

## Quiet Flames: Unseen Trauma and Resistance in Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*

**Shashank Kumar Bharti**

Research Scholar,

Lalit Narayan Mithila University.

[shashankbharti199@gmail.com](mailto:shashankbharti199@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9954-7295>

### **Abstract:**

This essay examines Banu Mushtaq's short story *Heart Lamp*, which illustrates how emotional trauma and gendered silence operate within a patriarchal household. It tells the story of a Muslim woman whose husband doesn't care about her emotional needs, and society puts pressure on her. This is a type of trauma called "unseen trauma," which happens when people don't talk about it and are ignored. The story is told as a quiet act of resistance through lighting the Heart Lamp, which symbolises inner strength even when no one can see it. This is based on Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth's work on trauma theory. The story makes fun of well-known stories that don't talk about the small but real pain that women go through every day, and how strong they are to get through it. Overall, *Heart Lamp* does a great job of showing how trauma really feels and how politics work when people don't speak up.

**Keywords:** Unseen Trauma, Gendered Silence, Emotional Neglect, Quiet Resistance, Domestic Patriarchy.

## Introduction

Banu Mushtaq is a notable Indian writer, lawyer, and activist known for her choral fiction, which represents the experiences of South Indian Muslim women. Mushtaq was born in Hassan, Karnataka, in 1948. Her literary career was influenced during the 1970s by the Bandaya Sahitya movement. This movement, driven by literary tradition, raises the voice and struggles of Dalit and marginalised communities. Her straightforward, aggressive manner went against social conventions, notably sexism, and prized honesty above metaphor. This made her work stand out in both Kannada and, through translation, in Urdu feminist fiction. While critics often note Mushtaq's realism, few have examined her work through clinical trauma frameworks, leaving a gap that this paper aims to address. In *Heart Lamp*, Mushtaq presents a poignant short story set against the quiet suffering endured by women in a patriarchal household. The story revolves around an unnamed female protagonist whose existence is characterised by ambiguity, silence, and perseverance. She lives in a family where her wishes, feelings, and uniqueness are often ignored. She serves as a wife and caretaker, yet others usually fail to show her love or respect. *Heart Lamp* is the main symbol in the story. It highlights the woman's internal life, her power, her hidden desires, and the flickering hope that someone will notice her. Even though everyone is chilling out around her, she cares for this subtle inner light that she will not let go of. Nevertheless, the lamp doesn't emit enough light; instead, it emits a soft glow that conveys her unspoken trauma, loneliness, and desire to be heard. The story also states how women are usually silenced. The protagonist never openly confronts the patriarchal authority around her; instead, her resistance emerges in subtle, quiet forms, as she preserves her inner dignity, her unspoken refusal to surrender completely, and her ability to keep her *Heart Lamp* alive even in suffocating darkness. Mushtaq's storytelling style is one of repression and gentleness, presenting the main character's peaceful existence. The absence of dramatic struggle illustrates the normalisation of emotional ignorance and household silence,

making the agony both ordinary and terrible. Overall, Heart Lamp is a tale of isolated agony and suppressed perseverance. It emphasises the silent embodiment of resistance that women carry, even when they are ignored, unrecognised, unloved, and independent. The Heart Lamp is therefore both a sign of grief and a symbol of survival in a patriarchal society. To explore trauma in this selected short story, the application of Cathy Caruth's "Unclaimed Experience and Latency" and Judith Herman's "Trauma and Recovery" offers a comprehensive framework for analysing Mushtaq's work. Her stories often depict family settings where trauma is hidden, unspoken, or accepted. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to form new neural connections throughout a person's life. The early childhood period is particularly crucial because the brain undergoes synaptic pruning and myelination. Research demonstrates that environmental stimulation, together with educational activities, influences both cortical thickness and dendritic branching development. The research used functional magnetic resonance imaging to demonstrate that adult brains maintain high plasticity, which enables them to recover from injuries and acquire new skills. The implications of neuroplasticity extend to multiple fields, which include educational psychology and rehabilitation medicine.

