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**REPRESSION, RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE IN  
BANU MUSHTAQ’S HEART LAMP**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Postcolonial and feminist literary discourses often depict Muslim women as silent victims of patriarchal oppression. Challenging this monolithic narrative, Banu Mushtaq’s Heart Lamp illuminates the complex interplay of repression, resistance, and resilience in the lives of ordinary women. The stories reveal how systemic gender inequality, disguised as tradition and religious custom, impacts reproductive rights, property ownership, and domestic dignity. Rather than succumbing to victimization, the protagonists demonstrate agency through both overt confrontation and covert endurance. The narrative celebrates the indomitable spirit of women who navigate socio-cultural constraints to assert their identity and survival.

**KEYWORDS:**

Muslim Women, Patriarchy, Resistance, Resilience, Feminist Literature.

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**“Even when crushed, the heart continues to glow like a lamp.”**

Repression of women has been central to postcolonial and feminist literature. Under the guise of tradition and religion, patriarchal dominance has been on the rise, especially among the Muslim community. Literature has represented Muslim women as victims of oppression. They have also been portrayed as silent sufferers of an oppressive system. Within the dominant western narratives, this oppression is often considered a symbol of cultural backwardness. On the contrary, there have also been representations in literature which portray Muslim women as articulating resistance and exhibiting resilience despite being under inhibited social constructs.

To begin with, Attia Hosain emerges as an early literary voice who plays an important role in providing a voice to the voiceless. Attia Hosain depicts women as transitioning from mute spectators of injustice to women with open-mindedness, from the oppressing patriarchy to modernity in post-colonial India in her influential novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). Women exhibiting resistance to the constraints imposed by traditions, religion, and family are portrayed through this groundbreaking novel, particularly through the character of Laila, who also exhibits her resilience and independence in thought and emotion. This resistance is not just a revolt but also self-reflection and self-discovery. Attia Hosain's writings focus on the emotional cost of repression even while upholding the capacity of resilience within the stern constraints of customs and traditions.

Following the tradition of Attia Hosain, writers such as Ismat Chughtai, Qurratulain Hyder, Rashid Jahan, Khadija Mastur, Fehmida Riaz, and Zehra Nigah have left a trend that makes explicit the discourse on Muslim womanhood by addressing rights of reproduction, domestic confinement, and moral hypocrisy. Especially Ismat Chughtai's literature portrays the social restrictions and represents the gendered double standards that govern women's lives. The above writers emphasize the notion that the depiction of

repression of women in literature functions subtly—quietly. These women writers collectively underscore the idea that repression often operates subtly—through silence and expectation rather than being explicit. In contemporary feminist writing, the tradition of Attia Hosain, Ismat Chughtai, and others is carried forward, bringing into the limelight the life of marginalized Muslim women who are often neglected in mainstream literature.

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.

The women in *Heart Lamp* tolerate not just emotional violence but also domestic violence, making institutions of marriage appear as confinement, and suffer invisible constraints under the guise of honor, decency, and respect. Even though the resistance is evident, it does not stop them from being resilient, which they exhibit through inner strength, moral clarity, and subtle defiance. Repression, resistance, and resilience have been examined in this research paper as intertwined processes and not as isolated terms.

Repression or oppression cannot be considered merely as embedded in the institution or through the misinterpretation of traditions and customs, but within the community, it is regarded as a normal way of life on account of psychological conditioning. On the other hand, resistance, in turn, is found in both overt forms—such as rude speech, confrontation, and retorting—and covert forms, including silent suffering, emotional withdrawal, and small acts of withdrawal.

Nevertheless, throughout the narratives, the women do not yield to surrender because of the inherent quality of resilience. For

the sake of keeping the family together or for the sake of raising the kids, even after being compelled to endure oppression, women continue to survive but without surrendering their sense of self. The study intends to find out these acts of resilience alongside repression and resistance. The intent of this study is also to trace these acts of transition and evolution from repression and resistance to resilience. The narratives also depict women's acts of defiance as refusing to be deprived of their self-respect and self-identity. This paper, through a close reading of the twelve illuminating stories, attempts to contribute to feminist literary criticism by portraying the silent yet powerful voices of Muslim women within the constraints of deterring socio-cultural environments.

