



# A Rain of Fire: A Study of Subjugation and Rebellion of Women in Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*

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## Abstract

*This paper attempts a thematic study of the recent Booker International Winner Heart Lamp by Banu Mushtaq as a scathing attack on oppression and marginalisation of Muslim women. In these collection of twelve stories, Mushtaq gives voice to the burning but often unheard life stories of Muslim women in South India. They are textured exploration of gender and power dynamics. The paper aims to analyze these selected stories not just as a criticism of patriarchy and oppression but as stories of sisterhood and resilience.*

**Keywords:** oppression, religion, society, family, cruelty, apathy, sisterhood, resilience.

“Hakhdaar tarse toh angar ka nuu barse”- If the one who has rights is displeased a rain of fire will fall (Mushtaq 27) are the words of the mother of the protagonist of “Fire Rain.” Banu Mushtaq’s stories in *Heart Lamp* are not just tales but ones that scorch the reader’s conscience. *Heart Lamp*, with its twelve selected stories is a textured exploration of gender and power dynamics. These tales are anger driven narratives and stinging critique of patriarchy. This study attempts an analysis of the theme of oppression and how Muslim women suffer and fight for

survival. Through these deceptively simple stories, the writer also highlights and celebrates the resilience of these women.

The writing of Banu Mushtaq are founded in Karnataka’s Bandaya Sahitya Movement of the 1970’s and 80’s. As a lawyer, activist and writer, Mushtaq has actively involved in this movement. This has started as a protest against the oppression and hegemony of upper caste and mostly male-led writing. Dalits and other social and religious minorities have been urged by this movement to tell



stories from their own experiences and in the Kannada they speak. *Heart Lamp* is part of the Bandaya Sahitya Movement that critiques caste, class and religious oppression.

After winning the 2025 International Booker Prize, in one of her interviews Mushtaq has stated, “My stories are about women-how religion, society and politics demand unquestioning obedience from them, and in doing so, inflict inhumane cruelty upon them, turning them into mere subordinates” (Ghosh, “Stories from the Heart”). The stories in *Heart Lamp* showcase the life of muslim women who go through terrible experiences like domestic violence, neglect and cruelty. These women also stand as universal symbols for issues faced by women world wide. Theirs is a sisterhood that binds them in a bitter fight for survival and sustenance.

The major themes of these stories are reproductive rights, right for education, equality and strictures imposed on women in the name of religion and tradition. Here lies the proof of the universality of Mushtaq’s themes. “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal” is the first story of this collection. In a witty, informal and colloquial style, Mushtaq unfolds the tale of Iftikhar Ahmed, a friend of Mujahid and Zeenat. Iftikhar, a middle aged man has many children and now his wife Shaista is expecting their seventh child. When the Mujahids visit them, the children of Shaista are looked after by Asifa, the eldest child. She is compelled to give up her studies. When Shaista bemoans this, Iftikhar declares, “ I made her stop studing because girls do not need much education. A high school certificate is enough” (Mushtaq 10). The man who claims to adore his wife, never bothers about her health. After each child birth, Shaista is in confinement only for fifteen days unlike the other women of their community who remained in bed for three months. When Zeenat loses her mother, she goes away to her native place. After nearly forty days, she goes to visit Shaista only to know that Shaista has died recently. What is more shocking is there is a new bride not older than eighteen years. Iftikhar has claimed that if he were an emperor he would build a palace that would put the Taj Mahal to shame and call it Shaista Mahal. The

same man has now married again within few days after the death of Shaista. Shaista has wanted to undergo tubectomy earlier but never found the time and now it is too late. Zeenat leaves after a bitter comment “It is OK if you do not get a Shaista Mahal built, or make arrangements for stone slabs to be put all around her grave... but if your eternal and intense love reaches her where she is and she were to wake up and come back, you will be in trouble” (Mushtaq 22).

The burden of looking after the youger children is now on Asifa. As Shaista has once said, Asifa the daughter becomes the mother to her siblings.

The denial of rights, expecially the right to decide when to stop further child birth, lead to horrendous sequences. “Black Cobra” the most painful story of this collection tells the tragic tale of Aashref and her children. Amina says, “My back is broken. These children, the home samsara – do I have even a minute of free time? If I bear one child per year, what will I become?” (Mushtaq 43). Amina narrates the tale of Ashraf, whose husband Yakub drives her away penniless when their newly born third child too is a girl. In spite of multiple appeals to Yakub and pettitions to Muttawalli Saheb -the trustee of a waqf, nothing happens. That is when Zulekha Begum advises her to demand justice and not to beg. For the sake of her infant Munni who is sick, Ashraf decides to be in the mosque with her hungry children until she gets justice. But Muttawalli is corrupt and after enjoying the food and drinks supplied by Yakub, tries to make her see reason. For the Muttawalli Sahab feels that Ashraf is unreasonable and being jealous as Islam permits a man to marry four times. When Ashraf remains stubborn for the sake of her sick child, Yakub calls her a whore. In his rage Yakub kicks Aashraf which leads to Munni’s death. What follows highlights the women’s solidarity. Even the ones who have remained inside the houses come forward trying to help her. The men get Munni ready for burial. Strangely enough Ashraf feels a thread of quite peace, because Munni is free from pain and has freed Ashraf from begging Yakub or Muttawalli. The story ends with Muttawalli Saheb facing the ire of women who call him Shaitan, a dog,



donkey-face, gorilla, etc. and many more curses. Jameela curses him “May black cobras coil themselves around you” (Mushtaq 60).

