

**RESISTANCE AGAINST PATRIARCHY AND ISLAMOPHOBIA:
FOSTERING PEACE IN HEART LAMP
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ABSTRACT:

The collection of short stories, Eedeya Hanathe (1990), written by Banu Mushtaq and translated into English by Deepa Bhashti as Heart Lamp, addresses the living experiences and day-to-day challenges of Muslim women. The stories revolve around the patriarchal and religious violence against women in the Muslim community; however, it transcends that and becomes a similar story of all women from different religions and castes. At the time of surging Islamophobia in India and other parts of the world, which dehumanizes Muslims, Heart Lamp sheds true light on the realities of the Muslim women and their community and resists all forms of oppression with peace and love. The early marriage of girls, the mechanical form of relationship between husband and wife, the abandonment by husbands, the suffocating patriarchal ecosystem and many other themes reveal the sufferings and forced submissive nature of women. These narratives sensitize the minds and social consciousness to develop empathy towards other human beings, especially women from all walks of life. It tackles hate and prejudice that are sown in the minds of people against other communities. Therefore, this paper substantiates Mushtaq's critical-insider role in promoting reformation, empathy, and peace in a broken society.

KEYWORDS:

Muslim women, Islamophobia, political violence, empathy.

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I. Introduction

Heart Lamp, a collection of short stories selected from the oeuvre of Banu Mushtaq, was originally written in Kannada between 1990 and 2023. It was translated into English by Deepa Bhashti and won the 2025 International Booker Prize. These stories reflect the intersectional oppression against Muslim women in rural and urban spheres. Banu Mushtaq, a compassionate writer, began writing as a journalist and columnist in Lankesh Patrike in the 1980s. The Bandaya Sahitya (Rebel Literature) Movement in the 1970s in Kannada literature largely influenced Banu Mushtaq's writings. This radical movement emerged in response to the earlier Kannada literary landscape which was dominated by the upper-caste men (Bhashti, 2025) and its fading relevance to society, especially to the women and marginalized communities (Rao, 2025). These stories are written in a colloquial and conversational way where Mushtaq has interwoven Arabic, Urdu, Dhakini, and Persian words and Bhashti retains those words in the translation too, ensuring its cultural essence. The stories reflect the day-to-day struggles of Muslim women in a suffocating patriarchal environment nourished by the misinterpretation of religious laws. These stories showcase how male-centric values subjugate women through constructed dependency, religious morality and thrusting upon them the burden of upholding the family's dignity at the cost of their individual self. Mushtaq's stories intervene to resist and showcase the fragility of the so-called masculinity and insist upon the need for love and empathy to foster peace in human relationships. Furthermore, Islamophobia is another threat to peace in society as it spreads stereotypes against Muslims and dehumanizes them. This paper argues that the Heart Lamp stories advocate for reformation within the community and not the hatred against it as propagated by the Islamophobes. Mushtaq acts as a critical insider whose resistance through words, not by swords, is what the present conflict-ridden world requires.

II. Theoretical Framework

As Yashasvi Gupta (2023) observes, patriarchal systems have historically managed women's reproductive rights, including restricted access to contraception, abortion, and the ongoing debate surrounding reproductive autonomy. Gupta argues that these issues deeply affect women's mental and physical health. Furthermore, patriarchy often interprets religious laws for its own convenience by sidelining the perspectives of women. Within this framework, men are granted unquestionable freedom while women are conditioned to be conformist. In the name of religious morality and long-constructed economic dependency women are exploited socially, physically, and mentally. Therefore, female characters in *Heart Lamp* cannot be seen through a single axis of identity, but rather at the intersection of gender, class, caste, and religion. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) observes that identities are multiple and intersecting; therefore, the resultant power and privilege, inequalities, and exclusion cannot be understood or addressed through single axis frameworks. On the other hand, Islamophobia is one such phenomenon utilized to propagate "unfounded hostility towards Muslims" (The Runnymede Trust, 1997). Islamophobia, in a way, homogenizes the entire Muslim community. Thus, it thwarts people from discussing about the shared struggles of women, children, and others among different communities. At this critical juncture, *Heart Lamp* gives voice to the oppressed women and their resistance. Contrasting Islamophobia, it aspires for a reformation within the system. The affective potency of narrative, as Boehmer (2014) suggests, enables readers to connect with people from marginalized backgrounds, thereby dismantling stereotypes and fostering an understanding of shared human experiences.

