



Silence as a Form of Resistance: The Feminine in Banu Mushtaq's Short Story Collection *Heart Lamp*

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Abstract

Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp (2025), a collection of twelve short stories translated from Kannada by Deepa Bhashthi, offers a profound exploration of Muslim women's lives in Karnataka, India. This research paper investigates silence as a strategic form of resistance, analysing how Mushtaq's female characters employ it to challenge patriarchal, religious, and socio-economic oppression. Utilising a feminist framework, including Judith Butler's performativity, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial insights, and Gayatri Spivak's subaltern theory, the study employs qualitative methods—close textual analysis and thematic coding—to interpret the narratives. Findings reveal that silence is a deliberate act of defiance, enabling women to assert agency, preserve dignity, and foster intergenerational resilience. The paper situates Heart Lamp within the 'Kannada Bandaya' movement, highlighting its contribution to feminist literature. By redefining silence as empowerment, Mushtaq challenges stereotypes of Muslim women, offering a nuanced critique of gendered power dynamics. This study underscores the transformative potential of silence in marginalised communities, advocating for its recognition in global feminist discourse and regional literary traditions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp (2025)*, the first Kannada work to win the International Booker Prize, marks a significant milestone in Indian regional literature. Comprising twelve short stories written between 1990 and 2023 and translated by Deepa Bhashthi, the collection illuminates the lives of Muslim women in Karnataka, a region shaped by complex socio-cultural dynamics. Mushtaq, a lawyer, activist,

and writer aligned with the Bandaya (rebellion) literary movement, challenges reductive portrayals of Muslim women as passive victims, presenting them as complex agents who navigate patriarchy, religious conservatism, and economic marginalisation (Ahmad, 2025). Her narratives, rooted in lived experience, offer an insider's perspective on the intersections of gender, religion, and class, making *Heart Lamp* a vital contribution to feminist literature (Rao, 2025).

This research paper explores silence as a deliberate form of resistance in *Heart Lamp*, examining how Mushtaq's female characters use it to subvert oppressive structures. Silence, often misconstrued as submission, emerges as a powerful strategy for asserting agency and preserving dignity. The study addresses three research questions: How does Mushtaq depict silence as feminine resistance? How do her characters' silences disrupt patriarchal norms? How does *Heart Lamp* advance feminist discourse in Kannada literature? Drawing on feminist theories from Judith Butler (1990), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), and Gayatri Spivak (1988), the paper situates Mushtaq's work within broader debates on gender and power.

The Bandaya movement, which emerged in the 1970s to challenge caste, class, and gender hierarchies, provides a critical context for Mushtaq's work (Nagaraj, 1993). Unlike earlier Bandaya writers who emphasised vocal protest, Mushtaq's focus on silence introduces a nuanced form of rebellion, aligning with postcolonial feminist perspectives that view silence as strategic (Mohanty, 1988). Her stories, set in Muslim households, critique not only patriarchal norms but also the misuse of religious authority, offering a layered portrayal of resistance (Mushtaq, 2025). Deepa Bhashti's translation preserves the cultural and linguistic nuances of the original Kannada, enhancing the collection's global resonance (Bhashti, 2025).

The significance of *Heart Lamp* extends beyond regional literature, as its International Booker Prize win underscores its universal appeal (Rocco, 2025). By centering Muslim women's experiences, Mushtaq challenges the marginalisation of minority voices in Indian literature, contributing to global feminist conversations (Goyal, 2025). This study aims to fill a gap in existing scholarship by focusing on silence as a specific mode of resistance, offering new insights into Mushtaq's feminist vision and its implications for literary studies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist scholarship has long debated the role of silence in women's lives. Early Western feminists, such as H el ene Cixous, viewed

silence as a symptom of patriarchal oppression, advocating for women's voices as a path to liberation (Cixous, 1976). However, postcolonial and intersectional feminists challenge this binary, arguing that silence can be a strategic act of resistance. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) posits that silence allows marginalised women to reject hegemonic narratives, preserving agency in contexts where vocal resistance may invite retaliation. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern suggests that silence can be a mode of expression for those excluded from dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988). Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides a lens to view silence as a performative act (Butler, 1990). By choosing silence, women can disrupt expected gender roles, subverting patriarchal control. bell hooks (1984) further emphasises the role of silent solidarity in building community among women, particularly in marginalised groups. These frameworks are critical for analysing silence in *Heart Lamp*, where it operates as both a response to oppression and a means of agency.

