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Heart Lamp: Illuminating the Battlefield of the Home in Banu Mushtaq's Stories

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Abstract

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories* (2025), translated from Kannada by Deepa Bhasthi, offers a searing indictment of patriarchal violence within the domestic sphere of Muslim communities in southern India. This paper argues that Mushtaq systematically dismantles the romanticised notion of "home" as a sanctuary, instead presenting it as the primary battlefield where women negotiate survival, resist erasure, and occasionally find solidarity. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and Islamic feminist critique, this analysis examines how the collections twelve stories, from the polygamy crisis in "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal" to the tragic broken promise of "The Shroud", construct the home as a space of economic exploitation, religious hypocrisy, bodily violence, and contested agency. Through close reading of key narratives, this paper demonstrates that Mushtaq's radical contribution lies in locating revolutionary potential not in public protest but in the whispered conversations, silent tears, and small refusals that unfold within kitchen walls, bedroom doors, and front-yard thresholds.

Keywords: Banu Mushtaq, Kannada literature, Islamic feminism, domestic violence, postcolonial feminism, Indian Muslim women, translation studies.

Introduction

The opening pages of *Heart Lamp* introduce a paradox that reverberates throughout Banu Mushtaq's collection. In "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," the narrator Zeenat describes her desperate flight from the *"concrete jungle"* of urban life, the *"flamboyant apartment buildings stacked like matchboxes,"* the *"smoke-*

spewing, horn-blaring vehicles," the *"people with no love for one another"* (Mushtaq 7). She finds refuge, she believes, in the *"beautiful quarters at the Krishnaraja Sagara dam project,"* surrounded by jackfruit and lemon trees, jasmine and rose plants. Yet within pages, this domestic paradise reveals itself as a different kind of prison, one where the husband is absent *"twenty-eight out of twenty-four hours every day,"* and the wife sits *"ranting about this so-called husband"* to an invisible audience (Mushtaq 8). This tension between the ideal of home as refuge and the reality of home as battlefield structures every story in Mushtaq's collection.

The Kannada original of Heart Lamp, selected from two volumes, *Haseena Mathu Ithara Kathegalu* (2013) and *Hennu Haddina Swayamvara* (2023), has established Mushtaq as a leading voice in the 'Bandaya' (protest) literary tradition. As translator Deepa Bhasthi notes in her afterword, 'Bandaya' Sahitya emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as an act of protest against upper- caste, male-dominated Kannada literature, urging *"women, Dalits and other social and religious minorities to tell stories from within their own lived experiences"* (Bhasthi 188). Mushtaq's innovation lies in locating the battleground of this protest squarely within the domestic sphere - the kitchen, the bedroom, the front yard, the mosque courtyard attached to the home. This paper argues that *Heart Lamp* systematically dismantles the romanticised notion of "home" as sanctuary, presenting it instead as the primary site of patriarchal violence, economic exploitation, religious hypocrisy, and bodily suffering. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and Islamic feminist critique, the researcher examines how Mushtaq's stories construct the home as a contested space where women negotiate survival through silence, strategic speech, bodily endurance, and occasional acts of resistance. The collection's radical contribution lies not in dramatic public rebellions but in illuminating the quiet, often invisible battles that unfold within domestic thresholds.

Theoretical Framework: The Home as a Category of Analysis

Feminist scholars have long challenged the public/private divide that relegates the home to a pre- political, naturalised space. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues in Feminism Without Borders, the "private sphere" is not a refuge from power but a domain thoroughly constituted by intersecting systems of gender, class, race, and religion (Mohanty 42). For Muslim women in contemporary India, this intersectionality takes specific forms: the home is governed not only by state

law but also by religious personal law (Sharia as interpreted by patriarchal authorities), community norms enforced by mosque committees, and the economic dependencies produced by restricted mobility and labour markets.

