



## **Resistance in the Select Stories of Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp**

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### **Abstract:**

The stories of Banu Mushtaq's collection *Heart Lamp* are not about Kings or Queens rather they talk about common man who belongs to the last line. These stories are so much captivating that one cannot ignore them. Like William Wordsworth, Banu Mushtaq has also taken the subject matter from the common man's life. Her characters also come from the real world, where they can be seen often. This collection of short-stories has day to day issues which are related to common men. Somewhere, there is role of gender due to which women of Muslim community resist. This paper tries to study the select short stories from the perspective of feminism where women of middle-class families in Muslim community resist at their level and tries to overcome the obstacles of dominance.

**Keywords: Dominance, Gender, Patriarchy, Resistance, Relationship.**

Banu Mushtaq, a lawyer and a journalist by profession, emerges as a Booker prize winning writer of short-story collection *Heart Lamp*. When somebody's first collection wins not only the Prize but hearts, must be acknowledged as a work which has something to attract. This collection has twelve short-stories originally written in Kannada language and translated into English language by Deepa Bhashti. The English Pen Translates award 2024 also goes to it for wonderful translation. The collection *Heart Lamp* is related to heart in terms of different issues raised by the writer. All the stories have strong emotions that can be felt by the readers.

When we talk about emotions, the first word that comes to mind is 'women' with whom 'emotions' co-relate. There are emotions of women characters as well as their intellect. Most of the characters are rational enough to use both emotions and intellect accordingly. They are apt to be emotional due to the gender, but at the same time, they can be seen overcoming the emotions and taking the rational decisions. In this way, the women characters are being dominated in the patriarchal setup where they try to resist in different forms.

Women, as usual, remain in the centre of the stories as they experience all the pains and sufferings in the patriarchal setup. The stories are based on the middle-class families of Muslim community. Not only these stories bring to light the plight of women from the middle-class families, but also the traditions and customs in the patriarchal setup. The stories also talk about the hollowness in the marital relationship due to the loss of feelings and emotions.

Obviously, when the story of a woman is told, patriarchal setup appears to be there in different forms like husband, brother, son and the society. This setup tries to weaken the voice of the women. In most of the cases, women seem broken due to gender but here in these stories the women are seen resisting at the same time in different ways. There is close reading of the text from the perspective of feminism which is based on analytical study. In this paper, an

attempt is made to understand the modes of resistance by women characters in the patriarchal setup.

Banu Mushtaq's short-story collection *Heart Lamp* is taken for study as most of the issues are related to women of Muslim community who are the victims of patriarchy. It will be not be out of place to quote Reshma who argues regarding the Banu Mushtaq's collection *Heart Lamp* in terms of the condition of Muslim women in the following words:

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* holds an important position in this context. The twelve stories in this collection depict ordinary Muslim women trapped in the web of the patriarchal system, religious constraints, gender inequality, and social pressure. Earlier writing on women empowerment laid emphasis on education and reform, but Banu Mushtaq's stories show women experiencing struggle and resistance in everyday lives. This resistance is evident as overt, covert, emotionally charged, and cultural. (Reshma 3)

From these lines it is evident that these stories talk about the lives of Muslim women who are living in the patriarchal setup and there are some kinds of restrictions in different forms. Despite all the restrictions, the women characters of Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* try to resist.

Though all the stories are important for study from different perspectives, the stories "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal", "Heart Lamp", "Fire Rain" and "Black Cobra" are found more relevant to study from the perspective of feminism. Central characters Zeenat, Mehrun, Aashraf and the wife of Abdul Qader Saheb experience the discrimination on the basis of gender.

In the story "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal", Zeenat and Shaista are the main characters in the story who resist amidst the patriarchal setup. The voice is raised against the system in which a man is free to marry as many times as he wills. There is a discussion of Zeenat and

Shaista who talks about marriage as the fragile relationship which is boasted as eternal love.

Here, status of women as wife is narrated in the lines of Shaista when she says:

‘Yes, my grandmother used to say that when a wife dies, it’s like an elbow injury for the husband. Do you know, Zeenat, if the elbow gets injured, the pain is extreme for one instant – it is intolerable. But it lasts only a few seconds, and after that one does not feel anything. There is no wound, no blood, no scar, no pain...’ (13)

Another point also comes to light that Shaista as a woman is there to give birth only. When her husband thinks of her daughter’s marriage and considers that high school is enough, the patriarchal mindset is reflected in the following line, “It is not like that. I made her stop studying because girls do not need much education. A high school certificate is enough there is no need for her to roam around in Mysuru for college. We can get her married off next year’ (11). Shaista resists here and objects strongly to it and says, ‘Absolutely not. I got married when I was twenty years old, I have become mother of six children over the last seventeen years. If you get my daughter married off this early...’ (11). In this way, the daughters are stopped from studies due to their gender only. Here Shaista’s resistance to her husband’s decision can be seen. Shaista dies after giving birth to seventh child.

