author portrays how Kashmiri

Muslims had harbored a suspicion and consequently the migrant Pandits had developed a sense of fear. This mystifying strangeness between the characters highlights their disillusionment with each other and with the idea of home. A home, “Ten years ago, it was ours. Now it is not ours, it looks strange now.” (65) The characters observe a similar trepidation, their “quiet eyes” issue questions into the air and search for answers.

Apart from chronicling the 1990s dramatic happenings, these stories focus upon the measured scouring of the identities of Kashmiri Pandits, followed by their gradual sense of rootlessness. They seem to be losing hold of their rituals, customs, language, and even their selves. Their dislocated and dual identities create a sense of crisis that haunts them internally as well as externally and the feeling of exile as a “tragic inward condition” tatters their psyche. These displaced selves of migrated Pandits often become the targets of various physiological and psychological ailments like trauma, sleepwalking, depression, dementia, and even complete loss of memory. In another story titled *Measureless*, the narrator who is living as a refugee in Jammu, keeps dreaming about Kashmir and often has nightmares. His family members are irritated by his behavior and his wife, Asha, keeps reminding him,

“How many times did I tell you— shake Kashmir out with all your heart as I have done. Why don’t I dream of Kashmir?” (70)

The story starts with an epigraph from Shafi Shauq, a famous writer and critic, which reads, “For ages, your and my blood is / Searching together/ The calm of the bottom of the ocean/ Or the sparks of hope in the blue sky...” (69) This longing for calmness and hope is what consumes narrator’s mind. He reminisces about the old *mohalla* of Kashmir, where houses used to be closely knit together with big courtyards and gardens which could save them at the time of an earthquake. But even after fourteen years of exile, the memory of the earthquake still gives him chills in Jammu and the sounds keep resonating in his mind.

In some stories, the author probes deeper into the innermost recesses of his characters and carves out their past, in which the present has taken refuge. It seems that there is a deliberate use of collective consciousness of the characters to present the conglomeration of different memory lanes which, otherwise, are haunted by the “clash of civilizations”. In the Afterword also, the author states,

“My sympathetic reader can find a peculiar aspect of these characters has been evoked, which he had not even perhaps speculated about...which arises in rituals and customs

after a human being is suddenly removed from one cultural context and deposited into another..." (136)

In *Separation*, a post-migration story, Roshan Lal has lost a part of his memory after hearing about the death of his mother, Arni. His present seems embedded in the memories of the past. The people around him try to make him confront reality but Roshan Lal only broods over the death of his father, who died twenty years ago. It is narrated that he is "still lost somewhere in his village in Kashmir. Now he is talking about the death of his father." (26) The villagers mourn the worldly separation of Roshan Lal from his parents and the metaphorical separation from his homeland.

As a Kashmiri reader, one can sympathize with the conditions in which Kashmiri Pandits lived after the migration in refugee camps. The dilapidated conditions of the tents and even the rooms they were provided with, added to their agonies. The "demon of outside heat and light" ruled over them all the time and they cursed their fate. The story titled *Gauri's Div Gaam* describes the torments of these migrated Kashmiri Pandits in these shelter camps in Jammu. The narrator informs how they frantically searched for a dwelling, made temporary arrangements to settle down, and notwithstanding the ecological setup of the region, fell prey to various physical and mental issues and even death. The narration goes like this, "The first sweltering heat in Jammu took away Gauri's father-in-law and second her mother-in-law. Early in the new year some insect bit Janki Nath in his bed and nothing could cure him of the poison. The same happened with several others." (121) Bashir Ahmad Dabla, a famous sociologist has observed how these intense conditions, "...the extreme heat in Jammu, even up to 44 degrees Celsius, was not bearable for these categories of people. In actuality, many individuals belonging to these groups suffered/collapsed/died because of dehydration, sun-strokes, skin reactions, neurological disorders, cardiac attacks, snake bites, and so on." (Sociological Implications of Pandit Migration in Jammu and Kashmir 81)

Another story *Fire*, voices the pangs of those migrants, who lost their children during evacuation like Nandlal and his wife Shobavati, who mourn the disappearance of their son, Lal Ji. The title of the story alludes to the concept of suffering, both inward and outward, and the characters tread the terrain of endless suffering. The sweltering heat of Jammu torments them like a "flame of forest fire entering a cave" and the loss of their son pulls them to pieces. The unstable state of Nandlal is mirrored by the tree outside their "room-sized house", which "bore just thorns and blackened leaves". Nandlal sits in the shade of this decaying tree, "a lost human

being, bearing the weight of the exile, he would spend the whole day in the sparse shade of this tree... For the last five years, this practice had become established.” (34) These immigrants had gradually made peace with these circumstances but a sudden intrusion would “touch a raw boil” on their bodies.

The author has also added an Afterword to the collection intending to add a different dimension to these “stories of sorrow” and to “supplement their meaning”. To answer his concerns about writing these stories the first hand, he uses the metaphor of *home*. He expresses how “home is remembered when out of home, pinning for Kashmir when out of Kashmir, going in dreams to places where in reality we could not have gone...” (135) by associating a sense of comfort with the word *home* and a yearning to get back to that *home*, a *home* which can “shrink only in the mailbox” and not in hearts of Kashmiri Pandits. These stories fill an important gap in the cultural and sociopolitical history of Kashmir because they present the lived experiences of Hindu-Muslim “bonhomie” before and after migration.

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