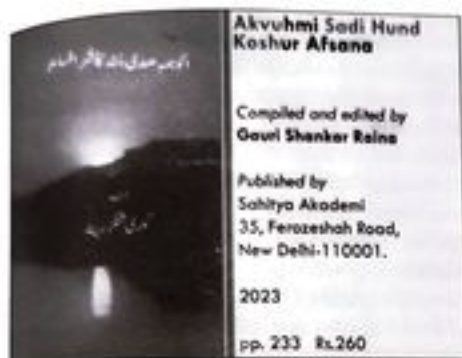


An Omnibus Selection

— Reviewed by Roop Krishen Bhat



Gauri Shankar Raina's *Akvuhmi Sadi Hund Koshur Afsana* is a collection of 35 short stories written in Kashmiri during the first two decades of twenty-first century, i.e. up to 2022, by three generations of writers. These writers, some of them veterans in fiction writing, include Akhtar Mohiuddin, Hari Krishen Kaul, Rattan Lal Shant, Hriday Kaul Bharati, Avtar Krishen Rehbar, Deepak Kaul, Gulshan Majid, Makhan Lal Pandita, Shafi Shauq, Majrooh Rashid, Mohiuddin Rishi, Roop Krishen Bhat, Rahim Rehbar, Mushtaq Ahmad Mushtaq, Mehdoza Jaan, Gauri Shankar Raina, Ratan Lal Jawhar, Avtar Hugami, Rajesh Kaul, Shakeel-ur-Rehman, Amar Malmohi, Ghulam Nabi Aatish, Sohan Koul, S. Razi and others. It also has stories by youngsters like Rinku Koul, Shahida Shabnam and Razi Tahir Bhagat. That way the canvas of the book is very wide and for the first time short stories of comparatively younger writers have been included in a collection like this.

The book opens with a detailed introduction

of 16 pages to the volume by the editor covering the overall contributions of almost all the authors listed in this volume with specific mention of their stories included in this book. The first story in the collection is of our versatile short story writer Akhtar Mohiuddin. This is taken from Akhtar's latest book *Vannu mahabon* published in 2009. The story 'Ainafs Ainafs' is different from most of his earlier stories. It describes the mental condition of its protagonist who is suffering from insomnia.

The next story 'Pot vanda' by another master short story writer Hari Krishen Kaul depicts the mental conflict of a person in the course of post-winter weather conditions in Kashmir. A very well-crafted story! Next two stories are by Hriday Kaul Bharati and Rattan Lal Shant. As usual Bharati's story is in his unique style of using symbols and imagery—in this case a dialogue between Vikramaditya and Vetaal. Bharati's concluding sentence *khathar kaetis kaalis rezam meer' vikramaditya kael ta zaer* ('Do not know how long my Vikramaditya will remain deaf and dumb.') conveys the theme of the story very well. 'Dakhil' by Rattan Lal Shant is a story set against the background of a migrant camp where the dead body of a lady awaits the last rites to be performed by her son-in-law who stayed back in Kashmir during the militancy, compromised with the situation, but was forced to leave because of danger to his life. The story depicts the camp life, fear psychosis, mental agony and the persistently unsettling circumstances in the valley of Kashmir. Shant's technique and characterization are very impressive. Rattan Lal Shant is the only writer

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among the earlier stalwarts who has been writing continuously and has contributed a lot both as a creative writer and a critic.

Avtar Krishen Rehbar is yet another master short story writer who was second after Akhtar Mohiuddin to publish his first short story collection *Tobrukhi* in 1958. He remained busy in other matters and published his second book *Yeli panda toth* in 2014 after a questionable gap of 56 years and his third one *Sorgachen heran pyath* in 2019. The story 'Sorgachen heran pyath' is the lead story of the last collection and is a fantasy of a radio producer who decides to visit the *sorag* ('heaven') to record an interview with the inhabitants over there but is confronted by the guards at the stairs of heaven. It is a very well-crafted story depicting the professional nitty-gritty of a producer and his state of mind.

Deepak Kaul is yet another name of the first generation writers who, through his limited number of stories, has created a niche in the minds of readers through stories like 'Safar ta saet' 'Vael', 'Raed' 'Kakin' 'Braer' and 'Tourist booy'. 'Choka daer' ('Window of the kitchen') is a very well-crafted story of two neighbours whose houses stand face-to-face. In the story, Mohan Lal occupies the window of his kitchen facing the house of Madhav Kak who suspects Mohan Lal of amorous intentions and rebukes him as he is father of a young daughter. The story binds the reader till the end and the dialogues between Mohan Lal and his wife are very interesting.

