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## Class and Gender Intersections in Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to study the multiple shades of victimization that suppress women and the lowly in Banu Mushtaq's collection of short stories titled *Heart Lamp*, translated by Deepa Bhashti. Written between 1990 and 2023, the stories in this Booker Prize winning collection showcase the lives of women from Muslim communities in Southern rural India. Selected stories from this collection are put to study based on intersectional theory and Marxist-feminist frameworks in order to decipher the conservative notions that often hold back families and societies from providing women equal opportunities for growth and progress, even in the beginning phases of the twenty-first century. These stories are slices of life, many of which do not show heroic acts of resistance from the part of the disadvantaged, but rather portray sheer reality that invokes subtle terror in readers. Addressing a range of issues like poverty, early marriage, maternal mortality, abandonment and denial of property rights, reproductive rights as well as education, these stories vocalise the use and misuse of authoritarian laws to suit the needs of those they favour. In a class society that is rigidly patriarchal, women and the poor experience systemic oppression wherein they are rendered voiceless and cannot make decisions for themselves even in basic matters of rights and justice. This systemic oppression is intersectional, as it involves multiple dimensions of social power like gender and class. By rawly portraying the woe and frustration that women face in such closed spaces, these stories make an impact for change. Through an intersectional analysis of selected stories, this paper seeks to bring to light the different faces of oppression that women are subject to in rural localities where fundamentalist principles are often prioritised over ethical concerns.

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## **Introduction**

Feminist literary theory has challenged the male centered discourse embedded in conventional social narratives since the 1960s. The rigidity of patriarchal norms that had treated women as subjects for centuries had been exposed by the feminist movement and theory by objectively examining the roles that they have been designed to carry in life and literature. Initially, in its rigid opposition to patriarchy, it did not fully address the multiple shades of oppression that deny women progress, which goes beyond the sole constraints of gender and extends to other dimensions of social power like class, race and caste. This is where intersectionality comes into play as it highlights how multiple aspects of a person's identity like gender, class, race, etc prevent access to opportunities and privileges. Conceived by Black feminist thinkers in the 1970s and 1980s, it sought to critique the debilitating faces of institutions that marginalized women of colour, which was not limited to the gendering of patriarchy.

A rich philosophy of both experience and the material world, intersectionality is a framework which, according to Crenshaw, is meant to replace "single-axis" analysis by accounting for multiple forms of oppression at the same time (Jones et al. 2). Bell Hooks's critical formulation 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' affirms this interlinking nature of different forms of subordination as well as resistance. By scrutinising different shades of marginalization, intersectional theory examines how multiple identities of an individual like gender, class, race, caste, age, nationality, disability etc. intersect to create unique forms of discrimination and privilege.

The Indian cultural scenario which incorporates diversity in a multitude of aspects like language, religion, traditions, cuisines, clothing etc is not only multifaceted, but also hierarchical. Irrespective of the unique cultural fabric any Indian society belongs to, class and patriarchy holds power across languages and cultures, denying agency to women and the weaker sections for centuries. From the mid-twentieth century, counter resistance movements had emerged in many regions of India, opposing patriarchal and bourgeois mentalities that plagued the underprivileged sections of the society. The Bandaya Sahitya was one such resistance movement which developed in Karnataka in the 1970s and 80s in regional Kannada literature. It was a highly influential literary movement wherein Muslims, Dalits and women wrote as an act of protest against the hegemony of the upper caste and mostly male-led writings in Kannada literature. Banu Mushtaq, activist, writer and the author of the Booker Prize winning short story collection *Heart Lamp* was part of the Bandaya Sahitya movement. Ideas of resistance that challenge authoritarian norms are subtly woven in the fabric of her stories which addresses the concerns of the weak and the poor.

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*Heart Lamp* is a collection of stories written by Banu Mushtaq over a span of three decades from 1990 to 2023, selected and translated into English by Deepa Bhashti. It deals with the lives of women and the poor in Muslim communities in rural parts of Karnataka. These stories grounded in reality portray the hypocritical face of patriarchy using subtle terror and humour. The women in these stories do not heroically resist or resurrect from their stifling realities, as these stories are rooted in the harsh realities of their lives which do not offer them a source of escape or at the least conscious awareness of their circumstances. But their lives are depicted with an honesty and rawness that is capable of bringing gradual change in society through the emotional depth that some of these stories hold beneath their surfaces. This seemingly subtle yet powerful storytelling also uses light humour and sarcasm to show how gender and class norms have been internalised in Indian societies. This paper seeks to analyse the interlinking layers of oppression that are challenged by Mushtaq's stories in the light of intersectionality.

