
The Sacred and the Subversive: Faith and Resistance in Banu Mushtaq's "Heart Lamp"

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Article Received: 02/08/2025

Article Accepted: 04/09/2025

Published Online: 04/09/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.41

Abstract:

This article examines how in "Heart Lamp", the short story incorporated in the anthology *Heart Lamp*, Banu Mushtaq both critiqued patriarchal readings of Islam while validating religious faith and cultural identification as possible routes to resistance available to Muslim women living in southern India. Through careful textual examination in conjunction with theoretical work on Islamic feminisms and postcolonial studies, this research argues that Mushtaq creates a sophisticated narrative that distinguishes between religious theology and patriarchal manipulation, eventually characterizing religious identification as a source of strength and resilience. The analysis explores how Mushtaq's heroine negotiates between the complex intersectionality of religious expectations, gender suppression, and subjectivity within a rightwing community environment. Based on this finding, "Heart Lamp" makes a notable contribution to global feminist scholarship in exhibiting how some resistances can occur within religious contexts rather than only in a location exterior to them and hence querying predominant Western feminisms' assumptions that often identify freedom or Enlightenment only with secularization.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, socio-religious critique, cultural resistance, patriarchal oppression, faith-based agency

Introduction

Banu Mushtaq's "Heart Lamp: Selected Stories", winner of the 2025 International Booker Prize, presents a watershed event in the global literary sphere, attracting global attention to the everyday lives of Muslim women living in Karnataka's rural heartlands. The title story, "Heart Lamp", is a particularly powerful exploration of how women navigate the complex interplay between religion, patriarchy, and personal autonomy within religiously conservative contexts. By drawing in part on Mushtaq's own experiences of trouble within marriage and maternal suffering, the work gives a powerful portrait of patriarchal oppression while at the same time affirming cultural and religious identification as a possible source of resistance.

Mushtaq, a practicing attorney and advocate who was part of Karnataka's Bandaya Sahitya (Rebel Literature) movement, provides a unique perspective within her literary work, blending sharp social commentary and intense empathy toward her characters. Her work challenges mainstream power structures by spotlighting Muslim women's difficulties while intersecting class-caste protest and Islamic feminist thought. This double approach is dramatically apparent within "Heart Lamp" wherein the protagonist's fight against male chauvinistic structures does not entail a denial of spirituality but rather a reclaiming of its positive elements.

This thesis argues that the short story "Heart Lamp" accesses a sophisticated narrative style that critiques socio-religious structures without direct condemnation of religion. It places faith and cultural identification on a level footing as a resistant device, rather than exclusively as a device of suppression. Through a careful textual reading and a consideration of applicable theoretical work, this thesis examines how Mushtaq creates what Islamic feminist theorist Fatima Mernissi calls a 'counter-patriarchal' narrative, which outlines the distinction between a genuine religious commitment and a patriarchal abuse of religious literature.

Literature Review

The study of religious structures has a long history in South Asian literature, particularly in feminist scholarship. Writers like Taslima Nasrin, Ismat Chughtai, and Kamila Shamsie have investigated how religious institutions often reinforce structures of patriarchal power. However, while some Western feminist discourses characterize religions as inherently oppressive, Mushtaq's work stands out due to its "sustained struggles against patriarchy, distilled through the experiences of class, caste, and religion" (Ahmad). Contrast this approach to some Western feminist scholarship that characterizes religions overall as oppressive, Mushtaq's criticism instead takes a more nuanced approach, zeroing in on religious scholarship rather than on religions themselves. Islamic feminism stands as a key template against which to understand Mushtaq's practice. Scholars like Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, and Amina Wadud have argued that Islamic scholarship interpreted patriarchally often works against the egalitarian message put forward in this or that version of the Quran. Mushtaq's work exemplifies these studies, demonstrating in narrative how empowered women can be within religious practice. Commenting on Mushtaq's work, critic Jenny Farrell has it that Mushtaq "confronts both Hindu supremacist violence - such as hijab bans - and regressive elements within Muslim communities, from patriarchal control to caste-based discrimination among believers" (Farrell).

