



Masculinity in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp Selected Stories

Abstract: The present paper entitled "Masculinity in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp, selected stories" is a study on the masculinity and femininity in the patriarchal Indian society. Heart Lamp selected stories is a collection of twelve short stories which questions the masculinity and the institute of marriage in the male chauvinist world. It is the recipient of the most coveted International Booker Prize of 2025. Banu Mushtaq is a feminist writer in every aspect of her writing. Her experience as a lawyer and journalist has helped her to endorse women's right through her writing. Though originally it is written in Kannada Deepa Bhasti has done justice in retaining the purity of her writing. Deepa Bhasti is the winner of the English Pen Translates Award 2024. Heart Lamp throws light on all the aspects of women suffering in marriage like domestic violence, unwanted pregnancies, discrimination, inequality, rejection, disrespect, harassment, trauma, lack of right to their body, body shaming and assertion. It is also about the husband-and-wife relationship, their commitment, love-hate relationship, domination of husbands, docile and sacrificing wives, lack of caring and understanding among the couples. Finally, all the women in the stories embrace motherhood by rejecting the master-slave relation of husband and wife.

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Introduction

The collection *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories* by Banu Mushtaq, translated by Deepa Bhasthi, offers a powerful representation of women's lived experiences within the deeply ingrained patriarchal social structure of India. The stories unravel the many layers of masculinity ranging from domination, emotional neglect, and entitlement to the systematic suppression of women's autonomy. Through twelve compelling narratives, Mushtaq exposes how marriage, religion, tradition, and cultural expectations are weaponized against women to restrict their identity, choices, and dignity. This paper examines the portrayal of toxic

masculinity in the collection and highlights how Mushtaq's characters despite their suffering assert their agency, embrace motherhood, and challenge oppressive social norms. By exploring themes such as misogyny, domestic violence, infidelity, emotional trauma, and body shaming, the paper emphasizes the urgency of rethinking gender roles for building a more equal and humane society.

In the Indian context masculinity of a man is determined by the way he controls his wife. It is always egocentric, dominating, never considering his wife as better half, equal or human. Wife should be always submissive and treat her husband as the king of the house. All the religions of the world teach to respect women as mother, daughter and daughter-in-law. But it is so heart wrenching that the men have dismissed the religious scripts and used it according to their benefits to rule women. But women are forced to follow it in fear so that patriarchy is sustained. Masculinity is not physical strength or socio, political, economic power but it is how a man treats a woman and makes her feel secured with him. Sex is biological, gender and gender differences are social. Masculinity is social aspirations of being



a man and femininity is social aspirations of being a woman. It depends on the persona, conducts and quality that are considered appropriate for boys or men in a particular society and some traits differ from one another. But universally in any society the man is associated with power dominance and violence against woman. As Michael Foucault opines: "Power relations are dependent upon a number of deftly-designed strategies: Most important one of these strategies is the tendency on the part of the dominant to ceaselessly refuse to acknowledge the dominated subject's separate identity and the dominant power structures constantly strive to drive a wedge between the oppressed, of about to be oppressed individual and community, group, gender or class to which she belongs. The victimization of a woman can be seen as related to a larger exploitative pattern perpetuated by patriarchy" (Michael Foucault, 125).

The story '*Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*' speaks about the plight of a married woman. In the facade of sheltered marriage Zeenat is treated like a breeding machine and dies in the process of pleasing her husband. In contrast to the traditional couple Iftikhar and Shaista there is a modern couple Mujahid and Zeenat upholding the values and meaning of marriage and love. '*Fire Rain*' is a story of a couple Mutawalli Usman Saheb and Arifa. Mutawalli fails as a husband, father, and to be a good religious person. His wife ironically admires her husband for saving religion who was not even aware of his son's illness. '*Black Cobra*' is about the sufferings of women in Islamic religion. This is a saga of women suffering and displays how women are crushed in the name of religion. '*A Decision of the heart*' is a story of a man who is sandwiched between his wife and mother. '*Heart Lamp*' is a heartbreaking story of a wife who suffered due to the infidelity of her husband, but Mehrun is saved by her daughter who rightly questions her, "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?" '*High heeled Shoe*' is a story which narrates the insensitiveness of a husband towards his pregnant wife. His behavior is very common among Indian husbands who are selfish and careless towards their pregnant wives. '*Be A Woman Once Oh lord!*' is a story of a poor wife with two children whose husband remarries as she could not pay him dowry. She cries to the lord, the creator of all the species on this earth including man to be a woman once to understand the pain and agonies of being a woman.