At another instance when Zeenat comes to know that Shaista is dead and her husband has married second time. She asks Shaista’s husband, Iftikhar, not to underestimate the grand love as he used to boast for his dead wife. He used to say that he would build a palace Shaista Mahal like Taj Mahal as a token of love. It is said in the following words, “‘Not just this. If I were an emperor, I would have built a palace to put even the Taj Mahal to shame, and call it Shaista Mahal-’ (12). Interesting to see that the love and affection does not last long as, Shaista, the wife of Iftikhar dies. This so-called love is not seen in the practical way. To marry just after

the fortieth day of his wife's death puts question mark on the so-called relationship in which husband boasts of his grand love. At this point, Zeenat asks Iftikhar at least not to underestimate the love of his first wife. Zeenat resists the system in which a man is free to marry and boasts of his grand love.

“Heart Lamp” is the most important story of the collection which revolves round the issue of patriarchy and dominance. Mehrun and Inayat are the main characters. They are married for a long time in which Mehrun is the victim of Inayat's dominance. Mehrun comes to her maternal home with her son without informing her husband because of his infidelity towards her. This incident is considered as dishonour for the family. Mehrun becomes helpless when her family declares that they can't do anything for her as Inayat might say that he doesn't need this woman anymore. Here, clear hegemony is seen in terms of gender. Mehrun as a woman has no right to ask her husband about his life. Her family is afraid of Inayat as he might give her *talaq* (divorce) if questioned. Women are apt to face the domination because of gender where men decide what to do or what not to do. Women are nowhere in the matter of decision making. This is one of the reasons that women have to accept their husbands despite many shortcomings.

Mehrun is also one of those women who are afraid due to social and economic reasons. Mehrun's family did not let her study. She accepted what her father and brothers decided. Now she finds herself helpless as she has five children to look after. Due to economic reasons, she can't take any stand. Her brothers are not in the position to support her lest Inayat give her *talaq* and she would be a burden for them. Mehrun's condition is expressed in the following line where she pleads:

I fell at your feet, saying that I didn't want to get married. Did you listen? I said,  
I will wear a burkha (veil) and go to college. I begged you not to make me stop

studying. None of you listened to me. Many of my classmates aren't even married, and yet I have become an old woman. I have the burden of five children on me. Their father is roaming around, and I don't have a life. When a man is doing such a haram thing, are none of you able to ask him why he is doing this?  
(101)

In these lines, Mehrun raises the question regarding the answerability of a man. As a man, Inayat is free to do whatever he wishes. He has extra-marital relationship in which he is not at home for eight days and nobody dares to ask him. Mehrun is unable to tolerate this and when she expresses her sorrow with her mother, her mother expresses this pain in the following lines when she tries to make her daughter understand the position of men and women in the society. It is narrated 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 stain that will stick to him." (102)

When Mehrun tries to express her feelings that she is no more interested in living with her husband, her brother Amaan objects to it and asks his mother to see how his sister is behaving. Here, Amaan is not only her brother but a man who can't tolerate the feelings of his sister as a woman who is there to decide how she has to live. Mehrun always lived according to the rules of the family as a disciplined daughter. She asserts that:

"It is true: I am the bad person. I have learned what my bad nature is. I did not go out without a burkha. He told me to discard it, and wear saree below my navel and strut around holding hands with him. But you covered me in a burkha and brought me up such that I would not even let my saree seragu slip from my head, didn't you? I feel naked if I remove it, now. You filled me with the fear of Allah. I did not agree to do what he asked me to, and so he took up with someone

who dances to his tunes. And now you are all afraid that I'll become a burden to you if he leaves me – that is why you are telling me to bear with it.” (102)

In the above lines, Mehrun is a helpless woman who is in the state of dilemma as how to change herself. Again, patriarchal setup comes to light. Before marriage a girl has to live according to her brothers and father and after marriage there is husband. Laura Kramer argues that “...differences between the sexes are actually produced by differences in the socially shaped experience of people, from birth. Although we are socialized throughout our lives, the early years have the most enduring impact” (63). The same happens with Mehrun where she is shaped and now re-shaping seems difficult or impossible for her.

Here, Mehrun's dilemma can be understood through the words of Wolfrey et al. in which it is argued that there are different rules for men and women. It is expressed as:

“...the cultural notions concerning femininity or masculinity and the ways in which these serve ideologically to maintain gendered identities. Gender might then include everything a person does, from the clothes he or she wears to choices of leisure activity and from career and education to tone of voice”.  
(Wolfrey et al. 45)

Through these lines it becomes clear that Mehrun has no or limited choice to live just because of her gender. She has to live according to patriarchal setup. To change the way becomes difficult for a woman and this change is not only outward rather inward also. This change throws her into dilemma and the state of confusion in which she appears as a rebel.

