
**Between Veil and Voice: Identity, Oppression, and Selfhood among
Muslim Women in *The Heart Lamp***

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Abstract

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* (2025), the first Kannada work to be awarded the International Booker Prize, offers an unflinching literary exploration of Muslim women's lives in rural Karnataka, India. Comprising twelve short stories written over three decades (1990–2023) and translated into English by Deepa Bhashti, the collection navigates the intricate terrain between communal identity and individual selfhood, between imposed silence and emergent voice. In this paper, the aim is an analytical reading of some of the stories from *Heart Lamp* with the objective of exploring the multidimensionality of oppression faced by Mushtaq's female characters and the various tactics, overt and covert, symbolic and embodied, with which both characters negotiate and resist, or, sometimes, overcome, the constraints of patriarchy, religion and socio-economic power. Intersecting feminist theory, postcolonial criticism and subaltern studies, the analysis reveals how the concept of identity amongst Mushtaq's Muslim women is not fixed but contested, continually negotiated in relation to the various factors of gender, class, religious authority and familial obligations. The paper claims that *Heart Lamp* redefines silence not as a universal acquiescence, but as a multifaceted form of resistance, and Mushtaq's narrative techniques – the use of humour, symbolic use of the body and the absence of heroic ending – a feministic poetics that opens up new spaces for regional Indian literature on the global map.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Identity, Oppression, Selfhood, Karnataka Literature, Banu Mushtaq,

Introduction

For feminist literary criticism, the issue of how marginalised women express selfhood in limited social structures has been a topic of discussion for decades. When patriarchy is supported by religion, economics, and culture, the situations for women to gain agency can be indirect, broken, and ambiguous. Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* joins this conversation with a series of stories that defy the easy mysteries of binaries and offer instead a complex picture of Muslim women in Karnataka living at the crossroads of various power dynamics. The international prize is the collection's historic win, as it is the first Kannada book to be awarded the prize, and it heralds not only the literary quality of Mushtaq's prose but also the cultural relevance of elevating voices that have been marginalised in Indian national literature or international feminist discourse.

It assumes here that the concept of identity for Mushtaq's protagonists is not a stable identity but an ongoing and contested process which is negotiated every day with family, community and institutional forms of identity. The title of this study, "Between Veil and Voice," points to the symbolic and material environments in which these women live: the veil, as both a symbol of religious and gender identity and as a possible covering and safeguarding environment; the voice, as a medium of selfhood, a means of aspiration, and as one that is often denied, suppressed, or strategically withdrawn. The interstitial spaces between these poles are attended to, and the analysis aims to unveil the intertwining layers of agency and constraint that are present in Mushtaq's literary universe. The paper draws on close readings of several stories, including "Black Cobras," "Heart Lamp," "The Shroud," "High-Heeled Shoe," "Red Lungi," "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!," and "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," situating these readings within the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, subaltern studies, and postcolonial feminism.

Intersectionality, Subalternity, and the Question of Voice

There are theoretical tools that provide illumination on the thematic concerns of *Heart Lamp*, and anything serious about it must start with an acknowledgement thereof. Intersectionality, first put forward by Kimberlé Crenshaw and later elaborated by others working in the field, such as Patricia Hill Collins, is a concept that is vital to understanding how gender, class, religion, caste combine to create unique forms of oppression and experience. It is not only a question of gender for Mushtaq's protagonists, it is always a question of gender plus their place in the rural economy, their role as wives, daughters or widows, their position in relation to religious authority and communal expectation. The intersectional lens argues Collins, is indispensable for the women in the stories, as they are the subject of what he calls

"matrices of domination": interlocking systems of power which cannot be broken down into separate elements, but must be explored as mutually constituting.

Given that the subaltern is an object of theorisation, one cannot help but highlight the important work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in theorising, and provoking, the subaltern, especially her provocation in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that the most marginalised subjects are often rendered voiceless not only by direct repression, but by the very structures of representation that claim to speak on their behalf. Throughout the stories, we hear Spivak's dictum, "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow," as women's voices are silenced by familial rules of submission, law, and religion's naturalisation of women's subordination. But Mushtaq's fiction complicates the easy notion of voicelessness, forcing us to consider the possibilities of silence as a means of expression, as a way of withholding, of preserving dignity, or even of surviving in situations where there is no point in resistance or even the danger of it.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's criticism of Western feminist scholarship is another corrective, which tends to de-historicize the concept of the "Third World women" as victims waiting to be liberated. Mohanty emphasizes that women's lives are not uniform and that local context, history and forms of agency must be taken into consideration. As in *Heart Lamp*, through the community she depicts, Mushtaq stands up for what critics have called a "critical insider's perspective," one that eschews romanticization and victimization. Her characters are not heroic revolutionaries, they are not just objects of sympathy, they're women who are not fully heroic, but who are dealing with the specificities of their social worlds, using whatever material, emotional, symbolic means they have at their disposal.

