



SHACKLED HEARTS, EXTINGUISHED LAMPS: PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN BANU MUSHTAQ'S *HEART LAMP*

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ABSTRACT

The 2025 International Booker Prize awarded to Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*—a collection of twelve short stories translated into English by Deepa Bhashti—constitutes a landmark recognition of the universality of women's suffering under patriarchal structures. Written over three decades, from 1990 to 2023, the stories illuminate the everyday struggles of Muslim women against conditions of systemic injustice and institutionalised helplessness. Denied education, confined to domestic servitude, and compelled to subordinate their desires to male appetites sanctified by religious authority, Mushtaq's female characters expose what Betty Friedan famously called "the problem that has no name"—the invisible yet totalising architecture of women's oppression (Friedan 15). Drawing on her background as a lawyer, Mushtaq anatomises the societal victimisation of women with unflinching clarity, situating individual suffering within the larger structures of patriarchal politics, religion, caste, and class. This paper undertakes a close reading of three stories from *Heart Lamp*—"Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," the titular "*Heart Lamp*," and "*Black Cobras*"—to explore the intricacies of the nexus between patriarchy, social norms, and religious authority that has left women paralysed and demeaned across generations.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Discrimination, Victimisation, Systemic Oppression, Muslim Women, Feminist Literary Criticism, Banu Mushtaq

INTRODUCTION

Banu Mushtaq's receipt of international recognition for her bold and unflinching representation of women's inner worlds is a long-overdue acknowledgement that women's lives—and their suffering—matter. Through Deepa Bhashti's English translation, Mushtaq's project of exposing the inherent inhumanity and discrimination normalised within Muslim communities—practices that, as she carefully demonstrates, are common to women across religious traditions—has finally reached a global readership, a development of particular significance for regional-language writers working within India's vernacular literary traditions. The stories present what Elaine Showalter describes as the "muted" female experience: an interior world systematically occluded by dominant cultural scripts (Showalter 29). They further substantiate the universality of women's suffering by revealing structural patterns that transcend geography and culture.

V. Geetha's analysis in the opening chapter of her foundational study *Gender*, titled "God Made You Different, Nature Made Us Different," makes clear that the subordinate role and status assigned to women across the world has been systematically naturalised as innate inferiority. Drawing on a comparative survey of world religions and ancient societies, Geetha demonstrates how sacred texts across traditions have codified women's bodies as inherently inferior and sinful, and therefore fit to be controlled by men (Geetha 3–5). She quotes the ancient Hindu text *Manusmriti*, which from the moment of creation allocated to women traits such as deceitfulness, moral weakness, and irrationality. Ancient Greek philosophy reinforced this view: Aristotle considered men the measure of human perfection, and women inherently deficient in reason and moral capacity (Geetha 7). Whether in Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, Geetha argues, similar assumptions about female inferiority have been normalised across millennia, trapping women in structures of subordination that present themselves as natural and divinely sanctioned (Geetha 10). It is precisely these deep-rooted assumptions—their historical origins, their institutional mechanisms, and their lived consequences—that Banu Mushtaq anatomises across the twelve stories of *Heart Lamp*.

This paper undertakes a close reading of three stories from the collection: "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," "*Heart Lamp*," and "*Black Cobras*." Through these texts, it attempts to unmask the naturalised discriminatory beliefs, customs, and practices—notions of womanhood, motherhood, morality, and religious obligation—that have pushed women into a condition of degradation so complete that it renders itself invisible. The analysis draws on feminist theory, including Kate Millett's concept of sexual politics, Simone de Beauvoir's account of women's alterity, and postcolonial feminist frameworks attentive to the intersection of religion and patriarchy, in order to illuminate the mechanisms through which Mushtaq's fictional world operates.

**"Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal": Language, Marriage, and the Architecture of Servitude**

In the very first story of the collection, Mushtaq portrays the invisible fetters of what she implicitly identifies as the eternal feminine—a condition in which women are rendered oblivious to their own oppression through the internalisation of patriarchal norms. Zeenat, the educated and newly married narrator of the story, brings to her marriage a critical rationality that functions as a defamiliarising lens on marital relations. The story opens with a seemingly mundane problem: Zeenat must decide how to address her husband. Yet the words available to her—maneyavaru (home person), Yajamana (owner), Ganda (male), and Pati, which immediately invokes devaru (God)—reveal a language inscribed with sexism (Mushtaq 6–7). As Millett argues, language is one of the primary sites through which patriarchal ideology reproduces itself, naturalising hierarchies of power within the most intimate social unit: the family (Millett 36). Mushtaq's dark humour here operates as a critical instrument, exposing the implicit power asymmetries encoded in everyday marital discourse.