Mushtaq's work can be situated within what Margot Badran terms "Islamic feminism"- a framework that distinguishes between the Quran's foundational principles of justice and the patriarchal interpretations that have historically dominated Islamic jurisprudence. As Badran writes, Islamic feminists argue that "patriarchy is not divinely ordained but is a product of human interpretation and social custom" (Badran 242). This distinction is crucial for reading *Heart Lamp*, for Mushtaq's characters rarely reject Islam itself. Instead, they appeal to its promises of justice - the right to property, the right to dignified treatment, the prohibition against cruelty, only to find those promises nullified by male religious authorities. The home in Mushtaq's stories thus operate as what Pierre Bourdieu would call a "site of struggle" where competing forms of capital, economic, cultural, symbolic, religious - are deployed and contested (Bourdieu 40). The husband's authority derives not from inherent superiority but from his control over wages, his access to religious discourse, his ability to marry additional wives, and his command over the physical space of the house. Women's resistance, correspondingly, takes forms appropriate to their limited capital: tears, silence, gossip, strategic compliance, and occasional physical refusals.

The Economic Battlefield: Wages, Dowry, and Unpaid Labour

Perhaps the most pervasive form of domestic violence in *Heart Lamp* is economic. Across the collection, women are valued for their dowries, their unpaid domestic labour, and their reproductive capacity and discarded when these resources are exhausted.

"Fire Rain" offers a devastating case study. Aashraf, abandoned by her husband Yakub after bearing three daughters, survives by working in Zulekha Begum's house while her infant Munni wastes away from malnutrition and illness. When she finally locates Yakub, he stuffs a ten-rupee note into her hands *"as if she was some beggar"* and disappears (Mushtaq 48). The mosque's mutawalli, whom she petitions for justice, invokes religious fatalism: *"Maut and hayat, our death and life, is in Allah's hands"* (Mushtaq 47). The economic logic is transparent: daughters have no exchange value; a wife who cannot produce male heirs is worthless. Munni's death from preventable illness becomes the tragic conclusion of

this calculus. *"Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!"* directs this economic critique directly at God. The unnamed narrator, whose name is redacted and replaced by the designation *"his wife,"* explains how her husband seeks *"fifty thousand rupees from your parent's house immediately"* (Mushtaq 181). When her mother sells it all to deliver twenty thousand rupees, she dies in an accident on the way and the husband forbids the narrator to go to the funeral. The gold chain that her mother melted from her own wedding gold to create for her daughter comes, at the story's crisis points, as a demand from the husband for his new wife:

"I am getting married again. I want to give it to the new girl" (Mushtaq 185).

The chain is a metonym for the value transference between mother and daughter, from one man's household to another, a value that the husband has the potential to claim and reappropriate as desired. Mushtaq's economic analysis also extends to the internal divisions within the household.In "A Decision of the Heart," the conflict between Akhila and her mother-in-law Mehaboob Bi is structured by the husband Yusuf's nervous allocation of resources:

> *"If he bought a small TV for Akhila, the same kind of TV would grace Mehaboob Bi's house too. If he bought a kerosene stove for Akhila, a similar one for Mehaboob Bi; if he bought a watermelon for this house, a watermelon of the same size for that house too"* (Mushtaq 57).

This parody of equality puts the husband in the distributor role and not a partner. In this way, women compete not for love but for the tangible marks of notice. When Akhila kicks a watermelon to pieces, she destroys not fruit but the symbol of having entered money into her ledger. The story turns the economic gaze inside out.

"The Shroud" investigates not the poverty of dispossessed people, but rather the moral poverty of the wealthy. When she returned from Hajj, Shaziya forgot the six thousand rupees Yaseen Bua gave her in order to buy a '*kafan'* (shroud) soaked in Zamzam water. Upon the death of Yaseen Bua, Shaziya searches frantically for a new '*kafan'*; it becomes a parable of class guilt. She calls relatives and friends, only to be greeted with laughter or evasion. One responder's sardonic

question: *"Do you want the kafan?"* (Mushtaq 165) implies the unspoken fact that the rich are comfortable giving charity to the living but cannot bear the burden of a promise made to the dead. The concluding image of the story, Shaziya believing that, *"it was not Yaseen Bua's last rites being performed, but her own"* (Mushtaq 167) reverses the class hierarchy. The poor woman's unfulfilled desire will become the rich woman's spiritual death.