And ultimately when Mehrun tries to set herself on fire, her daughter requests and she changes her mind. She tries and readies herself to resist in this setup.

Another story of the collection is “Black Cobra”. This story is studied through the lens of patriarchy, domestic violence on the basis of gender and resistance. Abdul Khader Saheb is

the *Mutawalli* (Chairman of the caretaking committee) of the mosque. Abdul Khader Saheb is more interested in his position as a mutawalli and not the responsibilities that come with the position. A matter comes to him from a woman, Aashraf, regarding the financial help from her husband, Yakub, who has married another woman. To sort out the matter, Abdul Khader comes to the mosque with Yakub on the scheduled date and time.

Abdul Khader's patriarchal mindset comes to light when he blames the woman, Aashraf, for exploiting her husband and reminds her the rights of a man in Islam in the following words:

“What forbidden thing has she done now? He has done another nikah, that's all. Isn't it? He didn't elope with anyone, did he? Let him do it. Do you know that there is a Sharia law that says he can get married to four women? Why are you getting jealous of that? These women are like this only. They know only to be jealous,' (51). Abdul Khader further says, 'Look, don't talk like a fool. Maut and hayat, our death and life, is in Allah's hands. Even if a rock is smashed over the heads of some people, they don't die. That is because it is Allah's wish that they should live. Just like that, if it is Allah's wish that this one should live, then it will live. If not, it will die. Why should you trouble Yakub for that?' (52).

In this way, Abdul Khader at once dismisses the request of Aashraf. Here, Aashraf is fully dependent on her husband for basic needs. She is adamant to take some money for her daughter's treatment and tries to resist despite the opposition from the side of mutawalli. Aashraf's helplessness depicts the socio-economic dependency of women on men. This dependence is argued by Mihiri Wijetunge in the following words:

Muslim women, the majority of whom are economically dependent on men who themselves belong to the most disadvantaged community, thus find themselves

in the most vulnerable category. They have low levels of literacy, marked economic disadvantage, pronounced social marginalisation and flagrant political under-representation. This triple marginalisation of Muslim women is the result of discrimination linked to gender, social class, and society. (Mihiri)

With that there is also the issue of domestic violence which is raised through Yakub who becomes so rage that he kicks his wife who seems adamant for the financial support. 'Lei! If you who squats to pee has this much arrogance, how much arrogance should I, who stands and piss, have?' (57). With these words he kicks his wife. In these words, there is superiority complex on the basis of gender. Women are considered inferior just because of physiology. In this physical violence, Aashraf's daughter Munni dies. Mutawalli remains silent which depicts the support of patriarchy and domestic violence.

When Abdul Khader begins to walk home after the incident, women of the neighbourhood pass comment on him like "May Allah's curse fall on you. It feels like I saw a Shaitan (Devil) in person.", "A dog, just a dog!" etc. shows that there is resistance from women. In this way, some curse him that his lineage be destroyed, another woman asks her son if he wants to see gorilla. A woman curses him that he will be born pig faced and black cobras will be coiled on him on the judgement day. Another one spats on him.

Even his wife only informs him that she is going to get operation after giving birth to seven children and will come after a week. Mutawalli saheb becomes speechless. These type of insults from various women depicts the strong resistance which is expressed through different actions and words.

Before moving to the conclusion, Reshma's words are found relevant to be quoted. She expresses in the following words:

“... This collection of stories not only appeals to the readers to recognise the inhumane and unjust acts of repression- holding mirror to society- but also, through various characters, emphasises this repression as transforming into resistance and resilience-loud or visible- and the refusal to surrender one’s inner self.” (Reshma 17)

To conclude, Shaista’s objection to her husband’s decision of marrying her daughter, Zeenat’s objection that *pati* is not the God on earth, Mehrun’s objection to her husband’s extramarital relationship and Aashraf’s willpower to get financial support from her husband brings to light the resistance of women characters. Their refusal to accept and adjust according to the circumstances in some way or other says much about them. One thing which is common in most of the situations is that women remain silent. Their silence seems powerful enough to understand their mindset.

The characters Zeenat, Shaista, Aashraf and Mehrun are found to be the women who raised their voice of resistance not only by speaking but by remaining silent and taking a stand against the set norms of patriarchy. Zeenat and Shaista suffer psychologically while Aashraf and Mehrun suffer physical torture. Zeenat and Shaista objects to their husband’s opinions, whereas Aashraf and Mehrun takes stand against their husband’s actions. All the four women characters from Muslim community resist against the set norms of patriarchy and discrimination on the basis of gender.

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