The story establishes its central argument through Zeenat's reflection on the Islamic framework governing marital relations: "...for us Muslims, it is said that other than Allah above, our pati is God on earth. Suppose there comes a situation where the husband's body is full of sores, with pus and blood oozing out from them, it is said that even if the wife uses her tongue to lick these wounds clean, she will still not be able to completely repay the debt she owes him." (Mushtaq 8)

This passage encapsulates the ideological structure of female servitude that Mushtaq dissects throughout the collection. The wife is constructed not merely as subordinate but as perpetually indebted—her labour, her body, and her selfhood permanently mortgaged to the husband. De Beauvoir's foundational insight in *The Second Sex*—that woman has been defined throughout history as Other, as the negative term against which man constitutes his identity as Subject—is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in this formulation of wifely obligation (de Beauvoir 16).

The ideal of romantic love is subjected to particular scrutiny through Zeenat's observations of the seemingly exemplary marriage of Iftikar Ahmed and Shaista. Iftikar presents himself as the devoted husband: he has planted his wife's favourite jasmine creeper and guava tree in their compound, and declares grandly that "if I were an emperor, I would have built a palace to put even the Taj Mahal to shame, and call it Shaista Mahal" (Mushtaq 12). The reference to the Taj Mahal is a masterpiece of bitter irony. Mushtaq invokes the celebrated monument as a symbol of the lethal logic of patriarchal love: Mumtaz Mahal, the empress to whom the Taj Mahal was dedicated, died delivering her fourteenth child, her body exhausted by Shah Jahan's insatiable desire for both heirs and erotic possession. The gesture of commemoration, however magnificent, belongs to the dead woman; the living woman has only obligation and expenditure. Shaista similarly meets her end after the birth of her seventh child, her physical resources depleted by Iftikar's "love" (Mushtaq 19).

The story's most devastating critique, however, is reserved for Asifa, Shaista and Iftikar's eldest daughter. Shaista's wish for Asifa to receive a college education—"it is my wish to see Asifa also wear such a gown and get a photo taken like this"—is sacrificed to Iftikar's reproductive appetite (Mushtaq 15). Asifa is pulled out of school to manage the household and care for her younger siblings, becoming, as Shaista acknowledges with painful irony, not a daughter but a surrogate mother: "Asifa is not my daughter: she is like my mother" (Mushtaq 18). What sounds like a compliment in fact encapsulates the enforced premature adulthood that patriarchy visits upon daughters, consuming their futures in the service of male desire. The story closes with Asifa surrounded by children, an infant in her arms and tears flowing from her eyes—an image that crystallises the intergenerational reproduction of women's oppression.

The denouement of the story is equally unsparing: within forty days of Shaista's death—the prescribed mourning period—Iftikar remarries a girl barely older than Asifa herself. His ostentatious declarations of love are exposed as hollow, his grief as performative. Mushtaq's satirical deployment of Islamic provisions permitting men to marry multiple wives underlines her argument that religious sanction has been consistently co-opted to legitimise sexual exploitation and to foreclose women's reproductive autonomy.

"Heart Lamp": Abandonment, Maternal Solidarity, and the Limits of Patriarchal Belonging

The titular story of the collection intensifies the critique of Islamic marital institutions by focusing on the plight of Mehrun, discarded by her husband Inayat after sixteen years of marriage and five children. The ease with which Islamic law permits men to divorce unwanted wives, combined with the absolute absence of social support for abandoned women, places Muslim women in a condition of extreme vulnerability: simultaneously unwelcome in their marital home and in their natal family, they occupy, as de Beauvoir would put it, the position of the perpetual outsider, belonging nowhere and to no one (de Beauvoir 9).

Mehrun's crisis begins when Inayat establishes an extramarital relationship and ceases to support his family. Her return to her natal home for emotional support and material sustenance is met not with solidarity but with suspicion, cold calculation, and blame:

"I fell at your feet, saying that I didn't want to get married. Did you listen? I said, I will wear burkha and go to college. I begged you not to make me stop studying. None of you listened to me. Many of my classmates aren't even married, and yet I have become an old woman. I have the burden of five children on me. Their father is roaming around, and I don't have a life. When a man is doing such a haram thing, are none of you able to ask him why he is doing this?" (Mushtaq 101)



Mehrun's outburst is not merely an expression of personal grief; it is a precise retrospective account of the structural conditions that produced her vulnerability. She had begged for education; she had been denied it. She had been married against her will at a young age; she had had no choice. Mushtaq here echoes the argument advanced by Mukherjee and others that the denial of education to women is not an incidental oversight but a systemic strategy for maintaining their dependence on male authority (Mukherjee 112). Without education or employable skills, Mehrun has no recourse outside marriage; and within marriage, she has no protection against her husband's caprice.