In the story '*Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*' Zeenat's education stops equating her husband to a master or elevate him to the place of God. She had been married for ten months with all the awkwardness and excitement they had soon become a normal couple. Her husband Mujahid had gone out of the way to overwhelm her like braiding her hair encouraged her to smoke in a desire to be called a very social and liberal person. They are invited by Iftikhar Ahmed to his house. When Zeenat enters to their house compound she feels as though she is entering to a park with all the fruit trees and bloomed flower plants. Even after having six children Shaista is not allowed to get an operation by her husband. She was a breeding machine to him who thought his earnings were enough to raise the kids. But Shaista was in pain because of her never ending pregnancy her elder daughter had quit her studies and taken care of her siblings. Iftikhar is a male chauvinist pig who just wants to have nice sex with his wife, denies for operation and thinks higher education is not needed for girl child as she will be married off. Iftikhar flaunts his love like a teenager to his wife. He wants to construct '*Shaista Mahal*' if he was an emperor. Mujahid is a matured man who understands Iftikhar love and says "If your mother dies it is the death of your mother's love too. You will not get that kind of love from anyone else. But if the wife dies, it is a different matter, because



one can get another wife" (13). Iftikhar was not fond of his wife, but he desired her body. He loves the company of women if it was not Shaista he would get along well with Nargis or Mehrun. Shaista delivers a cute baby boy. But she becomes very fragile after delivering her seventh child. She is killed by her regular pregnancy and without proper care. She had never taken care of her body, never laid in bed for more than fifteen days. She was always worried about her husband who became dull without her company. Zeenat recalls her sisters and sisters-in-law taking rest for forty days and her Amma's words "For forty days after the birth, forty graves have their mouth open for the baby and the new mother." (20)

The man who spoke about immortalizing his love by constructing a Shaista Mahal for his wife gets remarried immediately after her death. This story speaks about animal love of husbands towards their wives which is purely physical. There are men like Mujahid though very less in number who take care of their wives physically and mentally also. He had applied for a month's leave and stayed with his wife in her bereavement after she had lost her mother. Zeenat was very hurt to witness Iftikhar with his new wife. She had asked him not to repeat his fake declarations of love to his new wife. The man who had not allowed resting his wife for forty days after delivering a baby had remarried after the fortieth-day fatiha was over. He falsely claims that he had married for the sake of his children, but it was for his physical needs. He had never cared for his children if he had cared he would never have married again. He had married a young girl who was not more than eighteen years from a poor family, who was his daughter's age. Zeenat in tears remembers Shaista babi's words saying about her daughter "she is not my daughter, she is my mother." (22)

Fire Rain is a story of the couple Mutawalli Usman Saheb and his dutiful wife Arifa. The

role of the Mutawalli is to protect the property of the God and the love. He has to be a righteous person but in a reality he is a treacherous man. He is not worthy to be an agent of god. He is unwilling to give his sisters their share in the property and as a man he wants everything for himself. When his younger sister demands for her share, he is very unhappy with her as he has spent much on her education marriage and dowry. His main concern was to see how he could punish his sister and retain the whole property for himself. Arifa was more kind hearted and broad minded. Her mother had told her not to displease the one who has rights as it may lead to the rain of fire. She wanted her husband to give her sister in law's share as it is written in Quran. Mutawalli who was owner of his will and who had taken many decisions for others. "Why should he tolerate the words of a woman, burkha clad of little value?" (27) he had asked his wife to shut up. Arifa toiled day and night with her household chores and her sick son Ansar. He had not even taken care of his elder sister who was a widow. She had come to his home like any other visitors to request him to recommend her son's name for an attender's job at an engineering college as he was a member of the committee there. He had become a political personality and was under the illusion that he had the power to rule his Muslim folks and make them vote for any candidate of his choice.