Mushtaq's work is greatly influenced by the Bandaya Sahitya (Protest Literature) activism of 1970s-80s Karnataka state, which repudiated Karnataka's elite literary establishments in favour of protest-oriented raw narratives featuring Dalits, Muslims, and women. This strand makes possible what literary theorist Gauri Vishwanathan might term 'the counter-narrative' role of literature - amplifying the voices suppressed in mainstream narratives. Working within this lineage, Mushtaq employs fiction as a device for social

criticism, a special emphasis upon intersectional oppressions of gender, class, caste, and religious orthodoxy within Muslim societies.

Translating “Heart Lamp” by Deepa Bhashti is a noteworthy act in the practice of cultural activism and survival. Bhashti’s style, which does not italicize non-English words and does not provide explanatory footnotes but preserves the multilingual character of the tale. It resists a process of ‘domestication’ - to create books that can be marketed to Western readerships in preference to books that foreignize as a conscious act of activism. Bhashti outlines her style thus: “Writers who come from the global south have made it too easy italicising words like *rotti* or *dosè*. But these words are everyday words. If a reader doesn’t know what *rotti* is, they can look it up or work out how to say it through context” (Sudevan). Despite Mushtaq’s work subsequently receiving substantial critical attention upon his winning the International Booker Prize, very little rigorous scholarly attention has been devoted to “Heart Lamp.” Most analyses and news pieces prefer to examine the collection as a whole instead of examining individual stories. Critics have pointed to the autobiographical elements of the tale, its portrayal of ‘unresolved grief’, and religiosity-hypocrisy criticism. However, very little systematic investigation has been done regarding how the narrative both condemns socio-religious setups while affirming belief in a seat of resistance - a gap this work aims to fill.

Resistance in literature has been understood through countless theoretical lenses ranging from James Scott’s ‘weapons of the weak’ to Michel de Certeau’s ‘tactics’ of everyday resistance. Mushtaq’s novel contributes to what feminist scholar Saba Mahmood has called ‘the agency of piety’ - how women find a semblance of meaning and power within religious institutions rather than in opposition to them. This template works to explain how Mushtaq’s protagonists can both challenge male understandings of Islam and still be religiously and culturally identifying.

Objectives

This study hopes to:

1. Describe how “Heart Lamp” critiques male authority in Muslim communities in southern India without such a blanket denial of religious belief.
2. Discuss how the novel narrates faith and ethnic identification as productive assets for survival and strength rather than weapons for repression.
3. Frame “Heart Lamp” against the broader literary and theoretical works relating to Islamic feminism, literature of resistance, and Bandaya Sahitya movement.

Research Gap

In spite of the fantastic hype generated by Mushtaq’s anthology through having triumphed in the International Booker Prize, several research inadequacies persist:

1. There is less dedicated commentary on “Heart Lamp” in standalone format as a large portion of scholarship has studied the collection in entirety.
2. The novel’s ambivalent negotiation between criticism and validation - both questioning patriarchally constructed understandings of Islam and validating belief as a possible site of resistance - has gone largely underexamined.

3.The relationship between Mushtaq’s narrative strategies and her ideological loyalties might be examined further systematically.

4.The role of translation in forming reception history and signification continues to demand studies in the future, particularly how Bhashi’s stratagems help reinforce a work’s ability to withstand transcultural assimilation.

The object of this work is to rectify such limitations by making a directed study on “Heart Lamp”, considering its thematic preoccupations, narrative strategies, and translation considerations.

Methodology

It adopts a qualitative approach but does not integrate other analytical paradigms:

1. Close reading evaluation of Deepa Bhashi’s initial English translation in terms of narrative organization, character development, symbolism, and linguistic elements.

2.Academic exploration of Islamic feminism, postcolonial thought, and resistance theory to locate Mushtaq’s perspective within wider intellectual currents.

It primarily deals with the narrative “Heart Lamp”, but it does incorporate other stories in the anthology where necessary in order to provide context to the analysis.

“Heart Lamp” offers an insightful exploration of how systems of patriarchy operate within religious communities, particularly through manipulation of religious scriptures and practices to validate male authority and superiority. The film focuses on a mother of five who has been left by her husband for another woman but still returns to her family home. Rather than finding warmth and support, however, she is met with criticism and exclusion by her family members who imply that self-immolation might have been a preferable alternative to returning. This shocking response serves to highlight aggravating consequences of patriarchal mindsets that prioritize family honour at the expense of women’s welfare.

