



Heart Lamp: A Study on the Subjugation of (Muslim) Women

Dr. Begum Farida Alam

Associate Professor,

Department of English,

Goreswar College, Goreswar, India.

naajalam786@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Banu Mushtaq is a lawyer, a writer, and a social activist from Karnataka. She is an active member of the Bandaya Sahitya Movement in Karnataka in the 1970s and 1980s. Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* won the International Booker Prize in 2025. The book tells the stories of different women from Muslim communities in South India. The twelve stories capture the condition of Muslim women of Karnataka, where men are supposed to have the rights of ownership over wives and daughters. The themes of these stories relate to women's rights to education, equality, and reproductive rights, as well as restrictions on women in the name of religion. Her characters in the stories of *Heart Lamp* are Muslim, yet their experiences are universal and recognised by women from different backgrounds. The present article analyses patriarchal society that subjugates women as portrayed in a few selected short stories by Banu Mushtaq.

Keywords: Women, Muslim, Subjugation, Oppression, Patriarchy.

Introduction:

The literary works of Banu Mushtaq are deeply influenced by her personal experiences. The historical background of Mushtaq shows her dedication to societal change. Her advocacy for marginalised groups can clearly be seen in her writings. Her deep insight into the human condition and her voice for society's oppressed and segregated groups are worth noticing. Primarily, the stories of *Heart Lamp* are based on Muslim society, but the experiences and sufferings are universal, and women from different backgrounds can relate themselves to the characters of Mushtaq's stories.

Banu Mushtaq's stories are an analysis of orthodoxy. Mushtaq explains how society constrains the movements of girls and women. Girls are not allowed to pursue higher education. They are supposed to run the household and produce children; therefore, they are quickly married off. As a result, these girls have to lead a suffocating life. Their needs and aspirations are unheard. They are even expected to protect the family's honour, but nobody thinks about their honour, happiness, or expectations. The stories of Banu Mushtaq remain as vital documents where one can profoundly observe the happenings in the lives of Muslim women and consequently compel readers to rethink.

Analysis and Discussion:

The titular story, *Heart Lamp*, portrays the character of Mehrun. Mehrun fails to gather the support of her parental family at the time of her distress. She is denied help because she is married now. It is a common outlook that once a girl is married off, the family's support is withheld. The protagonist, Mehrun, had an issue with her husband, Inayat. Inayat had an illicit relationship with a nurse, which Mehrun came to learn. She informed her family about it, but nobody responded. She says:

“I wrote to you all, but you didn’t reply, didn’t care if I ended up dead or alive” (Mushtaq 100)

When Mehrun returned to her parents’ home, leaving her husband, the whole family became shocked. They started behaving as if she was an outsider. Though her presence delighted her father, he remained silent and did not utter a single word of welcome. Even her eldest brother, who used to call her *pari* (angel), said nothing, and the sisters-in-law looked at her as if she were from another planet. Mehrun’s own home, once a place of solace for her, now became a stranger’s house. It seemed that Mehrun’s return disturbed everyone. As per the societal norms, once a girl is married off, she should keep herself, under any circumstances, within the boundaries of her in-laws’ house.

Through the character of Mehrun, Banu Mushtaq narrates the roles of women which are prescribed by society and the impact on their lives when those roles are challenged. The definitions of freedom for men and women are different. When Mehrun’s husband, Inayat, was engaged in an extramarital affair, nobody questioned him about this. Under the roof of patriarchy, he can do so. But if Mehrun had done the same thing, it would have been a matter of shame. The same society that did not blame Inayat would have blamed Mehrun for the same act. The situation Mehrun would have faced could well be understood by the argument put forth by Wolfrey et al. They said:

“...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)

Here, Mushtaq tries to elucidate the Indian culture where women's identity is shaped in the name of tradition or religion. Women are always expected to do everything as per the instructions and discipline taught by their family. Before marriage, women follow the instructions given by their father and brothers. After marriage, women are expected to follow rules laid down by their husband. Society determines the role of men and women. Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* clearly illuminates the roles of male and female. She declares that the roles played by women are not natural, but constructed. She said:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female acquires in society; it is civilization as a whole that develops this product.” (Beauvoir 267)

In a patriarchal society, a girl child is taught from her childhood how to dress, speak, eat, and even laugh. Before marriage, her father and brothers shape her; and after marriage, her husband reshapes her. In Mehrun's case, difficulty arose after her marriage when she was compelled to change her way of life. She said:

“I did not go out without a burkha. He told me to discard it, and wear my 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.” (Mushtaq 102)

Due to her gender, a girl is always expected to live according to the patriarchal norms. Laura Kramer says:

“...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” (Kramer 63).