This paper is also an attempt to analyze Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp, which portrays the repression of women in a conservative Muslim society. The argument put forth in this paper is that although the victims of authoritarian patriarchal repression are women belonging to any faith or strata of society, Muslim women experience repression in ways that are distinct. In the first story, "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal", Shaista is deprived of reproductive rights. Shaista's resistance to this is revealed as the protagonist Zeenat meets Shaista for the first time; six children come paraded, and their conversation reveals something even more alarming:

"And your bhai saheb came in the way...when I thought of getting an operation done. Now I will certainly get it done after number seven." (Mushtaq, 9)

It is not just the rights of reproduction that Shaista has to forsake, but also her eldest daughter Asifa had to abandon her studies to take care of her siblings. When Iftikhar feels provoked by Shaista's comments on Arifa's education, his remarks follow:

"I made her stop studying because girls do not need much education. A high school certificate is enough. We can get her married off next year". (Mushtaq, 10)

Gender oppression is deeply embedded in cultures, institutions, and daily interactions across the globe. On one hand, Iftikhar talks about his love towards his wife Shaista, claiming that he would build a palace that would put the Taj Mahal to shame and call it Shaista Mahal. On another note, Shaista's emotions are not cared for, nor her likes and dislikes. Rather, soon after her death, after giving birth to the seventh child, Iftikhar brings home a new bride, a girl of his daughter's age. The excuse he provides for this marriage is veiled as a favor to the girl and a social commitment:

“She is from a poor family. I need someone to look after the children after all. That is why.” (Mushtaq, 20)

The burial of Shaista under the stone slabs is symbolic not just of the emotional repression of Shaista but also of her right to live itself. His claims of building Shaista Mahal sounded generous but it was hidden manipulation, as Iftikhar gives her a false sense of control and takes away her respect and emotional center, playing with her emotions.

On the other hand, Shaista's resistance is a silent resistance which she cannot express to her husband but expresses to her friend. Being financially dependent on her husband, she has to suppress her desires and opinions, but nobody can stop her from introspection. She suffers silently within herself and endures the pain. Whether endurance is veiled as resilience is again a debatable question.

In “Fire and Rain”, Jameela's right to property is at stake as her brother, a mutawalli (manager of the treasury of waqf), is reluctant to give away her share. Just like “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal”, “Fire and Rain” exposes the double standards of the patriarchal system. The mutawalli is kind and generous to outsiders, provides loans, and helps people get employment. On the contrary, he mistreats the women of his own family. His wife Arifa endures the pain of being insulted in front of people. Her resistance is seen when she supports her sister-in-law who has come to ask for her share in the property. Another elder sister of the mutawalli, Sakeena,

is struck with poverty after her husband's death and stands on his threshold seeking help, but she is not even allowed to enter the house, let alone receive her share of the property.

Arifa keeps repeating: "haqdaar tarse toh angaar ka nuuh barse. If the one who has rights is displeased, a rain of fire will fall" (p.26). Going one step further, Arifa tries to convince her husband to give away the share of property to his sisters, but in return, she is treated with more insults. Women who try to resist are treated with insults and repressed. "Fire and Rain" brings to light the fact that rights are achieved by assertion and resistance, not just by bestowal. Sakeena's condition does not move the mutawalli. The moral inconsistency of the mutawalli saheb is exposed through "Fire and Rain".

Resistance need not be overt. It can be concealed as swearing and abuse. "The Black Cobras" asserts the open resistance of Amina, unlike Shaista. She grumbles and complains. Both have given birth to six children and are expecting the seventh, without their willingness. Shaista's resistance is concealed and subtle while Amina chooses to be explicit and overt as she says:

"...these children at home, Samsara, do I have even a minute of free time? If I bear one child per year, what will I become? Don't you want me to live long enough to be a mother to these children at least?" (Mushtaq, 40)

These words appear to be those of defiance and rebellion, but in actuality, Amina is asking for her right to live with dignity and peace. To this, the typical reply and the moral hypocrisy of the mutawalli is exposed through these words:

"I am the mutawalli. If people get to know that I got the operation done for a woman in my own house, I will have to be answerable to them." (Mushtaq, 40).