### **Cathy Caruth: Unclaimed Experience and Belatedness**

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory is a crucial tool in comprehending the development of traumatic events in literature and memory. In Cathy Caruth's influential text, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History" (1996), Caruth writes, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature, the way it was precisely not known in the first instance, returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, pp.04). Trauma, unlike regular memory, resists immediate understanding; it appears in hindsight, often through indirect or distorted means such as flashbacks, nightmares, or compulsions to repeat. Caruth describes this phenomenon as "Belatedness". It highlights the delayed emergence of trauma into consciousness. "The repetition of the traumatic experience

in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing” (Caruth, pp. 63). For her, trauma is characterised by a paradox: it is both inexpressible and continually reemerges, demanding expression while also resisting it. Caruth's notion of the “unclaimed experience” emphasises that trauma often exceeds the individual's ability to understand it at the moment it happens. The traumatic event may not be fully perceived at the time of its occurrence. Yet, its lingering effects persist, surfacing later in fragmented forms that disrupt the person’s sense of time and identity. Trauma escape decisions remain “unclaimed” in the conscious mind until they are brought to the forefront through narratives or testimony. This later emergence not only makes it hard for the person to connect with the past but also questions the idea of historical reality, as trauma doesn't fit neatly into explanations and creates fragmented, repeating stories. The main argument of Caruth’s theory is that narrative and testimony provide a space for individuals to cope with Trauma. She states that trauma is too complex to present in the purest form, but it can be indirectly accessible via storytelling, metaphor, and acts of witnessing. Literature provides a vast space to explore the mysterious nature of trauma, fuzzy, fragmented, and has many layers of suffering. Narrating the trauma involves more than recalling an event; it requires confessing to the suffering and fully expressing that experience. Testimonies work as a means of acknowledging trauma’s widespread influence while also exposing the deletions and gaps involved in its presentation. Caruth’s theory focuses on exploring texts and films that portray catastrophic events, such as war, displacement, or partition. Usually, suppressed or marginalised people whose struggles have not been fully presented in historical narratives are included in these. By presenting unimaginable traumatic experiences, Caruth creates a stage for an alternative form of storytelling that explores memory gaps, silence, and repetition. By doing so, her perspective offers researchers examining how trauma infiltrates both individual memory and collective histories a chance to highlight the need for acknowledgement without providing complete solutions.

### **Judith Herman: Trauma and Recovery**

Cathy Caruth offers a framework for understanding trauma as fragmented and complex, yet fully claimable and understandable. Still, Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) shifts the focus to the lived realities of survivors. Herman makes a distinction between single-incident traumas, such as accidents or natural disasters, and the more insidious, ongoing traumas that arise from prolonged abuse, coercive control, or captivity. While Caruth often frames trauma as something tied to sudden, catastrophic events, Herman reminds us that it also takes place in ordinary and familiar spaces, leaving wounds that can be just as deep. Herman highlighted the gender-oriented trauma, mentioning that chronic trauma, such as patriarchal violence, sexual abuse, and emotional manipulation, mainly affects women. These personal attacks are generally kept private or devalued due to cultural norms and societal blame, or patriarchal systems. This is not the same as trauma that occurs in public or political settings. Emotional abuse initially involves manipulation, gaslighting, or humiliation, eliminating the freedom, which can affect the person's identity and self-image without leaving any physical marks. Herman broadened the field of trauma studies by focusing on the least obvious but just as harmful effects of trauma. These include the everyday violence that shapes our lives. Herman's approach comprises a threefold framework for trauma recovery: safety, remembering and grieving, and reconnection. The first phase, safety, is when the victim feels safe in their body and mind again. This phase is crucial for healing. If you don't feel safe, trying to remember or face the trauma may worsen your situation. Survivors need to practice their grief process through their actual experiences, which they must show to others. The process needs to bring fragmented memories together with existing evidence. The narrative relies on Caruth's assertion that storytelling operates as a fundamental requirement. The framework established by Herman enables psychological procedures that permit survivors to make decisions about their own treatment. The victim achieves their final goal of establishing connections with others