In Indian society, girls are married off too early. They are not even asked whether they are ready or not. The same thing happened with Mehrun. She wanted to continue her studies, but as a girl child, she was not allowed. Instead, the family made arrangements for her marriage. She urged everyone, but her cries fell on deaf ears. She said:

“I fell at your feet, saying that I didn’t want to get married. Did you listen? I said, I will wear a burkha 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?” (Mushtaq 101)

Mehrun’s family only tried to pacify and convince her to return to her in-laws’ house and manage things on her own. They never wanted Mehrun to come like this. They thought that this act by Mehrun would ruin the family’s honour. They said:

“If you had any concern for this family’s honour then you would have done that instead of coming here. The house that your dholi goes to should be the house from which your dhola comes out. This is the life of a decent woman.” (Mushtaq 103)

Mehrun understood that her family members now considered her a burden as she had moved out of her in-laws’ house. Through Mehrun’s character, Banu Mushtaq tries to throw light on

the conditions of women, particularly Muslim women. They do not have any role in decision-making. They are always in a state of subjugation. In the pretext of religion, the patriarchal setup completely withdraws their freedom. In reality, Islam emerged as a liberating force, elevating the status of women and granting them rights such as the ability to marry, divorce, inherit property, and make independent decisions. (Arafah 21-27)

Black Cobras is another significant story by Banu Mushtaq that portrays gender-based violence. Here, women's position in a patriarchal society is illuminated through the character of Abdul Khader Saheb. He was the mutawalli (Chairman of the caretaking committee) of the mosque. His chief role was to administer justice to those who were in distress. However, instead of extending his helping hand to the needy, he turned his back on his responsibilities. He was more concerned about his position than his responsibilities. Once, an issue was brought to the mutawalli by a lady named Aashraf. The husband of this lady, Yakub, was married to another woman. Consequently, he withdrew from his responsibilities to his first wife and children. Aashraf informed the mutawalli about Yakub's changed attitude. She also informed him about the cut-off financial help, which caused trouble in her life. On hearing the issues of Aashraf, the mutawalli, who had a pure patriarchal mindset, said to Aashraf,

“What forbidden thing has he 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,” (Mushtaq 51).

On hearing the words of the mutawalli, Aashraf replied that she had come there only to get some financial help for her little daughter, who was struggling with a serious health issue. Here, Mushtaq points out that one of the reasons for women's suffering is their financial status.

If women are not financially sound or they are dependent on others, their troubles start springing up. In this regard, Mihiri Wijetunge said:

“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)

The mutawalli showed no sympathy toward Aashraf and her child but said:

“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?’ (Mushtaq 52).

The response of Mutawalli clearly reflects his patriarchal temper. In this regard, Bano says,

“The traditional patriarchal norms prevalent in Indian society often limit the autonomy of women, including Muslim women. These norms dictate gender roles, restrict mobility, and impose conservative dress codes. Practices such as purdah (veil), seclusion, and early marriage can further marginalize Muslim women, hindering their access to education, employment, and participation in public life.” (Bano 701-24)

The violence against women is again seen when Yakub kicked Aashraf (his wife) who was asking for financial support for their daughter, Munni's treatment. She fell to one side, and Munni flew out of her hands, and eventually died. Again, the Mutawalli's role can be seen here. He remained silent. His silence again can be considered his support for patriarchy. However, in Islam, both men and women have equal rights. The Islamic tradition, as derived from the Quran and hadith, asserts that there should be no distinction between the rights of men and women. In the Islamic medieval ages, women enjoyed equal rights and status in society, contrasting sharply with the current conditions where many Muslim women face discrimination and limited rights. (Mun'im et al. 135-152)

Another remarkable story by Banu Mushtaq that reflects the subjugation of Muslim women is *Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!* The protagonist of the story attempted to portray a girl's life after marriage. After marriage, everything changes in a girl's life. The protagonist said that after marriage she lost her identity and had to start a new life in the yard of her husband. She said that she was recognised not by her name but by the new name that was 'his wife'. A girl child always has limited choices from childhood onwards, and after marriage, these choices become even more limited in her in-laws' house.