Gulshan Majid has a typical style of narration. Having written stories like 'Aki raets hund safar', 'Khashir lad huun', 'Sindis ardalas manz', 'Me maa zanakh' etc., he has proved to be a versatile story teller. With his background in philosophy, the current story 'Zaatak katha-2' evolves like a true *jatak katha*. The character of Sang Dev justifies Gulshan's philosophical mind and his skill of character building. A very interesting story which, however, is not meant for general readers. Shafi Shauq, a versatile scholar primarily known as a good poet and critic, has been writing short stories occasionally for the last several years. The present story 'Safar aki laashi hund' ('Journey of a dead body') is a story of a middle-aged rich

man Sula Bhat who is kidnapped by terrorists for ransom which his son Javed ignores paying and instead acts as an informer. As a consequence, Sula Bhat is killed mercilessly. The story is written in the background of militancy in Kashmir. The depiction of Sula Bhat's tortured body, setting of the Gujar shed and its inhabitants, etc. is marvellous. Shauq's command on language and narration is creditable.

Amar Malmohi, known till now as a scholar, novelist, critic and playwright, has recently come up with a collection each of poetry and short stories. His short story 'Turun kaajwath' ('Cold grinding stone') is taken from his book *Yeli patsh raev* ('When trust is betrayed') published in 2019. It is a story of a widow Shanta whose husband and sole bread-earner of family is killed by terrorists in Kashmir. For economic reasons, the head of family Sudarshan decides to get his younger son Avtar married to Shanta, his *Bhabhi*. Avtar, who is much younger to her and till then considered her like his mother, finds it difficult to enter into a new relationship with her. The symbolic title of the story is explained by the author in this sentence. *tsl chukh turun kaajwaThi hyar. voala myemis faeris saet. Tami koD bulawuz ta juleyji tas pyath.* ('You are like a cold grinding stone. Come close to my body.' She took off her blouse and threw herself on him.) Through his present story and stories like 'Yeli patsh raev, na soorvun safar', Amar Malmohi has proved to be a good story teller.

Makhan Lal Pandita, who started his literary journey post-displacement from Kashmir, published his first collection of short stories *Karna phyar* in 2001 and in just two decades wrote seven collections of short stories. The characteristic feature of his work is the depiction of rural life in the colloquial rural language and accent. 'Tsaadri pae'l' ('Kashmiri blanket'), as the name implies, is a similar story taken from his collection *Saan roagan* ('Deep and plain') published in 2017. It is a story of a small-time thief who leaves for his mission late at night wrapping and covering himself with a *tsaanar*. He reaches the house of Naba Mir who is deep in slumber. While searching the house, the thief lays down his *tsaanar* to pick up and wrap a bundle of wool

he intends to steal. As bad luck would have it, Naba Mir turns his side and sleeps over the *tsaadar*. Further description of the situation makes it interesting and the thief is left with no option but to surrender his *tsaadar*. Pandita's narration of the events creates an interesting piece of humour and satire.

Mohiuddin Rishi is known for writing mini short stories. He has mastered the craft of conveying a message in the minimum number of words. The author of two such collections, he has a unique style of his own. 'Maaji gobur' ('Mother's pet child') is a story of Javed who, as a child, was scared of lightning and thunder but after he became a terrorist, he turned a stone-hearted person. However, he soon realized that such actions result only in bloodshed and misery and he withdrew from the path of violence. His companions did not take it kindly and eliminated him. Rishi is successful in conveying a message in very few words and in simple language. 'Pot aalav' ('The call') by Roop Krishen Bhat is a story of an old lady Tarawati who, after displacement from Kashmir, lives with her son in Jammu and subsequently with another son and his family in Delhi. She is unable to reconcile herself with the changed circumstances and the unfamiliar environment. She keeps on remembering her old neighbours and friends in Kashmir whom she used to meet and chat with on a day-to-day basis on the bank of a river. Their calls reverberate in her memories. She becomes psychiatric and succumbs to her nostalgia. The story depicts life in exile, especially for older generation, their deep bondage with the native place and the fact that they could never come out of the hangover of Kashmir.