When Saabjaan had come to him to ask money for his daughter's marriage he had different plan and dreamt of building a shopping complex on this poor man's open site. Mutawalli had got Nisar tied to a tree and beaten for eating away the masjid's 200 rupees, in the name of painting the mosque. The guy had fallen into the pond and died. His corpse had attained the martyr's status. Dawood had taken the opportunity to blow it up into religious crisis as it was buried in Hindu land. Mutawalli picked up this issue for his



betterment. He spent fifteen days moving from one office to another after giving petition to the DC for the exhumation of the remains of Nisar from Hindu soil to Muslim soil.

Finally, when the day came when Nisar's body was exhumed were carrying the corpse for his shock Mutawalli recognized the drunkard who spoke in bad slang was Nisar. Many in the procession recognized Nisar but they did not reveal it to the police and safe guarded his honour, but Mutawalli was very much disturbed and rushed back home. "Thousands of crows crying kaa kaa began to pluck and eat his brain. Was it a Hindu corpse? Was it a Muslim corpse? The body was too rotten to be identified. Should it rot here or should it rot there?" (39) Where Mutawalli was trying to save his religion in futile or rather spoil it in his efforts. He was unaware that his son was hospitalized and was diagnosed with brain fever called Meningitis. He was an utter failure in rendering his duty as a Mutawalli, husband or as a father. His wife ironically admires her husband for saving religion.

Black Cobras is a story which mirrors the sufferings of women in Islamic religion. Mutowalli's wife is fed up with reproducing, and her husband is unwilling to give her permission for tubectomy as he is afraid of his reputation. His wife questions him "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?" (43)

There is Yakub who leaves his wife and marries another woman in want of a male child. He scolds his wife for producing three females and considers his right to remarry as his religion grants this permission. His wife wants him to take care and give money for the treatment of their younger child who is sick. She gives petition to the mosque but as a man Mutawalli supported Yakub. Yakub thinks that it was a dishonor that his wife had gone to the mosque

to ask for justice. He says, "As a woman, if she can't even adjust this much then....." (44) Mutawalli's wife Amina is a feminist and hates men who utilize the Quran and the God according to their wish and benefit. She knew her husband was not giving justice to his job as mutawalli. He never performed namaz properly for five times a day nor did he stop watching movies or drinks. Amina as a woman is sensible to another woman's pain and says "Poor thing! What is her fault in all this? Is it her fault that she gave birth to three daughters in a row? (45)

There is another feminist and our writer's mouth piece in the story named Zulekha Begum to whom Aashraf worked as maid. She knew about Aashraf's plight, and her husband was free as a man, and nobody will question him if he renders his responsibilities or not. She says "He is langoti yaar after all a man everybody's best friend. His past does not rise up to dance in public. The present doesn't touch him. The future doesn't move him nor is it a mystery. He does not have to remain shy in the shadows. He does not have to say who he belongs to. He does not need to seek forgiveness, not ever at all, because nothing he does is a mistake" (50) Aashraf was not willing to beg she wanted to get her daughter treated. The so called husband who was with her for a decade is not bothered about his child's wellbeing. Though polygamy is allowed in Islamic religion there are clauses which are ignored by men. Here Mutawalli did not follow the law himself, and many are ignorant of it. Many follow according to their will and which is useful to them. Zulekha rightly says "where this Sharia law remains is in the laps of poor women like you, like this Muni (53) Zulekha Begum and Aashraf's conversation about women's rights are noteworthy. Those women who are unaware of their rights blindly follow the patriarchy and hinder the emancipation of women. Much is spoken about women empowerment but practically