## Finding and Discussion

### Stratification and Social Inequality

According to the fundamental economic structure of work and property, there had been class based divisions in society across centuries which resulted in further bifurcation of power and resources. The recognition of these divisions led to the Marxist idea of economic determinism which held that class and privilege are economically determined. The two-class model of a class society was developed by Marxist thinkers which distinguished between the powerful and the powerless. This stratification in society is determined not only by the distribution of power and resources, but also by other factors like social positioning, gender and ethnicity. The question of intersection was first raised by Marxist-feminists to study the subordination of women and class exploitation.

In a class society, an individual develops multiple identities based on different dimensions of social power like gender, class, race etc which intersect and overlap. This is especially true in multicultural societies in India which are multilayered and hierarchical on different fronts. The various kinds of subordination that women, especially those belonging to the lower strata of society are subject to are portrayed with transparency in the stories in *Heart Lamp*. Though the women characters in most of these stories are from middle class or wealthy families, they are chained by patriarchal constraints which deny them a voice of their own. This indirectly affects their economic positioning as well. "An aspect of women's relationship to the class structure is that it is mediated, to some extent at least, by the configuration of the family, dependence on men, and domestic labour" (Barrett 135).

In "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal", Asifa, the eldest daughter in her family is shouldered with the responsibilities of taking care of six of her siblings while being denied education. Though her mother Shaista wants to get her educated in order to save her from her own destiny of early marriage, her father Iftikhar does not care for it. "I made her stop studying because girls do not

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need much education” (Mushtaq 10). The act of Iftikhar plucking jasmine buds symbolises this denial as discontinuing his daughter’s studies also corresponds to chopping off her dreams, her aspirations and her possibility for a better life. This denial of basic rights like education even to women who belong to affluent families pushes them to the labyrinth of economic marginalization as denial of education is the denial of financial autonomy.

The rich-poor divide in each of these stories highlights the reduced positioning of women especially those from financially underprivileged families. “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 288). The poor women in these stories experience intersectional oppression where there is an entanglement of power, resources and capital including cultural capital like education. In “Fire Rain”, the mutawalli Usman who holds generational wealth stands in stark contrast to his own sister, Sakeena, a destitute widow seeking monetary help from her brother. “Black Cobras” portrays the excruciating face of poverty and abandonment through the life circumstances of Aashraf, a poor woman who was abandoned by her husband for not conceiving a son. She is placed in direct contrast to Zulekha Begum, an affluent woman who not only owns material wealth, but also a heightened awareness of the rights and concerns of the disadvantaged. “Red Lung” shows the class differences within a single religious community wherein a wealthy family decides to conduct a mass khatna, a mass circumcision event for children from poor families in the wake of their child’s circumcision. In the story “The Shroud”, a clear contrast is drawn between Yaseen Bua, a poor old widowed woman who requests Shaziya, the mistress of a spacious bungalow to bring a kafan while she goes for Hajj pilgrimage in order to fulfill her endearing desire of salvation in death for which she had saved her hard-earned money for years. Such economic disparities in living conditions affect and determine the degrees of oppression and survival of these women.

The power that patriarchy exercises over women converges with the power exercised by other systems like class and religion. According to Bell Hooks, patriarchal systems “perpetuate power by suppressing dissent” (Hooks 42). Any form of resistance being shut down or met with ignorance reinforces the exerted power. In “Fire Rain”, Jameela, the mutawalli Usman’s sister visits him and requests him for her inherited share of property. His anger over his sister’s demand symbolises the reluctance of systems of power over the rights of the powerless. “Black Cobras” exposes the manipulative tendencies of power structures in the wake of the question of justice for a poor, needy woman. When Aashraf is abandoned by her husband Yakub who is an auto rickshaw driver, she struggles to make ends meet in order to take care of young children. Her infant child, Munni, becomes sick due to lack of food and nutrition.

