

**Women's Lives and the Politics of Everyday Existence in Banu
Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp***

Dr. MD. Jaleel

Asst. Professor of English, Government Degree College, Kukatpally, Telangana

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Abstract:

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* presents a powerful and realistic portrayal of the lives, experiences, and struggles of women in contemporary South India. The selected stories in the collection bring to light the everyday realities of women whose lives are shaped by family, marriage, religion, social customs, poverty, and patriarchal structures. This paper examines the representation of women in selected stories from *Heart Lamp*, with particular attention to their emotional experiences, social limitations, personal identities, and attempts to assert themselves. Mushtaq's women characters often encounter discrimination, domestic restrictions, unequal relationships, and pressures imposed by family and community. But, they are not merely portrayed as victims. Through their silence, endurance, choices, relationships, and acts of resistance, they reveal different forms of strength and agency. The stories also explore how women negotiate their identities within traditional social and religious structures. Mushtaq's realistic narrative style gives voice to women whose experiences are often ignored or marginalised. The paper argues that *Heart Lamp* challenges conventional representations of women by presenting their lives with complexity, sensitivity, and social awareness.

Keywords: Everyday existence, gender politics, patriarchy, social inequality

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*, translated from Kannada by Deepa Bhashti, offers a sensitive representation of the everyday lives of women in South Indian Muslim communities. Written across several decades, the stories portray women negotiating the pressures of family, marriage, religion, poverty, social expectations, and patriarchal

authority. Rather than presenting women merely as passive victims, Mushtaq depicts their endurance, emotional strength, silence, and subtle forms of resistance. The representation of women in *Heart Lamp* can be understood through Simone de Beauvoir's influential feminist proposition that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 283). This idea is particularly relevant to Mushtaq's stories because the female characters are shaped by social expectations and culturally prescribed gender roles. Their identities are constructed within the family and community rather than being determined solely by individual choice. Virginia Woolf's argument that "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (Woolf, 6) also provides a useful framework for examining the restrictions placed on women's education, mobility, economic independence, and personal space.

The postcolonial feminist perspective of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is equally significant, particularly her question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988). Mushtaq's women frequently occupy socially marginal positions where their voices are ignored or suppressed; nevertheless, their silence does not always signify complete submission. Their everyday acts of endurance and resistance become alternative forms of expression. Recent criticism of *Heart Lamp* has specifically examined the silencing and resistance of its women through Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Simone de Beauvoir argues that womanhood is largely constructed through social expectations rather than being simply a biological condition. This idea is particularly relevant to "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal." Shaista's life is defined by repeated pregnancies, domestic responsibilities, and expectations of motherhood. Her husband, Iftikhar, presents himself as a loving husband and even imagines building a magnificent palace for her, but his attitude towards his daughter Asifa exposes the patriarchal values beneath this apparent affection. He considers higher education unnecessary for girls and plans to marry Asifa early. Thus, the story exposes the contradiction between romantic idealisation of women and the actual denial of their autonomy.

Kate Millett's concept of "sexual politics" is also useful in understanding this contradiction. Millett defines sexual politics as the "process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex" (Millett, 25). In Mushtaq's stories, patriarchal power is not restricted to physical violence; it operates through decisions concerning women's education, marriage, reproduction, sexuality, property, and domestic roles. Shaista's inability to determine the direction of her daughter's life and her own vulnerability after childbirth demonstrate how patriarchal power can operate within apparently affectionate families. Her sudden replacement by a young bride after her death

further exposes the extent to which a woman may be treated as a functional member of the household rather than as an irreplaceable individual.

The theme of motherhood in *Heart Lamp* can also be examined through Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an experience and motherhood as an institution. Rich writes that "the institution of motherhood is designed to ensure that that potential and all women shall remain under male control" (Rich, 13). This distinction is particularly significant in "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal" and "Black Cobras." Shaista is expected to fulfill the role of mother despite the physical and emotional consequences of repeated pregnancies. Similarly, Aashraf's identity and social value are deeply affected by her failure to produce a son. Her husband abandons her and their three daughters, while she is left to struggle economically and care for her children. The story demonstrates how motherhood becomes a site through which patriarchal society determines a woman's worth.