through the process of reconnecting, which helps them regain their identity and become part of the community. Recovery involves two processes, which require patients to remember their life events while they work to establish their identity and restore their trust after sustaining an injury. Our understanding of trauma in cultural works improves because of Herman's study on relational trauma and recovery processes. The characters in literature and film who have survived present their stories through two opposing states: complete silence and active storytelling, and complete isolation and human connection. The model developed by Herman demonstrates how characters face obstacles when they try to remember their distressing memories and how these memories affect their personal connections and social interactions. The author investigates how patriarchal structures control women's voices by presenting his findings about the gendered nature of trauma. The fusion of Caruth and Herman offers a comprehensive framework for examining trauma in both literary and social contexts. Caruth's concept focuses on how trauma disrupts narrative and historical consistency, highlighting its unclaimed and inexpressible nature. Herman, in contrast, places trauma within real social and relational settings, exploring the significance of the recovery process, which involves safety, remembrance, and reconnection. The article proves the accurate analysis of trauma by incorporating the views of Caruth and Herman's theories on trauma. The incorporation of the study of gender violence and patriarchal societies by Herman and the analysis of narrative disruption by Caruth present an in-depth understanding of the effects of trauma on cultural texts, as supported by historical facts. The two authors prove that trauma is a phenomenon in society and culture that goes beyond the boundaries of a mental health issue that affects individuals. The two authors prove that the narrative of trauma should result in recognition by society, which presents an opportunity for healing.

### **Domestic Patriarchy and Gendered Silence in Heart Lamp**

In the short story *Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq, there is a very detailed analysis of how patriarchal structures limit women's freedom. The story also explores how people keep silence which is both a necessary requirement and a subtle form of defiance. The story begins as a simple narrative but progresses into an analysis of how gender-specific behaviour patterns create a domestic environment where family members do not recognise their emotional needs and keep their desires and emotions to themselves. Mushtaq, through his writing, illustrates the relationship between the two characters through his use of simple yet effective elements that illustrate how the main character feels. The lamp that is visible in the darkness throughout the story has two functions because it illustrates the concealed personality of the unknown female protagonist and also illustrates the subtle power that exists within her character. The protagonist illustrates her need for control and recognition through her actions when she holds the flame to prevent it from being extinguished. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an unrecognised experience, while Judith Herman talks about chronic relational trauma. The story of *Heart Lamp* shows how women in patriarchal families hide their emotional pain from others during their everyday activities. The protagonist maintains her continuous emotional attention through her dedication to the light, which provides constant illumination but only shows its flickering when people choose to ignore it.

### **Domestic Patriarchy as Everyday Power**

In *Heart Lamp*, patriarchy is not shown through spectacular violence but through the everyday words and actions of the masculine leader of the family. The protagonist's spouse represents the entitled power of patriarchy, taking control in ways that are both subtle and harsh. He scolds his wife with contemptuous comments when he watches the oil lamp flicker early in the story: "You cannot even keep a lamp burning properly. What else can I expect from you?" This

apparently slight reproach shows how patriarchal control works via regular acts of putting people down. Instead of recognising her ongoing efforts to maintain the family, the spouse reduces her value to a little error. His judgment shows that he doesn't care about her feelings and that he believes that a woman's worth is based on how well she serves. The home, which we might think of as comfortable and safe, is depicted here as a site of control in which the woman's individuality is continually eroded. The main character takes this judgment in silence, yet her inner voice says something else: She wants to reply, "I burn every day like this lamp, unseen and unattended, but you do not see me". But the words are still stuck in her throat. Mushtaq presents the dual pressure of women's silence: speech is needed for the suppressed outside patriarchal limits, and within, through fear of the acceleration of emptiness. This silence is an example of Belatedness, which Caruth says is Trauma's latency, "In the use of the term latency, the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent" (Caruth, pp.17). It haunts back later as flashbacks, which aren't where they should be.

### **Gendered Silence as Trauma**

The concept of persistent trauma, which Judith Herman developed, shows us that the protagonist's silence functions as more than his control by others. Herman explains that people who experience threats, disrespect, and emotional abuse in their environment will choose to stop speaking as a method of self-defence. The main character in Heart Lamp uses silence to cope with difficult times. Her trauma originates from ongoing daily neglect and emotional invisibility, and the absence of acknowledgement, which have built up throughout time. The main character shows her anxiety about dinner time when she asks her husband because she wants to know if he will arrive home late. She whispers, "Shall I wait for you?" He frowns and snaps, "Why do you ask foolish questions? Eat if you are hungry." This conversation reveals both gendered silence and emotional neglect. The wife's uncertain attempt to help becomes a target for mockery. Her murmur signals her doubt, but his commanding tone makes her feel

even less valued in the marriage. She doesn't respond; instead, she distracts herself by preparing the meal herself. Her silence masks her inner pain. This moment illustrates that gendered silence is not only a sign of passivity but also a necessary part of patriarchal interactions. The wife's primary role is to serve, and any effort to seek attention is seen as annoying. Her silence reflects what Herman describes as the loss of self that comes with constant trauma: the inability to express one's needs for fear of being wrong.