The Religious Battlefield: Scripture, Authority, and Hypocrisy

If economics structures the material conditions of domestic life, religion serves as its legitimising ideology. Throughout *Heart Lamp* male religious authorities:utawallis, maulvis, husbands invoking Sharia, rely on Islam as justification for polygamy, divorce, denial of property rights,and control of women's bodies. But Mushtaq is also careful to differentiate between faith as practiced by women and religion as imposed by men.

"Fire Rain" provides the most sustained critique of institutional religious authority. The mutawalli, Usman Saheb, runs a home in which his wife Arifa's exhaustion goes unnoticed, his sister Jameela's demand for her legal inheritance goes unheeded and his eldest sister Sakeena, a widow is called to stand in the veranda with male worshippers and seek employment for her son. When Aashraf takes her dying child to the mosque, the mutawalli, seeking justice on behalf of Aashraf against the man leaving her, resorts to Sharia to refuse her:

> *"He has done another nikah, that's all, isn' t it? He didn't elope with anyone, did he? ... Do you know there is a Sharia law that says he can get married to four women?"* (Mushtaq 47).

But Mushtaq inserts a dissenter: Zulekha Begum, the learned woman who reads "fat-fat books" and gives Aashraf detailed instructions on what Islamic law demands of him. As Zulekha comments, polygamy can only take place when certain conditions are present, for example, during wartime, when the wife is ill with an incurable illness or without children—and, in those situations, all wives have to be treated equally. The mutawalli, she claims, *"doesn't know"* the law himself; he accepts only that part of the law which suits him and nothing else (Mushtaq 48). This division between scripture and its patriarchal interpretation is crucial to Mushtaq's project. The mosque, which was meant to be a place of justice, becomes also a place of betrayal. When Yakub kicks Aashraf on the steps of the mosque and Munni dies, there is a spiritual void created that is irrevocably desecrated.

"Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!" takes it to its theological core. The narrator directly addresses God, asking why He made a world where men have power:

> *"All of these—that is, these sparkling green-coloured crickets, these colours everywhere, shining stones, the fragrant mud, the breeze, this sweet smell, these plants and trees and fields and forests, the roaring ocean, this rain, a paper boat in the rain—all of these are things I cannot touch, cannot soak in, cannot smell, cannot see, up to which I cannot lift my face. You have offered all these things to him, for your supreme creation, isn't it?"* (Mushtaq 180).

The accumulation of sensory details denied to the narrator, adds up to a devastating charge: God has fashioned beauty for men and imprisonment for women. The last plea in the story *"Be a woman once, oh Lord!"* (Mushtaq 187) isn't apostasy but, rather, a demand that the divine be constrained in order that half of humanity see the limit given them.

"The Shroud" is a more nuanced attack on religious hypocrisy. Shaziya's Hajj pilgrimage–the spiritual zenith of a Muslim's life, an act that turns into shopping, competition and failed commitment transforms into a shopping trip. She negotiates for Turkish carpet without considering '*kafan*' that she promised Yaseen Bua, and she is bargaining for carpets. The other pilgrims are stealing Zamzam water to wash shrouds for their entire families to wash as one cloth for family. The sacred is so relentlessly commodified. When Shaziya returns, she distributes prayer mats and dates as if checking items off a list, never realizing that *kafan* was not a transaction but a dying woman's last wish. The story implies that religious ritual, divorced from ethical obligation, becomes a kind of spiritual consumerism and the home, packed with Hajj souvenirs, is a museum of missed opportunities to embrace real compassion.

The Bodily Battlefield: Pregnancy, Illness and Pain.

No interpretation of *Heart Lamp* can deny the gut, visceral, physical reality of women's pain. Mushtaq is not about to romanticize the female form; she is not about spiritualising or sentimentalizing it. Instead, she depicts that body as a material venue where patriarchal authority is inscribed through pregnancy, childbirth, illness, domestic work and violence.