III. Analysis

A Questioning Constructed Dependency: The stories challenge the constructed dependency imposed on women by the patriarchal system and reveal how their resistance is being systematically suppressed. In the "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal"

story, the narrator employs satire in a soliloquy about the ideological belief that equates husband with God. The narrator supposes that if a husband's body is full of sores and blood gushing from them, "it is said that even if the wife uses her tongue to lick these wounds clean, she will not be able to completely repay the debt she owes." This underscores how women's existence is reduced to being subservient to men and their efforts, endurance, and struggles go unrecognized. The metaphor "Bonded labourer" used for women indicates the constructed dependency which erodes the dignified marital relationship and establishes a hierarchy within it. In the same story, Asifa's request to get sterilized after the seventh child was denied by her husband arguing that he is the one raising them. This articulates the male-centric attitude towards procreation, where men's decision is given prominence at the cost of women's bodily autonomy. As Yashasvi Gupta (2023) observes, patriarchal systems have historically managed women's reproductive rights, including restricted access to contraception, abortion, and the ongoing debate surrounding reproductive autonomy. In another story – Heart Lamp, Mehrun, a mother of five children, resists her husband's body-shaming and his extramarital affair. This illustrates the irony of an androcentric system that treats women's bodies merely as baby-rearing machines while simultaneously condemning those same bodies as "ugly" once they are exhausted by maternal labour. Her decision to abandon him was deemed a "dishonour" to the family by her brothers. The callous recommendation to her "to set on fire and die," to uphold their family's honor, reveals the honour-based patriarchal logic that erases the intrinsic value of women in the patriarchal system. Instead of attempting to hold her husband accountable for his actions, her family suggests Mehrun to "balance," normalizing injustice and silencing dissent. Together, these narratives affirm that the cultural and religious interpretations that entrench male hegemony pose a severe threat to women's agency. Through these stories, Mushtaq questions both imposed and internalized forms of constructed dependency and cautions against their self-

consuming impact on women's lives.

Resistance Against Oppression in the Name of Religion:

The stories subtly critique the patriarchal interpretation of religious laws as an inherently oppressive framework masked as “religious morality.” By employing an epistolary address to God in the story “Be A Woman Once Oh Lord,” Mushtaq deconstructs the lack of representation of women's perspectives in religious patriarchy. The narrator, a mother of two children, forsaken by her husband amid dowry demands and marital sexual entitlement, employs Juvenalian satire to critique the patriarchal interpretations of God that legitimize men's unfettered freedom. The narrator calls herself “a precious jewel” wrapped in gold and silver-embroidered cloth. This metaphor reveals two contradictions. Firstly, an assertion by the narrator about her self-worth and secondly, the irony of bringing up a girl child in a male-dominated social order “protected” at the cost of autonomy as a subordinate individual devoid of agency. Her nuanced questioning about the creator's bias for men in enjoying nature, marrying “four” women, and self-identity demonstrates her dissent not against “God” itself but the misinterpretation of the concept of the divine by the patriarchal religious authorities. Through Juvenalian satire, she exposes the creation of “arrogant and happy” men by “God,” described as creating men “as easily as clearing one's throat, as easily as pissing to relieve pressure.” This articulates the institutionalization of women's oppression in the theological patriarchy and its indifference towards women's lived experiences. The narrator's appeal to the figure of God to be a woman once, reflects an urgent call to the religious patriarchy to perceive the world and the institutions within it through women's lived perspectives, which has long been disregarded. In another story – Black Cobra, Zulekha Begum, who has learned Sharia law, instructs Ashraf to demand justice, not beg in her marital dispute case. Ashraf's husband abandons her for son preference, and the religious leader Mutawalli's apathy towards her appeal to get money for her daughter's medical expenses showcases the plight of women in

religious patriarchy. Though Zulekha educates Ashraf about the rights granted to women in Sharia law and misinterpretation of the same by Mutawalli, she does not look beyond it. “But there is a clause too that she should not exhibit her body and her beauty,” professed by Zulekha exposes her conformity towards religious laws without individual discretion. This confines them only to the religious laws in making life decisions. As Banu Mushtaq (2013) argues, Muslim women are unaware of their rights conferred by religious laws and their tragedy is that they are not aware of rights given to them in a democratic country. She contends that this lack of awareness is pushing women into extreme oppression and shrinking their capacity for resistance. Therefore, these narratives demand a critical outlook towards the theological patriarchy and the assertion of women’s individualism over religious bounds.