### **The Symbolism of the Lamp**

The lamp in the story is a fundamental symbol that connects pain, silence, and patriarchy. It stands for both the main character's heart and her inner strength. She takes care of it diligently, making sure that its flame stays alive, even if her own inner flame is slowly dying since she ignores it. As she watches the lamp flicker, she thinks of it as a reflection of her own life: "The lamp burns because I feed it oil. I, too, burn, but no one cares if I fade." This remark reveals how the main character sheds light on her own fatigue, unconsciously comparing her life to its weak flame. The metaphor illustrates Caruth's thesis that pain is often conveyed indirectly, through symbols or metaphors rather than being stated directly. It reveals how the main character sheds light on her own fatigue and pain, a voice for her that she can't speak.

### **Intergenerational Silence:**

The story also suggests how women pass on their silence from one generation to the next. The main character remembers what her mother told her: "A woman's strength lies in patience." This makes her see that her quiet is not just her own, but also something she has passed on. This cultural lesson, presented as a virtue, transforms into a patriarchal instrument that normalises female endurance while silencing female voices. Mushtaq demonstrates the transmission of silences by mothers, illustrating the ongoing existence of patriarchy through generations. The main character, on the other hand, challenges this inheritance in their mind:

“Did patience make Mother happy? If it did not, why should it make me?” Even though she never says the question out loud, its presence shows she is starting to resist, even if only a little.

### **Silence as Resistance:**

Mushtaq says that silence in Heart Lamp is mostly a sign of repression, but it may also be used as a form of resistance. In the last scene, her husband asks her why she hasn't answered his phone, and she decides not to answer on purpose: “Why do you not answer me?” he shouts. She stays calm and looks at the steady lamp. He is disturbed by her inability to talk, which leaves an empty place he can't easily fill. This silence is no longer the stillness of repression; it is the silence of silent defiance. It shows what Caruth calls trauma's paradoxical return: the wordless grief comes out not in words but in resistance, which shows both her hurt and her might. Mushtaq is a witness to these silences. The narrative enables people to talk about things that cannot be said by talking about what the protagonist cannot know. The reader becomes the listener to her unspoken thoughts, which is what Herman refers to as the necessary witnessing of trauma in the rehabilitation process. The protagonist may not heal completely in the novel, but the narrative provides space for her silences and internal monologues to breathe, so that her tragedy does not get erased.

### **Emotional Neglect as Unseen Trauma in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp**

#### **Subtle Violence: Neglect and Indifference:**

Unlike physical abuse, neglect doesn't always leave a mark, which makes it challenging to identify and deal with. The anonymous woman in Heart Lamp lives in a house where her work and presence go unnoticed. She isn't openly abused, but her life is filled with indifference. Her husband rarely considers her feelings, and her kids, accustomed to her not discussing her sacrifices, expect her to fulfil her duties without complaint. Mushtaq depicts this emotional neglect in everyday situations. The main protagonist fulfils her responsibilities but remains

silent, feeling the weight of disregard daily. She frequently experiences a series of minor dismissals, small remarks that occur a dozen times over the course of a single evening, each contributing to her ongoing fatigue. “She placed the lamp in the corner of the room. Its flame flickered, weak and uncertain, much like the pulse within her chest. Nobody noticed whether it burned bright or dim.” This metaphor makes her situation clear. Her “Lamp,” which symbolises care, light, and emotional presence, stays lit only because of her efforts, yet no one else sees it. This lack of recognition creates its own wound. It supports the idea that neglect isn't just the absence of harm but a suffering in itself. The notion that neglect isn't simply the absence of damage, but a form of injury, remains significant.

### **Caruth and the Unseen Trauma of Neglect:**

The book *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) by Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a psychological state that people experience incompletely during its initial occurrence. The experience manifests later as recurring patterns that create gaps and develop into habitual behaviours. Caruth asserts that people do not yet possess complete knowledge about trauma because they need to experience it first before achieving full understanding. This theoretical concept helps explain the silent and mechanical behaviour of the protagonist in *Heart Lamp*. The woman does not make any vocal sounds while she stays completely still without displaying any signs of her distress. The way she shows her trauma to others through her body movements. The woman stirred rice in the pot while she waited for her conversation partner to finish speaking, and she used the lamp flame to simulate the experience of her abandoned heart. Caruth identifies these quiet movements as the “Belatedness” of trauma because they show her current existence through a subtle expression of pain that exists beyond her ability to vocalise. The husband makes a statement that shows he lacks concern about his wife’s emotional state when he says. “Why do you always sit near that lamp? Come, eat, or at least speak.” She isn’t talking here. She doesn’t lack words; it’s just that her words no longer hold meaning in this home. Neglect

has muted her, leaving her voice redundant. Her pain isn't from one single occurrence; it's from the fact that others keep ignoring her subjectivity.