"High-Heeled Shoe" is the most extended meditation on the female body under duress in the collection. Arifa, who is already pregnant but fatigued, is obliged to

wear ill-fitting high-heeled shoes because of her husband, Nayaz Khan, a man obsessed with his sister-in-law's shoes. The shoes serve as tools of torture:

> *"Her heels struck out of the shoes quite a lot. They had cracked here and there; their black lines stood out all the more now"* (Mushtaq 113).

It was Arifa's heels, cracks on the feet exposed as signs of her endless domestic labour, that were shattered and exacerbated by the shoes made for play. As she tries to walk, she feels her unborn child cry from within her:

> *"The weight of your whole body feels like it is on me, Amma, and now look, look, I… I don't have any space, Amma..."* (Mushtaq 117).

The unborn child witnesses and becomes a victim of the mother's bodily oppression. Only when Arifa truly has her best to keep the child safe does she get the courage to shatter the shoes that *"exploded into thousands of pieces"* (Mushtaq 118). The image is surreal but precise: patriarchal fashion can't endure maternal fury.

"Red Lungi" explores corporal violence experienced by children. The khatna, mass circumcision organized by Razia, sharply delineates rich from poor: the wealthy children get anaesthesia, sterile bandages, antibiotics and nurses; the poor children in poor conditions receive Ibrahim's knife, ash to halt the bleeding, a red lungi. Arif, the cook's son - five days after circumcision, climbs a guava tree; no medical treatment is given and his wound heals. In the meantime, Razia's son Samad, even after everything is done, has a haemorrhage and is hospitalised. The story rejects simple moralising — the poor boy heals more quickly, only because he hasn't a choice but to pick up again, to carry on working. A mother who has turned to a woman of questionable social status comes with her already-circumcised son, who is hoping to get the wheat and copra to be distributed to participants. The men tease her: *"Bring your husband as well. Let's get him circumcised and give you wheat and copra"* (Mushtaq 83). The joke captures the broader economic logic at work: Women's bodies, and their children's bodies, are tools for harvesting resources from male-centric institutions.

"Heart Lamp" (the title story of the collection and it is placed fifth) focuses on Mehrun's physical and psychological decline after her husband, Inayat, leaves her for a nurse. Her body takes on the characteristics of a "corpse" in bed, inert, unattractive, worthless. When her brothers refuse to help her, she imagines doing it herself:

> *"She rushed to the kitchen, grabbed the matchbox and, gripping it with her right hand, opened the door latch quietly and stepped into the yard again... She poured the kerosene on herself"* (Mushtaq 99).

The act is prevented only by her daughter Salma's embrace. The story resists the redemption arc of "she found strength within herself"; it is the physical touch of another female body, Salma hugging her mother's legs, the baby crying on the ground that brings Mehrun back from death. Solidarity is not abstract but embodied. "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!" comes back to the maternal body as a site of both creation and destruction. The narrator describes her mother's death in an accident while bringing the demanded dowry:

> *"It seems they cut into her dead body." Maybe they didn't cut at her heart. They wouldn't have discovered clotted blood if they had; they would have found a clotted soul, many uncrossable Lakshmana Rekha, innumerable dozen signs of tests by flame"* (Mushtaq 183).

The autopsy emerges as a metaphor: the eye of the doctor does not recognize the actual injury, which is spiritual and structural. The mother's "eternal virgin" status - widowed before puberty, never remarried, haunts the story. Her body was never hers entirely; it falls prey to scrutiny even in death, courtesy of a male authority.

The Battlefield of Silence and Communication: Techniques of Resistance.

If the home is a battlefield, how do women fight? Mushtaq's answer is less black-and-white: to do that they battle in silence, in gossip, in acts of strategy, in purposeful tears, in the rewrites of domestic space, in the retention of female cultural lineages of knowledge.