Through the unrestrained articulation of the character of Yakub, Banu Mushtaq lays bare the ruthless underlying patriarchal

power structures.

“You must not misunderstand me. God’s law says get married not just to one woman, but four. Should women give up their honour and dignity and come to the mosque? I waited for not one, but ten years. Did she give birth to even one boy? And the way she runs her mouth! Abbabbaa! Is that a sign of a woman from a respectable family? So I married another woman.” (Mushtaq, 41)

Aashraf’s resistance is explicit when she comes to the mutawalli saheb in search of justice from her insensitive husband who refuses to look after her and her children after they separated. Her call for justice is a call for human rights:

“Why don’t scholars tell women about the rights available to them? Because they only want to restrict women. The whole world is at a stage where everyone is saying something must be done for women and girl children. But these people, they have taken over the Qur’an and the Hadiths. Let them behave as per these texts at least! Let them educate girls, not just a madrasa education, but also in schools and colleges. The choice of a husband should be hers. Let them give that... Let a girl’s maternal family give her a share in the property. Let them respect her right to get divorced if there is no compatibility between the man and woman. If she is divorced, let someone come forward to marry her again; if she is a widow, let her get a companion to share her life with.” (Mushtaq, 49)

Resistance in the form of silence and withdrawal is what is seen through the character of Aashraf. Instead of justice, what Aashraf gets is the corpse of the infant she was holding in her hands, which was the result of creating havoc in the form of domestic violence by her husband. Mushtaq realistically portrays this uninhibited domestic act of violence which nobody endorses. While Aashraf withdraws herself emotionally from the world, Amina, being a witness to this act of insensitivity, turns rebellious, and “The Black Cobras” ends with the defiant Amina declaring openly:

“I have given you seven already. At least now I am going to get an operation done...and look after the children. It will be more than a week before I return.” (Mushtaq, 56).

“A Decision of the Heart” is an example of the epitome of resistance and resilience when Mehboob Bi, the mother-in-law of Akhila, decides to marry again at the age of fifty-one, which is arranged by Yusuf, her son himself. Yusuf is an exception to the patriarchal dominance; rather, he paves the way for social reformation through his magnanimous act and decision owing to the circumstances.

As “Heart Lamp” opens, Meher’s cold reception at her own maternal home, despite her husband’s abandonment of her and treating her as the wrongdoer instead of her husband, exposes the patriarchal hegemony and double standards running in the male-dominated society.

“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. The house that your doli goes to should be the house from which your doli comes out.” (Mushtaq, 92).

Mehrun’s resistance through her reply is epoch-making—she claims it was because of her parents that she did not remove her burkha. Now that she is conditioned that way, she could not abandon the burkha even on the insistence of her husband, and now her husband has abandoned Mehrun to find someone liberal in her thoughts and appearance. Even after all this act and speech of defiance and resistance, when Mehrun’s problems do not seem to disappear, she pours kerosene onto herself, succumbing to her difficulties. In the meantime, Salma, her teenage daughter, comes to rescue her and becomes the reason for her resilience:

“Just because you have lost one person, you will throw all of us at that woman’s mercy? You are ready to die for Abba, but is it

not possible for you to live for our sakes? How can you make us all orphans, Ammi? We want you!” (Mushtaq, 101.)

In conclusion, Heart Lamp positions itself as important feminist literature that realistically records the lives of socially neglected women and provides a critique of the standardized patriarchal structures. This collection of stories not only appeals to the readers to recognize the inhumane and unjust acts of repression—holding a mirror to society—but also, through various characters, emphasizes this repression as transforming into resistance and resilience—loud or visible—and the refusal to surrender one’s inner self.

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