It shows how religious authorities inevitably distort scriptures to reinforce male authority. As Zulekha Begum, a scholar in another story in the collection (“Black Cobras”), reports:In most of our jama’at, the mutawallis themselves don’t know about the law. Secondly, they don’t know how to apply the law. Thirdly, no one listens to them. And then they only accept whatever they like out of the law. Where this Sharia law ends up is in poor women’s laps like yours. Why don’t ulema say anything about what rights women have? Because they only want to confine women. (53)

This reading corroborates Islamic feminist scholar Amina Wadud’s narrative that recognizes a selectivity within religious interpretation on behalf of patriarchy - that is, a reliance on citations of scriptures that advocate male power and an absence of citations supporting scriptures that advocate on behalf of feminine prerogatives.

Mushtaq identifies and condemns religious performativity’s inherent duplicity - the process in which practicing faith often masks ethical failure. In “Heart Lamp”, this duplicity is exemplified by Mehrun’s husband, who though outwardly practicing his religious duties abandons his family obligations, and her family members, who stress societal opinion rather

than provide actual backup. This reading looks beyond singular conduct and grapples with systemic concerns at large since Mushtaq exposes the intersection of financial dependency, religiosity interpretations, cultural traditions, and family ties that altogether keep the suppression of women going.

Despite its sharp criticism of patriarchal structures, “Heart Lamp” does not quite dismiss religion; instead, it suggests faith as a plausible resource both for resistance and survival. This vision finds parallel in what Islamic feminist thinker Fatima Mernissi might call ‘the forgotten egalitarianism’ that lies in Islamic roots - the perception that true Islamic fundamentals contain openings for gender equality rather than oppression.

Mehrun’s own practice of spirituality provides her strength and consolation while still allowing her to notice systemic injustices. Even in her darkest moments of desperation, whereby she entertains self-immolation, her connection to her children - described in almost transcendent terms - is what makes her continue on. Maternal love, often framed within religious paradigms as a transcendent duty sent to us by a higher power, here has a chance at working as a source of strength and resistance.

The title’s “heart lamp” metaphor suggests a lasting inner radiance untouched by exterior darkness, a metaphor reflecting women’s capacity to maintain their humanity and dignity amidst dehumanizing situations. This imagery corresponds to the concept of “nūr” (divine light) in every human being within Sufi thinkers’ thought - a religious concept that Mushtaq reimagines around feminist ends. The heart lamp evolves into an image corresponding to what feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether calls “women-church” - an empowering of spiritual relevance and communal connection without living within accepted patristic religious structures.

This ambivalent approach to religiosity is exemplified in the character of Mehrun, who embraces her religiosity while reprehending how religiosity is utilized to oppress femininity. Mushtaq herself characterizes it thusly: “Faith can be a source of strength. But when weaponised, it turns oppressive. My stories try to encapsulate that ambivalence” (Sudevan). This ambivalent portrayal resists a Western feminist trope that all too often equates agency with secular freedom.

The assertion of cultural identification in “Heart Lamp” operates both on levels of theme and linguistic and formal aspects. Mushtaq’s use of multilingual conversation - entwining Kannada, Urdu, Arabic, and Dakhni - constructs a literary weave resistant to cultural homogenization. This diversity of linguistic usage is a model of what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has termed “the third space” - an innovative intersection of cultural forces resistant to essentialist identities.

Deepa Bhashti’s approach to translation is essential in preserving the cultural specificity in the text. Through her translator’s note “Against Italics”, Bhashti explains her

decision not to italicize non-English words or provide explanatory footnotes, arguing that such strategies work to exoticize foreign words and create a hierarchy between languages. With this approach then, we receive a text that preserves linguistic hybridity in the original Kannada, which includes words borrowed from Urdu, Arabic, and local dialects.

Bhasth's approach demonstrates what translation theorist Lawrence Venuti has called 'foreignization' - a style which highlights rather than dampens down the source document's cultural differences in favour of target readers. By refusing to define cultural words such as "mutawalli" (a religious custodian) or 'meher' (dower), Bhasthi constrains the reader to work actively within the work's cultural context and hence produces what herself identifies 'a rebellion of sorts by Mushtaq and Bhashti against the hegemony of the West in the literary world'.