The tragic end of Munni gives the much needed courage to Amina, the wife of the Muttawalli. She leaves with her mother to undergo tubectomy so that there wouldn't be anymore child birth. The last line of Amina carries the punch - “Look, close the door, and look after the children. It will be more than a week before I return” (Mushtaq 61) and that is the coup de grace.

The unnamed protagonist of “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!” is a poignant example of a woman denied all rights. When she becomes pregnant, while still breast feeding her daughter, she gets upset. But the husband, a typical chauvinist replies, “I am the one raising them, what is your problem in bearing them?” (Mushtaq 205). The whole story is an address to God, the only entity she dares to raise her questions to. Her husband is God's superior creation, a man who need not understand the difficulties of giving birth or the pain so intense it breaks the ribs. So the only question she dares to ask is “Does that make me the creation unloved?” (Mushtaq 205). She is glad when she gives birth to a son for unlike a daughter, he would not be a prisoner of life.

Most of Mushtaq's women once they are married, lose their identity. As the heroine of “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!”, says after marriage they morph into dutiful servants. Soon even the social relationships are lost and they end up nameless, less than a person, only as wives of some men. In essence the married women are the source of ‘free labour’.

As with any place in the world, it is how families and acquaintances treat their female relatives and friends that determine how happy or fulfilling their life could be. In the case of Mushtaq's women, family and society are both culpable. The women of Mushtaq occupy a world where men are raised to believe they have rights of ownership over wives and daughters. Even to go out without a burqa might bring shame to the whole family. Further it would endanger the prospects of all the siblings yet to be married.

Mushtaq clarifies that the foundation of her stories are not from personal experiences. “For her patriarchy is the lingua franca of ‘a universal pain’ and deprivation that she has witnessed in women and the marginalized.” She further adds, “Men too suffer from patriarchal attitudes but they are not aware of it” (Ghosh, “What's Next for Banu Mushtaq”). In “A Decision of the heart”, Yusuf, a kind hearted man who is caught up between his loving widowed mother and the shrewish wife Akhila, comes to a drastic decision. Unable to bear his wife's cruelty to his mother, he decides to arrange his mother's marriage. The story ends with Yusuf saying “Akhila” he said, “may you also have the good fortune of having your children arrange your wedding.” (Mushtaq 83).

Both society and religion insist on women's absolute obedience and subordination. In “Stone Slab for Shaista Mahal,” Zeenat comments with irony that a woman's pati (husband) is God on Earth. If the man is “drunkard or a womaniser, or if he harasses her for dowry everyday – even if all these ‘ifs’ are true, he is still the husband. No matter which religion one belongs to, it is accepted that the wife is the husband's most obedient servant, his bonded labourer” (Mushtaq 8).

In a way, families are the direct agencies which are responsible for the vicious imposition of unjust and oppressive rules on women. Mothers train their daughter to be obedient and insist that a husband is like a God deserving loyalty. In the case of “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!,” the heroine exclaims in frustration what is the limit of her patience. When her husband leaves her destitute, to marry another one, she has one prayer. If the God should build the world again, she exhorts him not to act like an unexperienced potter. What ever he creates should share equal rights and power.

Equality is denied to the women even in their parent's homes. They are given only basic education and are married off with a dowry. But once the marriage is over the girl child becomes another man's property. Religion and societal norms are



unjust to women. In the story “A Taste of Heaven,” there is the tale of the hapless Bi Dadi. As a child, she had been married off and her husband died within a month. Till the end she remains an eternal virgin. One of the stories even mention a twelve year old bride who by her late teens had given birth to many children.

Family’s support is withheld once a marriage takes place. Mehrun in the titular story ‘Heart Lamp’ returns to her home after her husband starts an affair with another. No one is ready to welcome or accept her. She is taken back to her husband’s house. Mehrun is held responsible for her husband’s behaviour. Her brother makes it clear that it would be better if the daughter of the family has committed suicide instead of bringing shame on the whole family. Both religious tenets and traditional beliefs aim to safeguard the interests of men alone. “Mehrun has endured enough and the lamp in Mehrun’s heart had been extinguished long time ago” (Mushtaq108). She tries to commit suicide but her daughter pleads with her to live for the sake of the children.

Some women characters of Mushtaq are portrayed as strong persons who take matters into their own hands. In “Black Cobras,” women in the village finds the Muttawalli corrupt and cruel. When his indifference to the poor plight of Aashraf causes her child Munni’s death, they dare to accuse him and spew venom on him. Even his wife Amina who had been submissive so far rebels. In “Red Lungi,” Razia comes up with a clever plan. As she has to manage nearly eighteen children who are in her home during summer vacation, she decides to have the boys circumcised. Her husband decides to go by her decision. Most of them are their relatives’ children. Even the poor families in the village are asked to bring their boys. It soon becomes a mass event. The

number of male characters who stand by the women are few but Mushtaq shows how they make a difference. Most of the other men are themselves the victims of patriarchy.

With the fine radical translation done by Deepa Bhashti, Mushtaq’s *Heart Lamp* is a collection of stories that delineate the South Indian muslim women’s life of oppression and their rebellion. The tales dare to expose the horrors faced by these helpless women, imposed on them by patriarchy, gender division and societal norms. The dark humour of Mushtaq alleviates the bleakness of these tales of neglect and apathy. Mushtaq has truly seen and listened to the painful accounts of their lives. Hence the Booker International Prize as her work crosses boundaries and speaks to the world

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