'vAehrl vAer' ('Anniversary') by Mushtaq Ahmed Mushtaq is a story of a widower Abdul Kareem who lives alone as both his children live outside Kashmir. While sitting on a chair in the lawn of his house, he gazes at the newspaper which carries the anniversary obituary of his wife while her maid Saleema is attending to the domestic chores. He gets caught between his infatuation with her and his love for his dead wife and his responsibilities towards children. A very

good story written in simple language.

Rahim Rehbar, like Makhan Lal Pandita, is a short story writer who has published seven collections of short stories. He is credited with writing the maximum number of stories in Kashmiri as his stories are comparatively shorter or in mini form. He has his unique diction and idiom. 'Sati hund sehraav' ('Suffering and hope') is a story of a poor family of three members, Saleem, his wife Rafia who is sick, and their teenage son Nayeem. Saleem carries his son on his shoulders to fetch medicine from the market for his wife. The author describes the night scene of a city in a meticulous way. The darkness sweeps Saleem away from his feet when he finds his wife dead after reaching home empty-handed.

Like Shafi Shauq, Majrooh Rashid is yet another scholar known primarily as a good poet and critic but turns to writing short stories occasionally. 'Siyah shabakis vaenaakh vachas manz' ('In the solitude of dark night') is a story written in a different format and style. He is influenced by Hriday Kaul Bharati in his story writing. The story depicts helplessness of its protagonist who is faced with difficult situations of present-day life and, in a symbolic way, is engulfed by darkness of night and unable to gauge the way. At times he turns optimistic with the rising of certain stars on sky but is depressed again and again with their short span. Still optimistic, he waits for the good times when he may be able to live his life on his own terms. Mehfooza Jaan is a prolific writer who has tried her pen in every genre. She has published three story collections so far. Her story 'Krekh' ('Cry') is an unusual story which symbolizes human crisis in a unique way.

Gauri Shankar Raina has been writing short stories both in Hindi and Kashmiri. He has published one collection each in both the languages. His Kashmiri collection *U-tum* was published recently. 'Truvah number seat' ('Seat number thirteen') is a story which takes one on a journey from Jammu to Srinagar in a roadways bus in which the focus shifts to a young boy and a girl who start as strangers and become friends during the day-long travel and are watched

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keenly by an elderly co-passenger Swaroop Nath. The bus stops at various places on its way for tea, food etc. and the author aptly describes various situations. The story conveys the idea of unpredictability of existence and binds one till the end.

There are many other interesting stories in the collection by well-known authors. Worth mentioning are authors like Ratan Lal Jawhar, Shakeel ur Rehman, Avtar Hugami, Rajesh Kaul, Sohan Koul, G. M. Mahir, Vijay Sagar and others. Among young authors Rinku Koul, Shahida Shabnam and Razi Tahir Bhagat are a few names that will be watched keenly in years to come. I wish there were space and scope here to comment on them all.

This collection of short stories is a welcome addition to the Kashmiri prose. The editor has done a commendable job by collecting and compiling a vast number of stories from great masters to younger writers. However, there is a certain arbitrariness in the selection of stories. This may be the result of the book being compiled at the behest of an institution, that too with a government imprimatur, where the editor functions within certain constraints. For example, there are a few stories from authors who are not primarily known as short story writers. The selection from youngsters also looks arbitrary as

it does not include names like Deeba Nazir who has been awarded by the Akademi in short story writing.

Moreover, the title of the collection in itself is questionable. This collection cannot be called a true representative of the twenty-first century short stories because the samples from just two decades cannot justify the trends and forms of a genre spanning many decades. One never knows what shape the Kashmiri story takes in the years to come. Keeping in view that Kashmiri short story is just seventy years old, many new trends are expected to happen. That way the masters of twentieth century may or may not be the masters or true representatives of twenty-first century too. Many more collections are definitely going to be compiled and published in the years to come which may perhaps be labelled as twenty first century short story volumes 2, 3...etc.

Keeping all parameters in view, the collection is definitely an important milestone in short story literature and will serve as an important reference book for the general readers and researchers for many years to come. I congratulate Sahitya Akademi for bringing out this volume and appreciate the hard work put by Gauri Shankar Raina in compiling and editing it. I hope Kashmiri readers in general shall equally relish and appreciate the book.