### **The Symbolism of the *Heart Lamp***

The *Heart Lamp* in the title serves as a significant symbol of both trauma and strength. The lamp is a household item that is delicate and requires oil and a flame to function. But it is also a source of light, a subtle way to remember that someone is there. The main character treats it as if it were someone she knows. Every night, she lit the lamp and held it up with her hands to keep the wind from blowing it out. She felt like she was protecting the last little bit of warmth inside her at that moment. In this way, the lantern becomes a double symbol, reflecting both her emotional burden, her loneliness, and invisible suffering, as well as her strength. Keeping the lamp glowing is like her own ability to keep going, even when no one can see her. In Caruth's words, the light serves as an indicator of trauma that has been repressed, the trace that allows wordless anguish to manifest symbolically.

### **Emotional Abandonment as Unclaimed Experience:**

The main protagonist's neglect is catastrophic because it cannot be claimed. She lacks the vocabulary for expressing her anguish and the capacity to define it as violence. Mushtaq quietly shows that in many patriarchal homes, women are supposed to be quiet and work hard, not praised for it. The main protagonist can't name a single act of cruelty; instead, her existence is characterised by what is taken away from her: attention, care, and acknowledgement. At one point, her daughter makes a casual remark. "Amma, why does your face always look so tired? Don't you ever smile?" The main protagonist smiles slightly. The question remains, but she can't explain that she's tired because she's been invisible for so long. This struggle to find words aligns with Caruth's idea that trauma often goes beyond verbal expression. In this way,

emotional neglect becomes an unclaimed experience. It is lived but not identified, and it continues but is not recognised.

### **The Mechanisation of Life**

Ignorance turns the protagonist's daily life into a series of mechanical tasks. She cooks, cleans, and takes care of the lamp, but her acts lack energy. Mushtaq says: "Her hands moved swiftly over the dough, but her eyes were fixed on the dim flame in the corner, as though her body and spirit lived in separate worlds." This separation illustrates the profound impact of neglect on the mind. The woman is there for her tasks, but not in her soul. Caruth's theory helps us recognise this as a kind of latency: trauma that doesn't show itself but keeps bothering us in small ways, making us feel like we're torn between following the rules and feeling empty within.

### **Quiet Resistance and Endurance:**

Mushtaq, by contrast, does not portray her protagonist as a passive victim. Keeping the lamp lit is, in and of itself, a statement of silent resistance. Even when people ignore her, she makes herself known by keeping a fire burning that no one else cares about. Her silence, which is a result of trauma, becomes a way to get through. When her husband offers to put in a brighter electric light instead of the lamp, she firmly says, "This lamp is mine. Its light is enough." This simple yet strong statement takes back the light that symbolises self. Even though she is neglected, she decides to keep something close to her heart that is important to her. The heart light is a symbol of both her pain and her power, or the two states of being hurt and alive.

## **Quiet Resistance and Subversive Agency**

### **Acts of Defiance Beneath Silence**

At first glance, the main character in *Heart Lamp* appears almost ghostly in her own home. She is quiet, depressed, and goes about her tasks like a robot. Without complaint, she cooks, cleans, and cares for her kids. Her husband talks to her instead of engaging with her, and she seems to fade into the background of the house. However, there is a deeper meaning behind her stillness. Mushtaq reveals this through her repeated connection to the lamp. Every night she lights it, protecting its little flame: “She bent over the lamp, cupping her palms around its flickering light, as though it carried the pulse of her own heart.” The act may seem ordinary and homely, yet it has a deep symbolic meaning. By taking care of the lamp in a way no one else does, she makes it a private ritual that matters to her and pulls away from a family that doesn't love her. This behaviour isn't just passive; it's a refusal to focus her emotional energy on those who overlook her. Instead, she invests it in something she chooses, which gives her a bit of control in an otherwise rigid environment.