women are still suffering. There is need for girls to complete their education, have choice of husband, share in the property, right to get divorced, remarriage for divorced women and widows. Aashraf and her kids got wet in the rain. At last, When Yakub came to see her was burning in anger. As a man he thinks he has not done any injustice to her by remarrying. Men get rid of their guilt by quoting other men in the community or society for their support. Aashraf says Gafoor, Idris, Nasir all of them are happily married twice and their wives had left to their parent's house or have been working as coolies or something. Yakub had never cared about his children. Rather than asking about his sick baby he kicked Aashraf with all his strength.

She fell on one side, and her baby Munni flew out from her hand and smashed to the ground. Munni got an end to all her problems and freed her mother also. There was no need to beg Yakub or Mutawalli for the baby's treatment. Women who witnessed this indirectly cursed Mutawalli for not saving the little one. "Nothing good will come your way. You will be born with a pig face on Judgement Day. May black cobras coil themselves around you. May you not remember the Kalima on your tongue when you die." (60) Amina understood by Aashraf's example that women should not beg men for justice and they have to find their own way. She decides to get operated and take care of her and her children. Finally, she decides to assert her will not as a wife but as a mother.

A Decision of the Heart is a story of a man who is sandwiched between his wife and mother. Yusuf is the elder son of his mother Mehaboob bi. She was widowed at a young age and had taken the responsibility of raising her sons with much love and care. Mehaboob bi's son had witnessed her struggle and was very respectful to her. But his wife Akila was very jealous of her mother-in-law because of his treatment

towards his mother. She had called her mother in law a home wrecker and had even cracked her knuckles. She had cried beating her chest, "You are making my stomach burn by behaving like a co-wife" (64) The couple lacked understanding, and they quarrelled a lot. When his wife picked a big fight with him for bringing his mother by an auto, he challenged his wife that if he does not get his mother married, he would shave off his moustache. He can't dare to talaq his wife in her brother's threat, and he knew she was a good woman except her hatred towards his mother. Finally, he decides to find a suitable groom to his mother who looked beautiful in her fifties. He finds a suitable broom and makes necessary preparations for marriage. Akhila had given the information to panchayat and when they appeared she had taken all the blame on her side and shed tears and pleaded them to rectify her family. She was even ready to take care of her mother-in-law as a mother. Yusuf had not even taken consent from his mother for her marriage and before he could say her Akhila had created a scene by calling the panchayat. But Mehaboob Bi takes a decision from her heart to marry and defends her son's decision for his peace of mind. When Yusuf says to Akhila may she be of good fortune of having her children arrange her wedding and spat out enough bitterness for a lifetime, she was all in tears. A woman handles so well and performs her duty as a daughter, wife and mother but a man finds it difficult to balance as a son and husband between his mother and wife in perfect harmony.

High Heeled Shoe is a story which displays the insensitiveness of a husband towards his pregnant wife. His behaviour is just like many husbands of India who are selfish and careless towards their wives that too in pregnancy. Motherhood is not an easy journey, and every woman pledges her life to bring a new life on this earth. The man who takes pride of his lineage never cares about his wife who goes



through physical and psychological change in her pregnancy. Nayaz had a craze for high heeled shoes which his sister in law had bought if from Saudi. He wanted to steal it for his wife. As though his sister-in-law read his mind and had hidden those shoes eight days prior to her journey. He wanted to ask his sister in law directly to give those shoes to her wife, but he could not collect enough courage to ask. When their journey date was nearing, he panicked and with all the turmoil of his emotions he picked up vomiting and fever. Later he becomes a changed person, renovates his ancestral house and constructs cellar and two shops chopping the ancestral mango tree. He was in fact competing with his brother and sister in law. His brother Mehaboob khan was more sensible and had felt bad by witnessing tomb over his childhood memories. He even noticed that his sister in law had become very thin and feeble in her pregnancy. He asks her to get ready to take her to the gynaecologist. In this also Nayaz finds on opportunity to make up with his brother rather than getting worried about his wife's health. Everything was normal except Arifa had become anaemic and had B.P. Still after learning about her health condition her husband didn't show any concern and buys her a pair of pointed heel shoes. Arifa always used a pair of blue stripped hawai chappal and it was very difficult to walk. Her senseless husband had packed her hawai chapel and had walked out of the shop without turning back. It was very difficult for her to walk in those high heels and would have fallen if she had not got hold of a stranger. Then she hears the voice of the life within her saying there is a lot of weight on me, your stomach's weight is entirely on me. She realizes that she is putting unnecessary pressure on her baby because of those high heeled shoes and the baby was struggling between life and death. Her husband had disappeared leaving her in this distressful situation.