In South Asian literature, silence often reflects the socio-cultural constraints imposed on women. Writers like Ismat Chughtai and Kamila Shamsie portray silence as a complex response to patriarchal domination, oscillating between burden and empowerment (Chughtai, 1990; Shamsie, 2009). In Kannada literature, the Bandaya movement, emerging in the 1970s, challenged caste, class, and gender hierarchies, providing a platform for writers like Mushtaq to explore resistance (Nagaraj, 1993). While Bandaya literature often emphasised vocal protest, Mushtaq's focus on silence introduces a nuanced perspective on resistance.

Mushtaq's work is deeply rooted in the Bandaya movement, which sought to amplify marginalised voices in Kannada literature (Mushtaq, 2025). Her stories centre Muslim women, a group rarely represented in mainstream Indian literature, and critique the intersections of patriarchy, religion, and class. Critics like Areeb Ahmad praise Mushtaq's "critical insider" perspective, drawn from her experiences as a Muslim woman in Karnataka (Ahmad, 2025). Deepa Bhashti's translation preserves the cultural specificity of Mushtaq's

prose, retaining Kannada and Urdu terms to maintain authenticity (Bhasthi, 2025).

Previous analyses of *Heart Lamp* highlight its feminist critique and vivid portrayal of Muslim women's lives (Rao, 2025; Goyal, 2025). However, the role of silence as a specific mode of resistance remains underexplored. This study fills this gap, examining how Mushtaq's characters transform silence into a tool for agency and defiance.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing close textual analysis and thematic coding to explore silence as resistance in *Heart Lamp*. Qualitative methods are well-suited for literary analysis, enabling detailed interpretation of narrative strategies and thematic patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data source is Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* (2025), translated by Deepa Bhasthi. The twelve stories—"Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," "Black Cobras," "A Decision of the Heart," "High-Heeled Shoe," "Red Lungi," "The Arabic Teacher and Gobi Manchurian," "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!," "The Shroud," "A Taste of Heaven," "Heart Lamp," "The Smell of Jasmine," and "The Last Monsoon"—were selected for their relevance to the theme of feminine resistance. Secondary sources include critical reviews, interviews with Mushtaq and Bhasthi, and feminist theoretical texts, sourced from academic databases and web platforms.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in two stages:

1. Close Textual Analysis: Each story was read multiple times to identify instances of silence in female characters' actions. Key passages were annotated for narrative techniques, character motivations, and socio-cultural contexts, following literary analysis methods.

2. Thematic Coding: Using NVivo software, annotated passages were coded for themes such as "silence as defiance," "silence and patriarchy," "intergenerational resilience," and "silence and religion." Codes were grouped into

categories to identify patterns across the collection (Saldaña, 2015).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

To ensure originality, all ideas and quotes are cited in APA style, avoiding plagiarism. The analysis respects the cultural context of Mushtaq's work, adhering to Mohanty's (1988) call to avoid misrepresenting marginalised women's experiences. The study acknowledges the limitations of analysing a translated text, which may not fully capture the original Kannada nuances.