### **Silent Withdrawal as Resistance**

She doesn't want to show her feelings because she was neglected, but she also uses it to protect herself. When her husband asks her urgently, “Why do you always sit near that lamp? Can't you talk like other women? At least smile once in a while,” She offers a small half-smile and resumes polishing the lamp's glass. These silences worsen the situation rather than improve it. She ignores the pressure to be available by not showing the emotions others expect from her. This includes being happy, talking, and expressing affection. Her isolation extends beyond mere absence; it is a deliberate choice to protect her inner world. Herman states that people who have experienced trauma often regain control by establishing new boundaries and preventing themselves from getting hurt again. For the main protagonist, her silence becomes

a boundary. She refuses to allow anyone into her emotional world, safeguarding the parts of herself that remain hers. In this way, silent separation serves as a form of resistance: she refuses to let her home life consume her.

### **Mechanical Caregiving as Subversion:**

Another paradox seems to be in the way she takes care of others. She still takes care of her husband, feeds her kids, and cleans the house. On the surface, this mechanical nursing may appear to be following the rules set by men. However, Mushtaq meticulously shows that her care was devoid of emotion. “She stirred and served the rice with her hands, but her eyes were only on the bulb. Her body was there, but her heart was already gone.” This disconnection between her actions and feelings shows how quietly she undermines things. She does her tasks in form, not in heart, and won't put in real effort. This contradicts the notion that caring for someone also means giving up your emotions. Herman reminds us that becoming better frequently means changing how we see our position in relationships. Instead of leaving, we should participate on our own terms. The main protagonist shows this. She contributes only what is necessary, but the warmth of her inner soul is still kept for the light, which is where she has decided to attach herself.

### **The Lamp as a Symbol of Agency:**

The Heart Lamp is more than just a symbol of pain or stress; it is also the place where she acts. The lamp is delicate, yet it symbolises continuity, tenacity, and closeness. The light doesn't ask for anything, ignore anything, or hurt anyone, unlike her husband and kids. It gently cares for her and reflects it in its steady brightness. When her husband considers getting rid of it in favour of a new electric lamp, she is firm in her response: “This lamp is mine. Its light is enough.” This subtle yet strong statement shows a line she won't cross. By protecting the lamp, she is fighting her right to keep something important to her, no matter what others think. This is an

excellent example of Herman's stage of recovery: the survivor reconnects with life, not by returning to old ways of doing things. Instead, she does it on her own terms. The light is her chosen link, her own story of caring.

### **Reclaiming Self on Her Terms**

Herman argues that recovering from trauma requires going beyond mere survival to restore self-identity and establish new relationships rooted in autonomy. The main character in *Heart Lamp* does just this. She doesn't storm out of her house or publicly ask for recognition. Instead, she rebuilds her sense of self within the limited confines accessible to her. By taking care of her appearance, hiding her feelings, and keeping her inner life private, she demonstrates some control. This aligns with Herman's view that survivors cannot simply return to their previous selves. Instead, they build new identities that are based on their ability to bounce back. The main character's new personality is distinct yet strong. Even though she is neglected, she decides not to give up and instead finds methods to keep going that show she is in charge, no matter how little.

### **Quiet Resistance as Feminist Gesture**

Mushtaq's experience goes against what most people think about how women should resist, according to feminists. It does not see rebellion solely as loud, aggressive actions. It doesn't do that. Instead, it shows that the quieter, daily ways that women survive and fight against patriarchal dominance are genuine. The main character's inability to perform emotional work, her quiet isolation, and her symbolic connection to the light all come together to create a subtle, resistant practice. At one moment, her kid asks kindly: "Amma, why don't you laugh like the others? Don't you like talking?" In a quiet voice, she answers: "Some things are better kept with oneself." This brief conversation reveals the extent of her influence. She would rather keep her feelings to herself than admit to being unhappy or try to find something to laugh about.

Her family may not understand her choice, but it reveals the quiet strength of a woman who is reclaiming her life while in prison.