The response of Mehrun's family is illuminating in its cruelty. Her brothers, rather than questioning Inayat's infidelity, defend his behaviour and locate the cause of the marital breakdown in Mehrun's supposed failures as a wife. Her brother's pronouncement—"The house that your dholi goes to should be the house from which your dhola comes out. That's the life of a decent woman" (Mushtaq 103)—encapsulates the patriarchal logic through which women are defined entirely by their marital status. To be abandoned is, within this framework, to have failed as a woman. As Millett demonstrates in *Sexual Politics*, the family functions as the primary institution through which patriarchal ideology is transmitted and enforced; the complicity of Mehrun's own natal family in her oppression illustrates the extent to which women internalise and perpetuate the very structures that subjugate them (Millett 53).

De Beauvoir's concept of male solidarity—the implicit fraternal compact through which men collectively sustain their dominance over women—is dramatised when Mehrun's brothers accompany her back to Chikamagalur and proceed to counsel her to manage Inayat's "fling" with greater patience and tact, without once questioning his conduct (de Beauvoir 128). The scene illuminates a patriarchal architecture in which women are, as de Beauvoir argues, systematically denied the standing of subjects: they are managed, adjudicated, and returned to their assigned positions, but never heard.

The story's resolution turns, crucially, on the figure of Salma, Mehrun's eldest daughter, whose attentiveness and emotional intelligence offer the only genuine care in the narrative. It is Salma—herself at risk of inheriting her mother's fate—who persuades Mehrun to reclaim her sense of purpose and live for her children rather than perish for an unworthy man. The story's title, "Heart Lamp," operates as a metaphor for precisely this awakening: the inner light of self-worth and purpose that patriarchy systematically attempts to extinguish, but which female solidarity and maternal love can rekindle. As Showalter notes in her account of women's literary tradition, the motif of female illumination—the lamp, the fire, the interior light—recurs across women's writing as a figure for consciousness that patriarchy cannot entirely suppress (Showalter 31).

"Black Cobras": Religious Authority, Male Solidarity, and the Expendability of Female Life

"Black Cobras" represents the collection's most explicit engagement with the nexus between institutional religion and patriarchal power. The story centres on Aashraf, abandoned by her husband Yakub—a rickshaw driver—on the grounds that she has produced three daughters and no male heir. Left destitute, unable to afford medical treatment for her infant daughter Munni, Aashraf approaches Abdul Khader Saheb, the mutawalli of the local mosque, seeking judicial intervention to compel Yakub to support his family. The story is structured as a sustained confrontation between Aashraf's desperate maternal need and the institutional indifference of the religio-patriarchal order she petitions.

Mushtaq establishes the ideological terrain of the story through a juxtaposition of extraordinary precision. While Aashraf and her children shiver in rags on the steps of the mosque in cold and rain, the mutawalli sits at home, warm and well-fed, his mind drifting to erotic contemplation of his wife Amina:

"...the jewel-like Amina, who had borne him seven children in ten years of marriage, her body, her saree smelling of garlic, fresh ginger and garam masala, her breasts round and full since she was still breastfeeding the youngest baby..." (Mushtaq 43)

This juxtaposition is a masterstroke of critical realism. The mutawalli, Allah's appointed representative in the community, is revealed to be morally indistinguishable from Yakub: he too denies his wife reproductive autonomy, reducing Amina to an object of carnal satisfaction and biological productivity. His eroticisation of Amina's nursing body renders visible the violence that patriarchal desire inflicts on women's bodies even within apparently loving marriages. The contrast between his comfortable domesticity and Aashraf's exposure on the mosque steps enacts, spatially and viscerally, the unequal distribution of protection and precarity that patriarchy generates (Millett 25–27).

Yakub's justification for abandoning his family is framed in the language of religious entitlement:

"God's law says get married not just to one woman, but four. Should women give up their honour and dignity and come to the mosque? I waited for not one, but ten years. Did she give birth to even one boy? And the way she runs her mouth? Abbabbaa! Is that a sign of a woman from a respectable family? So I married another woman. So what?" (Mushtaq 44)

Yakub's invocation of divine law to legitimise abandonment illustrates what Leila Ahmed has described as the systematic misappropriation of Islamic jurisprudence to serve male interests while suppressing its provisions for women's rights (Ahmed 89). The logic of his argument rests on three interlocking claims: that a wife's primary obligation is to produce male heirs; that a wife who voices complaint has forfeited her respectability; and that Islamic law unconditionally authorises men to take multiple wives. All three claims are, as Mushtaq carefully demonstrates through her character Zulekha Begum, misrepresentations of Islamic teaching.