"Black Cobras" presents one of the strongest examples of the intersection of gender, poverty, and institutional power. Aashraf is economically vulnerable and socially powerless. After Yakub abandons her because she has not given birth to a son, she is forced to work as a domestic labourer while attempting to obtain treatment for her sick daughter. Her repeated petitions to the mosque authorities are ignored, demonstrating that formal religious institutions may fail to protect women even when principles of justice theoretically exist within the religious framework.

This situation may be connected with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality." Crenshaw explains that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw, 140). Although Crenshaw originally developed the concept in relation to Black women's experiences of discrimination, the broader critical principle is useful here: women may experience multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage. Aashraf's suffering is shaped simultaneously by her gender, poverty, marital position, and lack of institutional power. Her vulnerability is therefore not produced by patriarchy in isolation. Her economic condition intensifies the consequences of gender discrimination. The death of Munni becomes the tragic result of this interconnected system of neglect.

The story also complicates the idea of women as completely powerless. After Munni's death, the women of the neighbourhood openly condemn Yakub and the mutawalli through sarcasm, curses, and symbolic insults. Their collective response creates an

alternative form of justice when formal authority has failed. The story therefore suggests that resistance does not always take the form of direct political action. Speech, collective anger, moral judgement, and solidarity can also challenge patriarchal authority. Amina's decision to leave home to undergo sterilisation further represents an assertion of control over her own body and reproductive life.

The question of women's property rights in "Fire Rain" also reveals the connection between gender and economic independence. Jameela demands her rightful share of her deceased father's property, but her brother Usman resists her claim. His position demonstrates how patriarchal family structures can conflict with principles of legal and moral justice. Arifa, his wife, recognises Jameela's right and quietly supports her. The story therefore presents women not simply as victims of patriarchal structures but also as individuals capable of recognising and supporting one another's rights.

Virginia Woolf's assertion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (Woolf, 6) provides a useful connection here. Woolf associates women's freedom with material independence and personal space. Mushtaq's stories repeatedly demonstrate the consequences of women's lack of economic autonomy. A woman who lacks independent financial resources often has limited ability to challenge an abusive husband, leave an oppressive household, or secure justice through formal institutions. Jameela's struggle for property and Aashraf's economic dependence on others therefore have broader implications for understanding women's autonomy.

"A Decision of the Heart" introduces another dimension of women's lives: conflict between women within the patriarchal family. Akhila becomes jealous of the attention Yusuf gives to his widowed mother, Mehaboob Bi. The physical division of the household reflects the emotional division between the two women. Their conflict is initially presented as a personal struggle, but it can also be interpreted as the consequence of a social system in which women's security and status are frequently mediated through their relationship with men.

Bell hooks's statement that "patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating" (Hooks, 1) helps explain this conflict. The story demonstrates how patriarchal expectations can place women in competition for male affection and security. However, the narrative does not end with permanent hostility. Akhila recognises her mistake, while Mehaboob Bi accepts the proposed remarriage with dignity. Her decision is motivated partly by her desire to restore peace to her son's life. Thus,

Mushtaq presents women as emotionally complex individuals capable of jealousy, error, self-realisation, sacrifice, and reconciliation.

“Red Lungī” broadens the discussion from gender relations to class inequality. Razia belongs to a relatively privileged household, while poor women bring their children to the mass circumcision ceremony in the hope of receiving food or assistance. The contrast between the medical care provided to Razia’s family and the crude treatment received by poorer children exposes economic inequality. Arif’s torn clothes and Razia’s eventual sympathy for him make visible the class divisions that exist within the same community.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power is relevant to this representation of inequality. Bourdieu explains that “symbolic power is a power of constructing reality” (Bourdieu, 166). Social distinctions become meaningful because communities accept particular forms of status, authority, respectability, and privilege. In “Red Lungī,” the differences between rich and poor are not merely economic; they influence whose children receive better treatment and whose suffering remains largely invisible. Razia’s changing awareness indicates the possibility of developing social consciousness through recognising the unequal conditions of others.