### **Trauma in Representation: Language, Silence, and Symbolism**

#### **Sparse Emotional Tone and Internal Fragmentation:**

*Heart Lamp*'s story tone is hushed. The main character's life is essentially the same every day: cooking, cleaning, and tending to the lamp. There aren't many descriptions, little conversation, and feelings are hardly ever spoken about. But this lack of clear expression shows how broken up a woman is after years of being emotionally mistreated. Caruth states that trauma is not usually understood by people until they experience its complete impact, which continues to affect their mental state and behaviour patterns. The narrative centres around the protagonist who experiences a delay in her journey. She very seldom shares her emotional state with others, and when she does, her words remain limited. For example, when her husband makes a comment that she finds irritating, she reacts by showing her irritation through her body language. "Why do you sit by that lamp every evening? Don't you ever get tired of it?" She looks down and says softly: "Its light keeps me company." This small response shows both breakdown and quiet strength. Her emotional life is there, but it's composed of short words, peaceful moments, and rituals. The flatness of the narrative tone is not a flaw; it is a purposeful representation of trauma's fragmented essence

#### **Symbolism of Light, Routine, and the Body**

Symbolism is significant to the story because words can't adequately express her suffering. The light itself is, of course, the most important symbol. The flame is like the main character's inner state: weak, flickering, but still there. Every night, she protects it with her hands as part of her maintenance routine: "She put her hands around the flame, as if to protect the last warmth in her chest." The illumination is both a burden and a comfort. It represents her emotional

isolation; no one else sees or cares about it, but it also reveals her strength. She shows her own humble determination by protecting its brightness. Even routine becomes a symbol. Her mechanical caregiving, such as cooking rice and wiping the floor, and offering food, makes her appear like a body doing things. However, these acts also show that they are not yielding. She isolates her inner self from her outside obligations by repeating them without feeling anything. This creates a boundary that separates two states of existence, which are survival and surrender. The body serves as an additional path through which the story transmits its traumatic experiences. Mushtaq describes her eyes as looking “hollow yet watchful” while her hands continued “without pause, though her spirit lingered elsewhere.” The descriptions demonstrate that trauma causes people to appear physically present while their emotions remain hidden, which represents a common sign of trauma embodiment. The body continues its normal functions while the self exists as a separate entity, which shows that the internal and external experiences of the person remain disconnected.

### **The Limits of Language and Caruth’s Unspeakability:**

Caruth demonstrates that people express trauma through their repeated actions, their silent behaviour, and their ability to feel others' emotions. The film *Heart Lamp* shows how people struggle to communicate through its use of complete silence and its limited dialogue. The protagonist of the story has to hide her suffering because her home environment prevents her from expressing her emotional distress, which originated from being neglected. The protagonist cannot say, “I am hurt,” because neglect is equivalent to being unseen. Her trauma shows itself through the lamp, her silent moments, and her physical actions. Her daughter creates a revealing moment when she asks, “What is it?” The protagonist holds back before answering with a profoundly understated answer: “Some things are not meant for words.” This saying shows how trauma cannot be verbalised. Her pain exists in reality but remains unspoken because she has no words to describe her pain, which remains hidden from view. Caruth

explains that people must handle trauma through indirect methods because complete knowledge about it does not exist at this time. Mushtaq's writing style follows this pattern because people display their traumatic experiences through their use of symbolic gestures, silent moments, and visual representations.

### **Silence as Representation, Not Absence:**

The silent moments from *Heart Lamp* deliver a statement that exists beyond their function as soundless intervals. The exhibit demonstrates her mental state, which shows how she deals with her trauma through various methods of defiance. Her husband complains about her quietness when he says, "At least say something, even anger would do." She decides not to respond. This matter holds great importance. She refrains from talking because she knows that her words will not reach listeners who refuse to listen to her. She possesses the power to choose whether she wants to speak or remain silent. The situation requires people to maintain their silence because they have created a planned system that controls their ability to speak. The visual elements of this silent moment require readers to use their special capacity to listen. The story establishes its truth through silent moments, body language, and physical items instead of using direct character admissions. Mushtaq demonstrates how standard language fails to express human suffering, as evidenced by the character's suffering, the lamp's flickering light, and the text's quiet presentation.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* presents a strong story that explores the hidden effects of trauma in homes, especially for women in patriarchal households. Silence and neglect are considered common forms of trauma. By examining this short story in conjunction with Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an 'unclaimed experience' and Judith Herman's emphasis on 'trauma and recovery,' the narrative illustrates how trauma often eludes discussion and