Zulekha Begum—educated, articulate, and the wife of a government officer—functions in the story as Mushtaq's most important heroine, precisely because she operates from within the Islamic tradition to dismantle its patriarchal misappropriation. She informs Aashraf that the Prophet Muhammad himself had only daughters, his sole son having died in infancy, and that the Prophet cherished his daughter Bibi Fatima above all (Mushtaq 48). More significantly, she clarifies the conditional nature of Islamic provisions for polygamy:

"Look, for any man to marry four wives, there has to be a right reason for it. If it is wartime, if many men are dying in the war, then a man can marry more than once. If the wife is suffering from a long-term incurable disease, or if she cannot have children, then he can marry again. Else, if he cannot get satisfaction from one..." (Mushtaq 52)

Zulekha further clarifies that the Sharia law does not release a remarried man from his obligations towards his first wife: "he has to ensure that he does not make even a little distinction between the two wives and treats them both equally" (Mushtaq 53). She also enumerates the rights explicitly granted to women in the Quran and Hadith—the right to education, the right to choose a husband, the right to meher (bride price), the right to a share in parental property, and the right to divorce and remarriage—and indicts the religio-patriarchal establishment for systematically withholding this knowledge from women (Mushtaq 53). Ahmed's scholarship corroborates Zulekha's account: the egalitarian ethical impulse of early Islamic teaching has been repeatedly overwritten by patriarchal jurisprudence in the service of male power (Ahmed 66).

The mutawalli's response to Aashraf's petition demonstrates precisely the mechanisms of institutional bad faith that Zulekha describes. He dismisses her petitions as lost, deflects her appeals with theological non sequiturs - "life and death are decided at the wish of Allah"- and, after accepting Yakub's hospitality, arrives at the mosque to pronounce his judgment. The climax is an act of frank violence: Yakub kicks Aashraf with full force, sending her head to the ground and the infant Munni flying from her arms. The mutawalli's silent endorsement of this assault constitutes a formal declaration that the religio-patriarchal order will use physical force to enforce women's submission (Mushtaq 57).

Munni's death—the infant who never "tasted happiness"- is not a metaphor but a verdict. Mushtaq presents the death of a female infant as the logical outcome of a system in which daughters are liabilities, mothers are expendable, and the guardians of divine law are complicit in the destruction of the most vulnerable. Aashraf's thought at Munni's funeral - "I don't have to go behind Yakub begging; I don't have to chase this mutawalli, begging; I don't have to answer inhumane questions; there is me, and my two children" (Mushtaq 59)- is not a resolution but a further indictment: the system has failed so completely that Aashraf can only experience the death of her child as a form of relief. The story closes with women in the crowd cursing the departing mutawalli - an act of conscientisation without institutional power, resistance without recourse.

CONCLUSION

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, across the three stories examined here, constructs a comprehensive anatomy of patriarchal power as it operates through the interlocking institutions of marriage, family, religion, and community governance. Whether her subject is Shaista - a rich man's wife devoured by her husband's romantic self-mythology - or Mehruna - middle-class woman abandoned by both her husband and her natal family - or Aashraf - a working-class woman destroyed by the convergence of male selfishness and institutional indifference - Mushtaq demonstrates that the mechanisms of women's oppression are structurally consistent across class positions and economic circumstances. As Geetha argues, the naturalisation of female inferiority is so deeply embedded in religious, cultural, and linguistic formations that it reproduces itself across generations without requiring explicit coercion (Geetha 19). What Mushtaq adds to this analysis is a precise delineation of the points at which naturalisation breaks down - where Zeenat's critical gaze, Mehrun's anguished outburst, or Zulekha's jurisprudential lucidity punctures the ideological surface and the violence, both physical and symbolic, with which the system reasserts itself.

The collection is also a statement about the relationship between education and emancipation. Zeenat and Zulekha, the two educated women in these stories, are the only characters capable of naming the structures that oppress them. Asifa, Mehrun, and Aashraf - all denied the education they sought - remain partially or wholly vulnerable to manipulation precisely because they lack the conceptual vocabulary with which to contest their conditions. This is not a counsel of despair but a precise political diagnosis: the lamp that the collection's title invokes is the lamp of knowledge, the interior illumination that education cultivates, and that patriarchy systematically extinguishes. Mushtaq's literary project is, in this sense, an act of that very education - an attempt to ignite in her readers the critical consciousness that her fictional system works so hard to suppress.

The 2025 International Booker Prize recognition of *Heart Lamp* marks a significant moment in the global reception of South Asian women's writing. It signals, as Rege argued in a different but related context, that feminist discourse must attend to the specific intersections of caste, class, religion, and gender that shape women's experiences in South Asia, and that regional-language literatures are indispensable to that project (Rege qtd. in Gaikwad). Mushtaq's achievement is to have made the interior lives of Muslim women in Karnataka not simply visible, but urgently, inescapably legible to the world.



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