This translational approach has significant effects on the level of engagement between the reader and narrative. Rather than obfuscating differences between cultures, Bhasthi's translation focuses on these differences such that readers are forced to grapple with discomfort and uncertainty, which structurally corresponds to the themes within the narrative. Thus, the translation does more than perform a linguistic conversion; it is a political act designed to preserve culture and a resistant move against linguistic imperialism.

The basic structure of "Heart Lamp" is typical of what literary theorist Barbara Harlow could describe as 'resistance literature' - writing that challenges mainstream narratives via certain aesthetic choices. Unlike typical short stories advancing toward resolution and ending, "Heart Lamp" mirrors the often-unresolved problems confronting its protagonists. Its narrative structure in a circle - the beginning and ending in Mehrun's return home to her husband's dwelling - reveals a sense of claustrophobia and determinism while at the same time signifying the cycles of patriarchal oppression.

But subtle differences between these instances indicate Meherun's individual growth: she returns not as a defeated victim but as a woman who has consciously chosen her condition in a bid to continue a relationship with her progeny. This narrative choice reveals Mushtaq's commitment to realism - her stories rarely contain happy endings but often describe small moments of rebellion sowing the 'seeds of change'(Farrell).

There is also use made of what feminist narratologist Robyn Warhol refers to as 'unnatural narration' - devices that unsettle natural narration in order to pass on political ideologies. Use of free indirect discourse creates indeterminacy between third-person narration and Mehrun's inner monologues, enabling observers to gain intense penetration into her inner life while still retaining some critical distance. The device is particularly powerful at such moments of high tension, such as when Mehrun recognizes that her family will be unsupportive: "Her brothers' words rang in her ears: 'if you had the sense to uphold our family honour, you would have set yourself on fire and died. You should not have come here.'" (104).

By deploying these narrative techniques, Mushtaq succeeds in reflecting the psychological effects of patriarchal suppression while at the same time making possible a formal appearance of resistance.

Conclusion

Mushtaq's "Heart Lamp" makes a noteworthy literary contribution to works about religion, gender, and resistance. The work demonstrates the feasibility of critiquing socio-religious structures internal to a faith or culture without relinquishing a faith or cultural identification altogether. With sophisticated narrative strategies, highly developed characterization, and a sophisticated exploration of religious belief, "Heart Lamp" presents a model of resistance that operates within rather than against cultural and religious practices.

The findings of this study illustrate how Mushtaq's narrative differentiates between the essence of religious doctrine and the patriarchal interpretations associated with it, thereby providing Muslim women with the opportunity to critique their oppression while retaining their spiritual identities. The metaphor of the heart lamp emerges as a compelling emblem of intrinsic resilience, symbolizing the enduring light of dignity and humanity that remains, even in circumstances intended to suppress it. Furthermore, Bhasthi's translational methodology maintains the cultural and linguistic specificity of the narrative, thereby strengthening its capacity to resist cultural assimilation.

This analysis opens up a number of avenues for future research initiatives. Comparative studies with other pieces of Islamic feminist literature coming out of the Global South would create a contextual basis for situating Mushtaq's work within broader literary streams. Reception studies that explore the receptions across different audiences (e.g., Western versus Indian, Muslim versus non-Muslim audiences) would shed light on reading practices and cultural transferral. Finally, a further investigation into adaptation possibilities within the tale could evaluate how visual media might escalate its impact.

The piece "Heart Lamp" is a powerful testament to literature's ability to bear witness to human pain while imagining possibilities for dignity and strength amidst constraint. Mushtaq encapsulates this thesis, claiming: "No story is ever 'small'— that in the tapestry of human experience, every thread holds the weight of the whole. In a world that often tries to divide us, literature remains one of the last sacred spaces where we can live inside each other's minds, if only a few pages" (Farrell). By creating an uncompromising but compassionate portrait of a subject's response to patriarchal suppression, "Heart Lamp" ignites a beacon that illuminates both the depth of religious hypocrisy and the strength of the human spirit.

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