She feared she might slip and fall. "It was OK even if she fell down, at the most she might break a few bones. But what about the baby inside her, she wondered?" (127) Finally, she placed her hands on her stomach focusing all her will on the movement of her baby and tried to put all her pressure on the heels to protect her baby. She was drenched in sweat when she puts all pressure on the shoes and gets the heels exploded. It's evident that a mother can go to any extent to save her baby and Arifa stood solid like the earth to save her baby. For the patience and tolerance, she displayed it is obvious why the earth is called the Mother Earth.

Heart Lamp is a heart rendering story of a woman who is lighted up by her daughter. Mehrun is unwelcomed at her parental home and her brother who once called her 'my pari, my angel'. They sensed something was wrong at her husband's house and their silence spoke their rejection to help her. Her brothers immediately took her back home. Though she was a feeding mother she denied having anything from her matrimonial house as they were not ready to listen to her trauma and allow her back to her home. They were just thinking if she leaves her husband's house it would be dishonour and she had sisters to be married. They were not even ready to ask their brother-in-law about his affair as they were afraid if he talaks their sister. It was Meher's fate to accept it and as a man he can do whatever he wants. She had begged her parents and brothers not to discontinue her studies and get her married. Many of her classmates were even not married and she had become an old lady with five children. Even her mother does not understand what she feels and says "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." (102) As a man he is unconfined, but it is Meher's responsibility is to think about her daughter who is in high



school and her two younger sisters who are of marriageable age. Her actions may hurdle their future, but the so called husband can saunter around with another woman, and it is acceptable by all. Inayat had played the game of love and lust for sixteen years. After having five children he had insulted her womanhood. "You lie there like a corpse. What happiness did I get from you? 'What have I not given you to wear, to eat? Who is going to stop me? I am with a woman who makes me happy (105). Mehrun's sixteen year daughter was understanding her mother's pain and had thought her uncles would scold her father and bring him back to them. But Inayat and brother-in-law spoke about everything except the crucial family matter. Her brother before leaving said her to be responsible. "What problems some women have to fare-husbands who are drunkards, mother-in-law who beat them. Thank God you are in a good situation. He is a bit irresponsible that is all. It is you who must balance all that" (107) Mehrun had lost all hopes in her life after she realized that she has become stranger to her own family. She was recalling the insults and criticism by her husband regarding her loose stomach and her sagging breasts that had sated their children's hunger. He had made her soul feel naked too when he had said her "You are like my mother and with those words had pushed her alive into hell" (109). Her body shaming by her husband had damaged her mental health and had shattered her self-esteem. She had cried for help, but her family had denied it and without looking at her children in the mid of night she decides to end her life. She had taken the kerosene and match box in her hand. Fortunately, Salma woke up by hearing to the cry of the baby. She was intelligent enough to sense something was not right and rushed to her mother even in the darkness tracing the smell of kerosene. She hugged her mother and questioned her, Ammi 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 it is not possible for you to live for our sakes? How can you make us all orphans Ammi? A daughter is like a friend to her mother. Salma comforted her mother by her touching words and illuminated her mother's heart. Each and every woman's heart which is extinguished by her man needs to get lighted by soothing words and therapeutical touch to make her realize her worth and to live her life.

