

Original Article

Heart Lamp: The Light Exploring Loss, Resilience and Marginalized Identity of South Indian Muslim Women

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Abstract

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Heart Lamp by Banu Mushtaq, the winner of International Booker Prize for Kannada language is a defining chapter in the revolutionary literary history of Indian women writers. It represents the experiences of Muslim and Dalit women in South India which softly brighten out plights of Indian Muslim women, spotting gender-based injustices in Muslim communities. It is a collection of 12 short stories written in regional language of Kannada and translated by Deepa Bhasi which peeps into the lives of Southern Muslim women and girls. It centers on cruelty of religion, society, and politics which demand absolute obedience of women for smooth running of silent patriarchal power turning them into voiceless carriers of social norms. All these short stories, contemporary narrative of women's emotional world absolutely unexplored and unhindered by the Indian women writers. Heart Lamp is considered as a masterpiece of representation of Indian women's resilience against physical, emotional, and psychological violence, and their fight against restrictions under the cover of societal and religious norms reveals depth of their resilience and raises the question of women's identity in Indian society.

Keywords: women, identity, loss, resilience, exploitation, subordination, religious and cultural pressure.

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Introduction:

Heart Lamp by Banu Mushtaq is written in Kannada language, a collection of 12 short stories exploring the inner world of south Indian Muslim women and girl during 1993 to 2023. These short stories cover the unsung subaltern world of Muslim women suppressed under the religious and cultural pressure which evokes the question of identity of women in Indian society. The title Heart Lamp does not represent only the power of inner soul of these women to illuminate their life with this light of their burning heart rather it focuses on the themes of gender issues, societal and religious pressure, power of patriarchy and the helplessness of women against this power. All stories reveal the hardships of Kannada Muslim women occupied with uncertainty of marital life and the question of their identity in the society. They smoothly underline the prevalent dogmatism and dominance of male which has the complete control over the lives of women. Every story exposes different aspects of women in Muslim community but the pivotal theme of patriarchy is found in different forms of father, son, husband and even the priests.

Banu Mushtaq has persuasively takes readers painful and uncertain world of these women by using a skilled narrative techniques along with her first hand experiences. Heart Lamp is an introspective tapestry of structure of power in Indian society. These short stories lay a hand on to multifaceted problematic angles of silence and vulnerability of women. The context of the book reflects over following themes recurrent in all short stories.

Objectives:

1. To analyze short stories with respect to Muslim community in India.
2. To understand the religious and cultural pressures reflected in these stories.
3. To analyze issues of women's identity and their resilience.



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4. To study gender discrimination and power of Islam through these stories.

Marginalized Voices:

Banu Mushtaq represents revolutionary voice in Karnataka's Rebel Literature movement, which foregrounds on her feministic approach and secularism. Her revolutionary writing challenges existing patriarchal based hierarchy placing women at the lowest strata as voiceless. Her stark oppose for the insistence of *hijab* and the custom of *talaq* reflects through social involvement to erase the supremacy of male and to establish gender equality. All stories in the collection reassert the feminine struggle for existence where they are absolutely left with the personal loss and frustration highlighting the marginalization and subordination of women in Muslim community. Depiction of domestic injustices in the name of tradition directly strikes the reader's mind revealing the worse lives of women.

Patriarchal Cruelty:

The stories in Heart Lamp depict the suffering of women whose lives are dictated and controlled absolutely by men which decides social customs suppressing women as second sex. The undoubted societal expectations mirrored through these stories highlights the cruelties of patriarchy. Women are left desolated along with her children without any cause, they are found helpless in front of patriarchy when husband of Aashraf abandons her for not giving birth to a boy. His irresponsible attitude towards his wife and sick daughter is not interrogated by the society. The way of leading life for every female character is fixed by her husband and even Mutawalli who is found male biased and corrupted supporting to the patriarchy system. The story Black Cobra starkly exposes power of patriarchy suppressing feminine existence and their demand for justice when Aashraf pleads for justice in her marital life, she is ignored by mutawalli and masque committee. "She begged them to make Yakub provide pleads for at least a little money for the child's medical expenses. The only answer she got was, come back later, come another way, go away." (51)

Societal Pressures:

Heart Lamp explores supremacy of religion and society which demands complete surrender from women, often leading towards their suppression and unbearable injustices. Blind faith in religious customs and ethics presses these women at the bottom of society as a meager, feeble and voiceless like Mehrun in Heart Lamp story. Her parents and brothers argue with her about impudence towards her irresponsible husband and force her to return home to die there. Social pressures for women through these stories pose a question of feminine identity. Male in Indian society are gifted with full license for leading unrestricted life crushing women's feeling under their feet. Mehrun is silenced by her brothers who complains about her husband's infidelity as, "Meher, what are you saying? This is too much. He is a man, and he has stamped on some slush, but he will wash it off where there is water and then come back inside. There is no strain that will stick to him." (102)

Gendered Injustice:

The narratives probe into themes of forced marriage, honor killings, and women diminished social status who are bound for domestic duties and destined for caring children, familial duties and obedience. Women are extremely suppressed for their supposed second sex and restricted them only in domestic duties, their right over parental property is crushed under male dominance and they are found desolate and helpless struggling for their identity. The story Fire Rain highlights the gendered injustice where women are denied their biological rights. Sakeena in Fire Rain is ignored by her rich brother who on the other hand helps poor and serves the community. Each story represents the inequality based on gender. The story The Red Lungi focuses on women's domestic world where they are engaged completely in following rituals and rearing lots of children.

Resilience and Resistance:

Despite unbearable suffering, the women in the stories demonstrate remarkable resilience and quiet resistance against the violence inflicted on them in the form of overt and subtle. The very structure of Heart Lamp constitutes its own radical act of resistance, rejecting the conventions of traditional storytelling. Unlike typical short story collections where the texts move towards the resolution of conflict, Mushtaq style leaves her protagonist's problem unanswered and unresolved. Mehrun in Heart Lamp is projected with ultimate resilience for her injustices and broken condition when she poured kerosine on her body unrest call by her daughter who stopped her from suicide as she was being comforted, touched and understood by a friend. She found existence valuable to someone, and the lamp ignited in her heart and thawed the darkness of night. Feminine resilience is clearly reflected in High Heeled shoes where Arifa forced by her husband to wear high heeled shoes against her wish, at the end of story she found great power in asserting her identity by successfully standing on those high heels. "Those high heeled shoes, as if from some great power, exploded into thousands of pieces, lit up like a meteor, fell somewhere, somewhere were obliterated." (131)

Mushtaq hardly concludes her stories happily, which underlines the suffocated, frustrated life and constrained reality of her characters. However, resistance is revealed throughout the collection by women characters, who at the same time assert themselves and protest to different aspects of injustice. The significant occurrence of muteness and surrender of the protagonists leave readers restless for the system of oppression. Yet, Mushtaq plants



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seeds of resistance through characters like Zeenat in Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal, Mehrun in Heart Lamp, she in *Be a Woman Once*, Oh Lord and Mehboob Bi in *A decision of Heart*. It is also exhibited through the symbols like a tubectomy in *Black Cobras*, a matchstick dropped in *Heart Lamp* which suggests that the change is possible in Indian patriarchal society.

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