"I had nothing left that was just my own. I had to set down roots in another's front yards, grow new shoots there, bloom there. He was getting attached, while my identity was melting away. Even my name got lost. Do you know what my new name was? His wife. My body, my mind were not my own....." (Mushtaq 201.)

Moreover, the protagonist also expressed her fear and level of endurance when her husband ordered her to bring fifty thousand rupees from her parents' house. When he did not get the money, he told her that she could never visit her parents' house, and her parents could

not visit their house either. Later, she learned that her parents sold everything they had and managed to make twenty thousand. Unfortunately, her mother met with an accident on her way to hand over the money and died. The husband was so arrogant that he did not even allow his wife to go and see her mother for the last time. Here, Mushtaq tries to focus on the treatment of women by their male counterparts. The lady had no choice but to accept her husband's command. She did not even dare to express her emotions. In our society, it is very common for a girl child to be raised to live a life of subjugation.

In another incident, the lady again expressed her grief by sharing her experiences when she was admitted to a hospital. It was detected that a tumour was growing in her stomach. The doctor advised surgery to remove the tumour, but the husband showed his anger instead of supporting her at the hour of need. Post-surgical happenings were even more shocking. The husband came and ordered her to give him the neck chain that she was wearing. However, she was reluctant to give the chain. To her, its emotional value was more than its materialistic worth. Her mother gave her the chain at the time of her marriage. Her mother melted her own gold chain, which she got from her mother at the time of marriage. So, the chain was a memory of her mother, and that's why she dared to ask her husband, "Why do you want it now? I think that was the first time I had ever questioned him in my life." (Mushtaq 206). The husband replied without any hesitation that he was getting married again and he wanted to give the chain to the new girl with whom he was going to tie the knot. She was shocked as if the whole world had crushed on her head. She replied that she was not going to give him the chain. The husband never expected such an answer from her and felt insulted. In some traditional Indian families, a husband may feel disrespected if his wife asks him a question because, as per the social rules, a husband expects his wife to obey him without speaking back. Some men think that questioning ruins their authority.

The lady in the story failed to find a solution. What should she do now? Complete darkness gripped her. She knew that if she went to society, society would provide her hundreds of pieces of advice. She, therefore, questioned God,

“Hey Prabhu? Can you hear my grievances? Are my cries reaching you?

What will I do...what will I do...” (Mushtaq 207)

The husband did not come to the hospital for the next three days. During that time, the lady and her three children shared the free food offered by the hospital authority. Once she was discharged, she walked along with her children toward her house. They found the door locked, so they sat in front of the house the whole day. Gradually, the night fell. The children were hungry, but they did not mention that. The lady was half asleep. She did not know the time, but once she heard a scream that awakened her, she saw that her son had fallen into the ditch. She jumped and rescued him somehow. Just then, she heard the noise of people. She saw that people were celebrating something. Within a moment, she observed her husband getting down from a tempo and lifting a woman dressed in red. She learned what was actually happening. She saw that her son, who had fallen into the ditch a while ago, was shivering, and he hugged her. She observed everything with wide eyes. Whom would she complain to? She only told God,

“I do not know the meaning of patience. If you were to build the world again,

to create males and females again, do not be like an inexperienced potter.

Come to earth as a woman, Prabhu! Be a woman once, oh Lord!” (Mushtaq 208)

Through the story, Mushtaq attempts to portray the immeasurable sufferings that women have to undergo. Society always expects women to tolerate an unhappy marriage rather than challenge the social conventions. Women are often expected to behave according to the norms that are established by the very patriarchal society. To fulfil all the patriarchal desires,

women have to discard their personal ambitions, emotions and choices. The story *Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!* clearly shows how women are expected to adjust themselves to the demands of their conjugal life rather than challenging the misdeeds done to them.

Conclusion:

The straightforward storytelling style of Banu Mushtaq captures the attention of the reader worldwide. Through her writings, one can easily visualise her connections with the marginalised groups. The struggles that the women have to undergo and the challenges that these women have to face are the prime focus in the stories of *Heart Lamp*. Through the narratives, Mushtaq tries to bring about a change in society where women can live with dignity. Her stories unveil the realities of this world where women are always subjugated. In the name of religion and tradition, how Muslim women undergo horrible experiences is well delineated through her writings.

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