Be A Woman Once Oh Lord! narrates the story of a woman who loses her identity to be a wife and her life is even jeopardized when her husband leaves and marries again. It is a horrible tribulation of women suffering a lot in Muslim marriages with the acceptance of the two evils of polygamy and dowry system. The women are taught to be obedient to their husbands and follow his words like the God. Marriage makes every woman to lose her identity and becomes just a wife to her demanding husband. "My body was his playground, my heart a toy in his hand. I do not hate him, nor do I wish for him to be my plaything either. If only I had been his backbone and he the hands that would wipe my tears away... (201) Here is a husband who never allows his wife to meet her parents or go to them as they were incapable of giving dowry. She was not allowed to meet them in her pregnancy nor in their deaths. The husband was greedy for money and was keen on his bodily desires. She became pregnant not with the union of mind and heart but with the sexual act of her husband. He never displayed any affection towards his wife or cared in her pregnancy. Though he was happy to have a son never felt more than a master to his wife. The tumour in her stomach changes her life. She was still in the hospital after operation when her husband wants her to give the two strand chain, she was wearing to the new girl he was getting married. She denies giving it as it was gifted by her mother. Her husband was absent for three days and she was waiting for him to take her home. When she comes home



to be a prisoner again with her children the house was locked. She waited with her children from morning to night and witnessed her husband with his new wife. Her patience and heart is broken and the lord who had created both man and woman with so much disparity cries to the god "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! A woman is torn apart by her body. For many husbands she is just a body and not a being. It is not easy to lead a loveless and lifeless life. To understand the pain and agony of a woman the lord should come to the earth and witness her pain by being a woman himself for at least once. All the protagonists who were enslaved under the sheltered tree of their husbands get aware of its reality and embrace motherhood. Day by day rape of women and domestic violence are increasing in India. Toxic masculinity in our country is deep rooted, and it provokes and promotes men to be violent, stoic and aggressive towards women. There is need for the evolution of masculinity as our Indian men are still in crisis. The media has played an important role in comprehending this macho man. Still the young minds should be channelized and educated towards rethinking of masculinity for the gender equality. There should be a revolution in thoughts of thinking women as just bodies and accept their intellectuality. The next generation should be free from the age-old strivings of patriarchy to welcome an egalitarian society.

A man becomes a man in the way he thinks; in the way he takes a right decision for his family and struggles to protect it. Each woman is a warrior, but she needs a father who prepares her for the war of life and supporters to withstand the obstacles in the way of her success. When the protector is a destroyer and the victimizer plays as a victim it is very difficult to survive. Women should get aware of

the laws which can save their rights, lives and peace of mind. There is The Dowry Prohibition Act, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, right to property and right to divorce, The Hindu Succession Act, The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage Act 2019) is an act which prohibits pronouncing triple talaq by husbands and The Supreme Court of India criminalized and declared triple talaq unconstitutional. Body shaming is an offence and is punishable under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). But our traditional minded women are not willing to exercise their rights. Juliet Mitchell in *Women: The Longest Revolution* rightly opines "Women's Liberation would be achieved only if changes in four structures: reproduction, production, socialization of children and sexuality are radically transformed".

Conclusion

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* boldly dismantles the façade of idealized masculinity that prioritizes male privilege over women's humanity. Through vivid, heartbreaking, and socially grounded narratives, the collection reveals how religious interpretations, marital expectations, and patriarchal customs continue to undermine women's rights and emotional well-being. The stories depict women who are silenced, abandoned, exploited, and body-shamed, yet they also portray resilience through motherhood, courage, and emotional strength. As the paper demonstrates, the evolution of masculinity is essential for achieving gender equality, and societal transformation must begin with awareness, education, and legal empowerment. Mushtaq ultimately asserts that a truly just society can emerge only when men recognize women as equal individuals not just bodies or burdens and when women refuse to surrender their identity to oppressive structures. Her stories stand as a call for empathy, reform, and a collective reimagining of gender relations in contemporary India.



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