Lastly, it is good to remember Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which focuses on the practice, gesture, and repeated act of the performative in the constitution of identity, rather than the prior essence of it. In *Heart Lamp*, the practice of femininity, whether ritualized as the wife or managed as domestic space or enacted as veils and unveils, is a space of normativity being enacted and, at times, repressed. The analytical challenge is to read these performances sensitively, noticing their ambivalence, in which they can reinforce and resist the prevailing norms of a society all in one act.

The Bandaya Movement and the Literary Context of *Heart Lamp*

The importance of the stories can't be understood without reading it in the literary and political background of the Kannada Bandaya (rebellion) movement. The Bandaya movement, which began in the 1970s, emerged in the wake of caste oppression, class exploitation and gender discrimination to make Kannada literature

a tool for social criticism and voice the voices of the marginalised. The writers of the movement sought to oppose the aestheticist and Brahminical sensibilities of the past and argued that literature should address the material issue of caste, class and gender.

As a lawyer and activist, herself, Mushtaq embraces this legacy and extends the concerns to the special case of Muslim women, a community sorely underrepresented even in progressive literary circles. Her tales are set in the unique world of Muslim communities in rural Karnataka, capturing the ebb and flow of daily existence, the power of religious leaders like mutawalli and the gendered customs of marriage, birth and death. But it is not Mushtaq's involvement with the community that is ahistorical or defensive; it reveals the hypocrisy of patriarchy, the interlocking of religious and familial power in the subordination of women, and the economic systems that make women dependent and vulnerable.

The translator Deepa Bhashti has been very instrumental in translating the Kannada prose from the original into English, and hence in retaining the cultural and linguistic nuances of the original, such as the use of Kannada and Urdu terms, which would be lost if translated into more common European languages. As modern research has pointed out, this accented version helps to maintain a "polyvocal, posthuman voice" that avoids the leveling of local register into a homogenized "global English."

Intersectional Oppression: Gender, Class, and Religious Authority

A central thematic concern of *Heart Lamp* is the entanglement of gender and class in the production of women's oppression. Mushtaq's stories demonstrate that patriarchy does not operate in isolation but is always mediated by economic positioning, familial structures, and the authority of religious institutions. The intersectional character of oppression is vividly illustrated in "Black Cobras," where Aashraf, a poor woman abandoned by her husband Yakub for failing to produce a male heir, seeks redress from the mutawalli, only to be met with indifference and humiliation. Her poverty compounds her gendered vulnerability: she cannot afford legal representation, she lacks the social capital to command the attention of religious authority, and her status as an abandoned wife places her outside the protective structures of family. The story underscores how Aashraf's oppression is not simply the result of her husband's cruelty but is produced and sustained by the intersection of patriarchal marriage law, economic deprivation, and the complicity of religious institutions.

The economic dimension of women's subordination is further explored in "The Shroud," which juxtaposes the lives of Yaseen Bua, a poor widowed woman who earns her living through domestic labour, and Shaziya, an affluent woman

preparing for the Hajj pilgrimage. Yaseen Bua's single desire—to be buried in a kafan brought from Mecca—is a modest aspiration that nevertheless exceeds her material means; she saves her hard-earned money over many years and entrusts it to Shaziya, who receives it carelessly and ultimately forgets the request. The contrast between the two women is stark: Shaziya's wealth affords her the spiritual privilege of pilgrimage and the social recognition that accompanies it, while Yaseen Bua's poverty renders her invisible, her request forgotten, her dignity unacknowledged. The story suggests that class difference is not merely an economic fact but a determinant of spiritual worth and social visibility within the community. As the narrator observes, "Money from the pockets of poor people was, just like them, broken, shattered, crumpled, wrinkly, diminished in essence and form." The image of the crumpled notes becomes a metonym for the devaluation of poor women's lives, aspirations, and selfhood.