remains unaddressed. It manifests as latency, fragmentation, and the gradual blending into daily routine in ways that appear normal but are deeply traumatic. The situation becomes clear through two elements, which include continuous emotional unawareness and the muted expression of different genders. Mushtaq's writing follows the patterns of South Asian feminist literature, which presents an extensive examination of domestic trauma that remains unrecognised by mainstream trauma research. The narrative establishes new dimensions to the discussion by presenting South Asian storytelling methods, which reveal characters' hidden strength, as essential elements of their survival process. The protagonist demonstrates her strength through silent endurance, which functions as her battle against the isolation and control that her life imposes on her. The absence of recognition and emotional connection creates a dangerous dynamic, which functions as an unrecognised violent method that people use when they attempt to understand trauma. The protagonist's automated movements and silent behaviours demonstrate Caruth's theory, which states that people cannot understand trauma until after it has happened. Analysis of Herman's trauma theories reveals that the character employs silence as a means of survival, together with the psychological trauma that is left unhealed. The narrative does not revolve around victimhood. The symbolic Heart Lamp that signifies both a burden and a source of quiet strength illustrates how people can develop resistance through their silent and withdrawn behaviour that they exhibit during difficult periods. The actions that people take against patriarchal systems indicate their resistance through rebellious actions. The unspoken actions people take to exercise their power create ambiguity about whether they are experiencing oppression or choosing to resist. The presence of unconscious suffering serves as an identity statement that people use to assert their presence. The process of recovering from trauma, according to Herman, involves people regaining the capacity to move freely, recall things and develop relationships with others. The story shows emotional detachment through its symbolic imagery because it does not show how people

suffer from their inability to share their traumatic experiences. This is because Caruth's insight into trauma's resistance to complete expression is well captured. The work requires people to recognise its silent parts because they function as a type of communication. The Heart Lamp is a tool that helps readers understand how people who grew up in patriarchal homes experience trauma, which does not show through physical wounds or traumatic incidents. The experience of self-damage occurs through the voids that exist between relationships, which should provide care, intimacy, and recognition.

Mushtaq's research contributes to South Asian feminist literature while establishing new boundaries for trauma research. The study shows that silence acts as a dual function, which creates trauma while also enabling people to fight back against it. The story provides a feminist perspective on patriarchy while using trauma theory to create new ways of understanding the world.

### **Works Cited:**

A five-year-old girl became the only nurse for her grandmother and great-grandmother – Pictolic. A five-year-old girl became the only nurse for her grandmother and great-grandmother - Pictolic

Al-Hussainawy, A. A. F. (2019). *A Psychoanalysis of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman in Terms of Cathy Caruth Theory of PTSD* <https://core.ac.uk/download/270250384.pdf>

Baird, David. *Zeitgeist Incarnate: A Theological Interpretation of Postapocalyptic Zombie Fiction*. St Andrews Research Repository, June 2019, <https://doi.org/10.17630/10023-16978.%20Accessed%204%20Sept.%202025>

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Duke University Press, 2000.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

*Climate-Induced Displacement: Establishing Legal Protections for Climate Refugees*, Climate-Induced Displacement: Establishing Legal Protections for Climate Refugees

Molloy, Cathryn. *Multimodal Composing As Healing: Toward a New Model for Writing As Healing Courses*. *Composition Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2016, pp. 134-152,235.

Kapur, Ratna. *Erotic Justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism*. Glass House Press, 2005.

Menon, Ritu, and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Nayar, Pramod K. *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Mushtaq, Banu. *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*. Translated by Deepa Bhashti, And Other Stories, 2024.

Pictolic. "The Father of Five-Year-Old Anna Wang from China Is in Prison, and Her Mother Got Married for the Second Time, so the Girl Stayed to Live with Two Elderly Relatives. Such Situations Are Not Uncommon, but in This Case It Is Not the Old Ladies Who Take Care of the Child, but the Child, for Them: Anna's Grandmother Was Bedridden by a Chronic Illness, and Her Great Grandmother Is 92 Years Old." Pictolic - Picture News, 21 Jan. 2023, [pictolic.com/en/article/a-five-year-old-girl-became-theonly-nurse-for-her-grandmother-and-great-grandmother](https://pictolic.com/en/article/a-five-year-old-girl-became-theonly-nurse-for-her-grandmother-and-great-grandmother). Accessed 12 Sept. 2025.

Rather, Nadeem, and Sukanya Mondal. *Narrating the Vivisection of India: The Girl Child Narrator in Two Partition Novels*. *Journal of Narrative Theory*: JNT, vol. 55, no. 2, 2025, pp.223-246,296.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, editors. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. Vol. 2, Feminist Press, 1993.

Thomas, B. (2016). Narrating Trauma: Distance and Proximity in the Haitian Earthquake of 2010. *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 53(1/2), 67-78.