Across these selected stories, Mushtaq presents women’s lives as shaped by a complex network of patriarchal, economic, familial, and institutional forces. Her women experience suffering, but suffering does not completely define them. They also negotiate, question, endure, support one another, express anger, make decisions, and occasionally resist established authority. The stories consequently move beyond a simple victim-versus-oppressor framework. They reveal how power operates in ordinary domestic and community life while also demonstrating the possibilities of female agency. Through the lives of Shaista, Asifa, Jameela, Arifa, Aashraf, Amina, Mehaboob Bi, Akhila, and Razia, *Heart Lamp* becomes a significant exploration of women’s lived experiences and the social structures that shape them.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity provides a useful starting point for understanding the social construction of femininity in *Heart Lamp*. Butler argues that “gender is ... instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 179). In this sense, is continuously produced through repeated social practices. This idea is particularly relevant to “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!” The unnamed narrator is trained from childhood to become an obedient daughter and later an obedient wife. She is taught modesty, silence, submission,

and acceptance of male authority. After marriage, her identity becomes largely defined through her relationship with her husband. Her repeated performance of obedience does not arise from free choice; it is produced through social conditioning. The story therefore illustrates how femininity can become a learned pattern of behaviour through which patriarchal society regulates women's lives.

Butler's theory also helps us understand Arifa in "High-Heeled Shoe." Her husband wants her to wear fashionable shoes so that she can resemble a wealthier woman. The shoes become a symbol of socially constructed femininity: Arifa is expected to change her body and appearance to satisfy a male desire for elegance and status. Yet the shoes do not fit her feet and cause physical suffering. Her eventual destruction of the shoes can therefore be read symbolically as a rejection of an externally imposed feminine identity. She chooses bodily safety and the well-being of her unborn child over an artificial performance of sophistication.

The politics of the female body is another significant concern in these stories. Susan Bordo's feminist analysis of the body is particularly useful because she argues that "the body ... is a medium of culture" (Bordo, 165). The female body is not simply biological; it becomes a site upon which social expectations are written. This concept is visible in several stories. In "*Heart Lamp*," Mehrun's body and reproductive life are subjected to the expectations of marriage and family. She has several children and experiences abandonment by her husband, while her family insists that she return to him rather than challenge the social order. Her body, marriage, and motherhood are therefore inseparable from the demands of family honour.

The unnamed woman in "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!" provides an even more powerful example. She undergoes repeated pregnancies despite physical exhaustion and later requires surgery. Even while she is recovering, her husband demands the gold chain given to her by her mother because he intends to marry another woman. Her body and possessions are treated as objects over which her husband believes he has authority. Her experience demonstrates how patriarchal power can operate simultaneously through sexuality, reproduction, property, and marriage.

Nancy Chodorow's feminist psychoanalytic approach to motherhood also offers a productive perspective. Chodorow argues that "women's mothering is a central feature of the social organization of gender" (Chodorow, 3). Motherhood in Mushtaq's stories is not merely a biological relationship; it becomes a source of responsibility, emotional strength,

and sometimes resistance. This is especially evident in *Heart Lamp*. When Mehrun is about to end her life, her daughter Salma intervenes and reminds her of her responsibilities towards her children. Mehrun's decision to continue living emerges through her relationship with her children. Motherhood becomes both a burden imposed by social circumstances and a source of emotional meaning.

A similar complexity appears in "High-Heeled Shoe." Arifa's awareness of her unborn child changes her response to the physical pain caused by the shoes. She finally breaks them, symbolically rejecting the social pressure represented by the shoes. Her maternal consciousness becomes a source of agency. Thus, Mushtaq complicates the representation of motherhood: it can involve suffering and social expectation, but it can also provide women with a reason to resist harmful pressures.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the tendency to represent women from the Global South as a single, homogeneous group is particularly relevant to *Heart Lamp*. Mohanty warns against the construction of the "'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (Mohanty, 17). Mushtaq's stories resist precisely such simplification. Mehrun, Arifa, Bi Dadi, Shaziya, the lawyer-narrator, and the unnamed woman in "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!" do not have identical experiences. Some are economically vulnerable; others possess education or social privilege. Some experience oppression within marriage, while others participate in family decisions or observe injustice from positions of relative security.