Zulekha Begum, an educated woman in the house she goes to work for, makes her aware of her rights and she pleads with the mosque authority for justice, which results in a trial. “Do not beg. Demand justice. Do you know who gets justice? Only those who demand it. People like you

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will not get justice if you don't demand it...Twisting the Qur'an and Hadiths the way they want in front of a helpless woman is not justice" (Mushtaq 54). She seeks justice not because she wants her husband back, but in fear of the declining health of her malnourished children. Yakub is able to get away with the injustice that he has meted out to his wife as the society he lives in holds double standards.

Isn't he a man? Whether he is there, not there, whether he carries responsibilities, whether he neglects them, who's going to ask? Who does he have to answer to? 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 shyly 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. (Mushtaq 50)

This vocalisation of Aashraf's thoughts reflects the privilege that Yakub has as a man in a predominantly patriarchal society. Despite being economically underprivileged, Yakub is not as disadvantaged as Aashraf especially in terms of legal and religious rights on the grounds of his gender. Aashraf thus emerges as a clear example of a woman who experiences intersectional oppression who is denied resources as well as a choice of resistance.

### **Class and Gender Consciousness**

"Consciousness is, from the very beginning, a social product and remains so as long as men exist at all" (Marx 44). While Marx addressed the imbalance of power in material society which creates class consciousness, the internalisation of gender bias was addressed by feminist theorists. Both these forms of consciousness evade the women characters in Mushtaq's collection. The question of belonging pervades the minds of women in a male dominant society as institutions like marriage often end up dissolving their identity. In "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!", the narrator is a nameless woman who complains to the "lord", which could symbolise not just God Almighty, but also the powerful patriarchal system which has rendered her helpless. She talks about her husband's domestic abuse in the name of shortage in dowry which went on to the extent of denying her the right to even see her own mother.

Across the years, she is reduced to a being with no sense of individuality and her identity is stripped off from her. "I was nothing without him and that stark reality was constantly before my eyes. I was a mere shadow" (Mushtaq 205). In the story "Heart Lamp", Mehrun, the protagonist, is met with ignorance when she returns to her paternal home in the wake of her husband's extramarital affair. She is made to feel guilty for no reason and is asked to shrink and adjust by her own family. This leads her to attempting suicide from which she is stopped by her elder daughter. This loss of a sense of being which leads her to attempt killing herself is the result of unjust power structures which are often hypocritical. The character of Aashraf in "Black Cobras" is met with ignorance and humiliation even in the midst of judgement which also results

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in a tragic end. For her, dependence on legal justice is not merely gendered, it is also the result of having left with no choice of meeting the economic needs of her family.

In most of these stories, the husband-wife relationship in a marriage parallels a master-slave dynamic as infiltrated by the authoritarian system of patriarchy. This relationship is often weighed with respect to the imposed gender roles, starting from household work to unwavering obedience of the wife to the demands of the husband. “The household is not merely a site in which a division of labour exists, but a set of relations between household members by which women are systematically dependent upon, and unequal to, men” (Barrett 209). In certain instances, the women in some of these stories are shown to be addressed by the men in their families as “dog”, “beggar”, “slave” and “savathi”. In “Be a Woman Once Oh Lord!”, the protagonist is seen to be robbed of her sense of individuality. “I was a slave; even so, the owner who gave me food, water and shelter in return for my labour seemed like a mahatma to me” (Mushtaq 206). This slave consciousness rises from a lack of agency and absolute submission to power.

While patriarchal norms subjugate women and erase their autonomy, their economic dependence adds to their deprivation of social and familial dignity. According to Collins, “any matrix of domination can be seen as a historically specific organization of power in which social groups are embedded and which they aim to influence... This, regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organised through diverse local realities” (Collins 228). The women in Mushtaq’s collection are placed within multiple matrices of domination, particularly patriarchy and capitalism.

An example of how obsession with material goods puts the dependents at stake could be traced in “High-Heeled Shoes”. In this story, Nayaz Khan, the protagonist develops an uncontrollable obsession with his sister-in-law’s shoes. Though he desires it for adorning his wife, his greed makes him eventually forget about his pregnant wife’s health and the story ends with a wave of terror. It shows what casualties untamed materialistic obsessions could bring. This kind of obsession is not very uncommon in a capitalistic society wherein more important concerns like human relationships are disregarded. The dowry harassment portrayed in “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!” also showcases an alarming aspect of material driven systems. “His greed for money swallowed all our attachments, love and affection” (Mushtaq 203). The accumulation of generational wealth as seen in “Fire Rain” reflects societal greed which further widens the demarcation between the rich and the poor. “What was the property he had earned? Wasn’t he only managing the property his father had accumulated?” (Mushtaq 24). Sakeena, the sister of the rich mutawalli Usman, is widowed and lives in poverty. She is a prime example of an intersectional victim as the suppression due to her social positioning is compounded by her widow status.