"Soft Whispers" is an intricate meditation on silence and memory. The older narrator reflects on her eight-year-old self in her grandmother Ajji's village. When Abid, the older boy, kisses her cheek by the pond, she tells Ajji—who responds not with outrage but a *"very brief smile"* and a hug (Mushtaq 132). Abid does not face an abusive response from his grandmother, neither does she punish him or ignore the child's unhappiness. Instead, she has the girl dig groundnuts from the earth—a magical act that turns the land into a wellspring of hidden abundance. The narrative tells us that Ajji does not, in fact, wisdom to the child is only so much about confronting male violence directly, rather her wisdom to guide the child's attention to female food sources and magical power. The underground groundnuts

stand as an example for women's knowledge, which remains under patriarchy and remains beneath the surface only through patriarchal authority.

"Fire Rain" closes with an extraordinary passage of female resistance through indirect speech. Following Munni's death, the mohalla women condemn the mutawalli but never speak directly to him. Hanifa Chikkamma said to "*the wind: May Allah curse you. It is like I saw Shaitan live"* (Mushtaq 54). Rafiya hurls a stone at a *"non-existent dog*." Another woman curses a cock she has raised. The mutawalli's daughter-in-law, who has hardly been known to speak in two years of marriage, tells her daughter: *"Do you want to see a gorilla, my love? Look, there, a gorilla!"* (Mushtaq 54). Through animals, through the air, through children, this kind of indirect attacks are a collective female judgment that the mutawalli can't respond to. All around him are voices that refuse to speak directly to him, helplessly.

"Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal" provides another form of resistance: the maintenance of female memory. When Iftikhar remarries days after Shaista's fortieth day fatiha, Zeenat does not attack him with violence, though; she curses him with advice, too:

> "*It is OK if you do not get a Shaista Mahal built, or stone slabs placed all around her grave… but if your eternal and intense love lands in her place and she were to wake and come back, you will get in trouble"* (Mushtaq 21).

The "stone slabs" of the title are a metaphor for the material traces women leave behind - but not monuments: memories that endure in the face of male efforts to erase them. Asifa, Shaista's only- born daughter, who is cradling her little brother in the garden, her eyes fill with tears. Shaista's words *"She is not my daughter; she's my mother"* (Mushtaq 21) are a reminder to the narrator. Maternal lineage—mother to daughter to granddaughter—serves as a kind of alternative genealogy that patriarchy couldn't entirely separate.

"The Arabic Teacher and Gobi Manchuri" presents the most comic form of resistance in the collection. Because the Arabic teacher is so absorbed with gobi manchuri, he cannot concentrate on marriage or religious obligations and is rather a hafiz who has memorised the entire Qur'an. The two daughters plot with him to cook the snack in their kitchen to fool both parents. When the mother, the lawyer narrator, finds her daughters, she solves the crisis not by discipline but by obtaining a recipe for gobi manchuri and calling her brother to arrange the teacher's marriage.

The story implies that women's knowledge, including knowledge of cooking that men treat as trivial, can defuse patriarchal authority through absurdity. The teacher's obsession with a fried cauliflower snack effectively cheapens his religious authority into farce.

Conclusion

Heart Lamp is named for a moment in the story "Heart Lamp" when Mehrun's daughter Salma, stops her mother's suicide: *"The lamp in Mehrun's heart had been extinguished long ago"* (Mushtaq 97). But the arc of the story leads people to suspect otherwise. Mehrun's heart lamp may flicker, yet if brought down it cannot be extinguished- not while Salma looks on, not while the infant cries out, not even on the physical touch of a female body that can bring her back from death. The lamp is a communal one - bequeathed from mother to daughter, sustained only by feeling and remembering. Banu Mushtaq, through *Heart Lamp*, explores this domestic realm as a theatre of war and struggle, where women have few weapons against one another tears, silence, gossip, indirect curses, and the saving of a recipe and story. The home is not a sanctuary from the world; it is the world in miniature, ruled by the hierarchies of class, religion, and gender that govern public life. But it is also the site of resistance, because it is where women live, work, sleep, bear children, cook, clean and crucially talk to one another.

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