"A Taste of Heaven" is especially significant in this regard. Bi Dadi is an elderly widow whose identity has been shaped by a lifetime of domestic service and religious devotion. Her attachment to the prayer rug represents her emotional connection with a lost past. When the rug is accidentally damaged, her suppressed grief resurfaces. Her eventual withdrawal into an imagined "heaven" can be interpreted as a psychological response to loneliness and emotional neglect. Her experience demonstrates that women's oppression cannot be understood only through marriage or direct male violence. Age, widowhood, emotional isolation, and domestic invisibility can also shape women's lives.

The relationship between women, labour, and invisibility is further illustrated by Yaseen Bua in "The Shroud." She is a poor former servant who saves money to fulfill her religious wish of being buried in a shroud associated with Mecca. Shaziya, a wealthy woman, casually promises to fulfill the request but later forgets it. The contrast between the two

women exposes the intersection of gender and class. Bua's poverty makes her dependent upon the goodwill of a socially privileged woman. Her final humiliation demonstrates how economic inequality can reduce the ability of poor women to have their wishes and dignity respected.

This dimension may be connected with Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between different forms of capital, particularly economic and social capital. However, unlike the earlier discussion of symbolic power, the emphasis here is on how unequal access to material resources influences personal dignity and social relationships. Shaziya possesses economic and social privilege, while Bua possesses neither. The tragedy of the story emerges from this unequal relationship. Mushtaq consequently transforms a seemingly simple incident involving a shroud into a criticism of class-based indifference.

The issue of domestic violence in "The Arabic Teacher and Gobi Manchuri" can be approached through the feminist analysis of domestic space. The story initially presents the Arabic teacher as religious, modest, and disciplined. However, after his marriage, he beats his wife because of his obsession with a particular dish. The contrast between his public religious image and private behaviour exposes the gap between social respectability and ethical conduct. The story therefore suggests that religious appearance does not automatically guarantee moral behaviour. Women may remain vulnerable even when men occupy positions associated with religious learning and respectability.

Sara Ahmed's feminist idea that "feminism is homework" (Ahmed, 7) is also useful for understanding Mushtaq's emphasis on everyday life. Ahmed uses "homework" to suggest that feminism requires continuous work and reflection, particularly in spaces such as the home where inequalities are repeatedly produced. Mushtaq's stories similarly locate gender politics within ordinary domestic incidents. A pair of shoes, a marriage dispute, a prayer rug, a religious lesson, a shroud, or a family argument becomes a means of exposing larger structures of gender inequality. The stories suggest that oppression does not always announce itself through dramatic events; it is frequently embedded in routine behaviour.

The unnamed narrator of "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!" represents the culmination of this critical perspective. Her prayer-like monologue transforms private suffering into a broader social accusation. Her childhood restrictions, forced adjustment to marriage, dowry-related humiliation, separation from her mother, repeated pregnancies, illness, and husband's remarriage reveal the cumulative nature of patriarchal oppression. Her final appeal to God is

significant because it reverses the traditional structure of authority. She asks the ultimate authority to experience the life of a woman and thereby understand women's suffering. Her speech transforms silence into testimony.

The selected stories of *Heart Lamp* demonstrate that women's lives are shaped by multiple and overlapping forces: gender expectations, marriage, motherhood, class, age, religion, economic dependence, and social honour. Mushtaq's achievement lies in presenting these experiences through ordinary characters and situations rather than abstract theoretical arguments. Her women are neither uniformly submissive nor uniformly rebellious. They occupy different positions and respond to oppression in different ways. Through their experiences, *Heart Lamp* reveals that the struggle for dignity and agency often begins within the seemingly private spaces of the home and family. The stories therefore constitute a nuanced critique of patriarchal society while also recognising the emotional complexity, resilience, and diverse forms of agency through which women negotiate their lives.

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