III.C Mushtaq as a Critical Insider: Countering Islamophobia – Mushtaq through her stories acts as a critical insider within the Muslim community. By contemplating the struggles faced by Muslim women, she documents her resistance against subjugating forces. This contrasts with popular Islamophobia that dehumanizes the Muslim community and creates unfounded hostility against it (The Runnymede Trust, 1997). In the Heart Lamp story, Mehrun pleads with her parents that she would wear a burqa and continue her education. However, she was forcefully married. Her argument that she feels naked if she removes her burqa reveals the dilemma of Muslim women, who are restricted from defying the status quo. The woman narrator in the “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord” story, questioning the figure of God that “He” did not have the time to peep into her heart, reflects Mushtaq’s dissent with the androcentric interpretation of the divine. In another story – The Shroud, Mushtaq depicts the violence of class attitudes; Shazia from a rich class was apathetic towards poor Yaseen Bua’s desire for the shroud. The narrative ending with Shazia’s intense remorse foregrounds how privilege can dull one’s capacity to recognise another’s dignity, and how that blindness is a violence (Tripathi, 2025). Thus, Mushtaq’s

approach of radical criticism against patriarchy and class structures in the Muslim community emphasizes the need for reform in the community, whereas Islamophobia's ideology and approach is to spread hate against Muslims and retreat from constructive criticism. It does not anticipate reformation in the community and comprehend the shared struggles of marginalized people across communities. This never halts at ideological level but transforms into violence; religious chauvinism, mob lynching, communal riots, and loss of innocent lives. Banu Mushtaq (2013) cautions that the Muslim women writers must be introspective in their writings while critiquing patriarchy and fundamentalism in Islam that their approach would empower the Sangh Parivar's fundamentalist forces (which often fuel Islamophobic narratives). She contends that Muslim women should ensure that their agitation for women's rights must not be hijacked by the fundamentalist forces. Thus, the stories enlighten about establishing boundaries between constructive criticism and hate mongering in understanding religious and political discourses.

Beyond the Community: Narrative, Empathy, and Peace – In this paper, peace is understood as an ethical condition fostered through empathy, recognition, and narrative understanding. The short stories, by reflecting the lived experiences of Muslim women, compels readers to recognize the collective hardships of women across caste, religion, and class. Literature breaks the ignorance surrounding the lack of attention to the different struggles of both men and women around us. It creates a space for introspection, reflection, attention, and emancipation (Shah, Fatima, & Fatima, 2024). The stories champion empathy, not just towards women but all of humankind. It illustrates that empathy towards people of different backgrounds facilitates the conscious repudiation of prejudices and hatred against others. In addition, empathy establishes tranquillity in the world. In the story "Red Lung," the metaphor "faded burqa" used for a working Muslim woman, articulates the distinct conditions that different people live in society, especially

the downtrodden and how they have been marginalized. The series of poor Muslim women arriving at the Khatna (circumcision) ceremony with their already circumcised sons to get circumcised, so that they would get some money and food reveals the stark reality of poverty in the society. Their silence when they were ridiculed for “stoop[ing] to any level” exposes the unempathetic manner they are observed and treated without dignity. The ceremony’s organizer, Latif Ahmed, seeing his wife and his son in a woman carrying a month-old baby to get circumcised, and handing over a hundred rupee note to her showcases the efficacy of empathy in changing one’s perspective towards others. The narrator’s proposition that “when there was so much poverty & misery around, was there any need to be arrogant,” challenges the inhumane disposition in interpreting and responding to the social, economic, and political issues. In the story “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord,” the narrator calling her dead mother an “eternal virgin” encapsulates the lack of space for the women’s voices, internal desires, and emotional intimacy in the restrictive male-dominated system. Therefore, these narratives impel introspection among both the oppressors and the oppressed for transformation and emancipation to create an empathetic and peaceful world.

IV. Conclusion

The narratives in the Heart Lamp are conversational and confrontational in nature. Together, these stories showcase the conundrum in which both women and men are trapped in a patriarchal system. The female characters in these stories are not passive victims but they resist subjugating forces in their own terms – acts assumed to be small, but with a massive impact in subverting patriarchy. Through questioning the constructed dependency imposed on women and misinterpretation of religion, women in these stories document their defiance potently. As these stories uncover the reality of Muslim women in the religious patriarchy, they also act as a contrasting model against Islamophobia. By exposing the oppression of Muslim women, these stories compel

readers to understand the shared struggles of women across communities, especially in the present times of divided minds and a divided world. The stories foreground the essential aspect of human life: empathy towards people of different caste, gender, religion, and class. Therefore, Mushtaq's role as a critical insider underscores that resistance through words, not by swords, is what the present conflict-ridden world requires.

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