The inheritance of generational wealth often does not ensure fair distribution of resources, especially to the ones who are already disadvantaged, like the women in the family. In the story

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“Red Lungis” when the mass circumcision is conducted by the affluent family to also accommodate poor children, a feeble woman brings her malnourished child who had already been circumcised in order to receive the wheat and copra distributed after the ceremony, for want of food and resources. The poor boy and his mother are mocked by a few others. This story draws with clarity the disparities between the rich and the underprivileged.

In “The Shroud”, Yaseen Bua, the poor woman who earned her living by doing household chores had no desires but one - a kafan brought from Mecca. When Shaziya, the affluent woman who was about to go on Hajj pilgrimage arranges a party to seek blessings and forgiveness from relatives, Yaseen Bua comes uninvited to assist with chores and to ask for her wish. Due to her economic positioning in society, she goes unnoticed. “She had never in her life known what it meant to be honoured and held in esteem. She did not recognize disrespect either” (Mushtaq 171). This reflects her undermined social positioning due to her widowed status as well as financial state. When she gives Shaziya her hard earned money for the desired cause, she receives it and leaves it on top of the sink which is later left forgotten. “It was when the notes passed from Bua’s hands into her own that Shaziya understood. Money from the pockets of poor people was, just like them, broken, shattered, crumpled, wrinkly, diminished in essence and form” (Mushtaq 173). The state of those notes directly resembles her destitution. This economic disadvantage also leaves people unseen and ignored which highlights how social dignity and respect is directly linked to the class one belongs to. Though Shaziya remembers her request while on the pilgrimage, she postpones buying it and eventually forgets it.

When Yaseen Bua dies almost seven years later, her son comes to Shaziya’s house and asks for the kafan, which leaves Shaziya in a state of intense remorse. She feels that Allah would judge her on Judgement Day for not serving justice to the poor woman’s needs. “It became clear to her that she was poorer than Bua, more unfortunate too” (Mushtaq 182). This poverty signifies spiritual poverty. It highlights the idea that the economically poor are often spiritually rich and vice versa, promising justice afterlife. While this is a consolation in the spiritual realm, Yaseen Bua is subject to intersectional oppression in the real world as she is overlooked in terms of her class and gender. The dismissal and denial that women like Aashraf in “Black Cobras” and Yaseen Bua in “The Shroud” face brings to the light the overlapping forms of oppression they are subject to. This gives rise to a subaltern consciousness which is resistant and counteractive.

### Conclusion

The victimization of subaltern women in a male-dominated cultural paradigm is intersectional. Banu Mushtaq’s collection *Heart Lamp* showcases multiple facets of oppression that women in a rural religious community are subject to, particularly capitalistic and patriarchal subordination. This happens in a society where men have ownership over pen, money and property which corresponds to their power in decision-making. In a society where patriarchal standards intersect with class dignity, the powerful have the whip hand over the poorer sections of the

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society. While early Marxist critics held that capitalism reinforced the oppression of women, Marxist Feminist thinkers held that both patriarchy and capitalism work together simultaneously to subordinate women. The women in these stories are victims of familial and societal discrimination which further intensifies their economic marginalization. Their needs are often overlooked because of their economic positioning within societies and gender positioning within families, both of which affect their autonomy. They are caught between the unrealistic expectations of the society and their individual realities. In each of these stories, Mushtaq portrays reality with a transparency that is powerful enough to seek change. Through a Marxist-Feminist and intersectional analysis of some of these stories, the primary idea that could be concluded is that the oppression of women is not merely a gender based phenomena. It also inevitably intersects with facets like class, caste, race, age based on multiple identities of an individual. Feminism loses its true essence when it excludes certain voices. It ceases to be genuinely feminist unless it is intersectional—one that listens, shares space, and creates room for every woman’s struggle. While we address the subjugation faced by women, it is essential to address intersectional matrices like caste and class without which the discourse would be incomplete.

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