The imbrication of religious authority and patriarchal control is a recurring motif throughout the collection. In "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," Zeenat is instructed that "our pati is God on earth," a formulation that sacralises male authority and renders female obedience a religious duty. Mushtaq does not critique Islam per se but rather the mobilisation of religious discourse to justify and naturalise women's subordination. Her stories reveal how authoritarian interpretations of religious law can be wielded to deny women property rights, reproductive autonomy, and access to education—forms of oppression that are at once gendered and classed.

The Erasure of Selfhood

A recurring motif in *Heart Lamp* is the erosion of women's selfhood within the institution of marriage. Mushtaq's stories depict marriage not as a partnership of equals but as a relation of dependency in which wives are rendered extensions of their husbands' will, stripped of independent identity, and addressed in terms that reduce them to property or servitude. In "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!," the unnamed protagonist addresses a "lord" who functions as both God and the embodiment of patriarchal authority, recounting her husband's domestic abuse, the denial of her right to see her own mother, and her gradual reduction to "nothing" and "a mere shadow." Her confession—"I was a slave; even so, the owner who gave me food, water and shelter in return for my labour seemed like a mahatma to me" (13)—reveals the internalisation of her subordination, a form of "slave consciousness" (42) that arises from the absence of alternatives and the normalisation of abuse.

The dissolution of identity within marriage is not merely psychological but also structural. Women's economic dependency on their husbands—reinforced by the denial of education and property rights—ensures that they cannot easily exit abusive

or unsatisfying marriages, leaving them trapped in relations that erode their sense of self. In "Heart Lamp," Mehrun's attempt to return to her paternal home after her husband's extramarital affair is met with indifference and admonition; she is told to "shrink and adjust," a directive that encapsulates the double bind facing women who seek refuge from marital unhappiness. The family, which should offer protection, instead reinforces the patriarchal expectation that women must endure rather than exit, adjust rather than protest.

Mushtaq's portrayal of marriage aligns with feminist analyses of the household as a site of gendered labour and dependency. As Michele Barrett has argued, the household is "not merely a site in which a division of labour exists, but a set of relations between household members by which women are systematically dependent upon, and unequal to, men." In *Heart Lamp*, this dependency is both material and symbolic: women depend on men for economic sustenance, but they are also expected to perform the emotional labour of wifedom and motherhood, subordinating their own desires and identities to the needs of the family.

Recent scholarship on *Heart Lamp* has drawn attention to the significance of material spaces and thresholds in shaping women's identities and modes of resistance. The veil, the doorway, the bus ride, the domestic interior—these are not merely settings for action but constitutive elements of identity formation. Drawing on posthuman feminist theory, critics have proposed an "interface ethics" that reads piety and agency as embodied coordination across material thresholds rather than as properties of individual subjects.

In this framework, domestic scenes in *Heart Lamp* disclose a "micropolitics of piety" in which authority is recalibrated through care work, timing, and spatial tact rather than through doctrinal dispute. The management of household labour, the negotiation of public and private space, and the embodied practices of veiling become sites where women navigate and sometimes subvert the expectations placed upon them. The implication is that identity is not fixed prior to these practices but is produced and reproduced through them, rendering agency relational, iterative, and situationally contingent.

Conclusion

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* is one of the key works in the field of Indian regional literature and one of the most important contributions to the feminist discourse in the world. Mushtaq explores how Muslim women in rural Karnataka are oppressed by the interplay of factors, such as gender, class, religious authority and familial responsibility, that limit women's lives and identities. But her narratives do not simply serve to render women into passive victims: they look at the different

means (silence, embodied resistance, dark humour, intergenerational solidarity) by which women cope with their situation and affirm, if only on a provisional basis, their own subjectivity.

The stories of Mushtaq, unlike those of the western feminists who have made voice the theme of liberation, show that sometimes silence can be as strategic, protective, and defiant as speech; it can save dignity in situations where speech is only futile and even dangerous. The insight extends beyond the arena of literary criticism to feminist theory and practice, drawing in a more generous sense of agency to consider the contextually and relationally constrained nature of resistance.

In the end, *Heart Lamp* poses a question for readers that goes beyond the essentialist concept of identity, Muslim, woman, subaltern, and seeks to focus on the "processes" through which these identities are created, challenged, and changed. Mushtaq is an addition to the feminist literature and a template for an engaged and ethically conscious approach to storytelling, one that does not romanticize or victimize the stories' protagonists, who are women who have been marginalised in both national and global literary canons. It is a collection that demonstrates that the literature of the regions can be significant to universal issues, and that the narrative form can reveal the gaps between veil and voice, constraint and agency, oppression and selfhood.

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