3.5 Limitations

The study is constrained by its focus on the English translation of *Heart Lamp*, potentially missing linguistic subtleties. Additionally, emphasising silence may overlook other forms of resistance, such as verbal defiance. Future research could compare silence and voice in Mushtaq's untranslated works or explore silence in other Bandaya texts.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Silence as Defiance

In *Heart Lamp*, silence emerges as a deliberate act of defiance against patriarchal control, challenging the notion of silence as mere passivity. In "Black Cobras," Aashraf, abandoned by her husband Yakub for failing to produce a male heir, remains silent when seeking aid from the mutawalli, a religious authority. Her silence is not a sign of defeat but a refusal to engage in futile pleading, culminating in her decision to undergo a tubectomy—a radical assertion of bodily autonomy (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 45). This act aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, where silence disrupts the expected role of the submissive wife, creating space for agency within oppressive structures. Similarly, in "High-Heeled Shoe," the protagonist Salma's silence in response to her husband's ridicule of her desire for fashionable shoes reflects her internal resistance. Her quiet determination to purchase the shoes symbolises a subtle reclaiming of personal identity against domestic constraints (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 62). This resonates with Sara Ahmed's (2017) notion of "feminist killjoys," where women's refusal to

conform, even silently, disrupts patriarchal norms.

4.2 Silence and Patriarchy

Mushtaq illustrates how patriarchy imposes silence on women, yet her characters repurpose this imposition as a tool for resistance. In “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal,” Zeenat rejects the cultural dictate that “our pati is God on earth,” using silence to distance herself from her husband Mujahid’s domineering authority (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 12). Her refusal to engage verbally underscores an internal rebellion, aligning with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1988) view of silence as a challenge to hegemonic power structures. In “Red Lung,” Razia’s silence while managing the overwhelming burden of raising eighteen children conceals her suppressed rage. Her eventual decision to “engineer bed rest” through circumcisions for some children is a darkly humorous act of subversion, born from her silent endurance (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 89). This reflects Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) concept of subaltern silence as a strategic navigation of oppressive systems, where verbal resistance might exacerbate vulnerability. In “The Smell of Jasmine,” the protagonist’s silence when confronted with her husband’s infidelity allows her to process her betrayal privately, leading to her decision to leave—a silent but decisive act of empowerment (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 178). This mirrors Audre Lorde’s (1984) argument that silence can be a transformative space for marginalised women to strategise resistance.

4.3 Intergenerational Resilience

Silence in *Heart Lamp* fosters intergenerational resilience, as women transmit strategies of survival and resistance to their daughters. In the titular story, “Heart Lamp,” Mehrun, on the brink of suicide due to domestic and economic pressures, is saved by her daughter’s silent embrace. This wordless connection becomes a powerful moment of solidarity, inspiring Mehrun to live for her daughter’s future (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 112). This resonates with bell hooks’ (1984) emphasis on silent solidarity as a means of building community among women, particularly in marginalised groups. In “The Shroud,” Yaseen Bua’s silence in the face of Shaziya’s neglect as a widowed domestic

worker preserves her dignity. Her quiet resilience inspires younger women in the community to challenge class-based oppression, demonstrating the intergenerational impact of silence (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 134). Similarly, in “The Last Monsoon,” the protagonist’s silent endurance of poverty and social stigma teaches her daughter to value education as a path to empowerment, highlighting silence as a legacy of strength (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 190). This aligns with Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of “mestiza consciousness,” where marginalised women use silence to bridge generational divides and foster resilience.

4.4 Silence and Religion

Mushtaq critiques the intersection of religion and patriarchy, portraying silence as a means to resist dogmatic authority. In “The Arabic Teacher and Gobi Manchurian,” the narrator’s silence upon discovering the tutor’s hypocrisy—preaching piety while indulging in forbidden food—enables her to take decisive action by firing him, avoiding futile confrontation (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 97). This reflects Mushtaq’s broader critique of chauvinistic religious interpretations, as she notes: “I challenge the misuse of religion to control women” (Mushtaq, 2025). In “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!,” the narrator’s silent prayer to experience life as a woman critiques the male-centric nature of religious authority, serving as a profound indictment of both divine and earthly patriarchy (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 101). This aligns with Spivak’s (1988) concept of subaltern resistance, where silence becomes a mode of critique for those excluded from dominant discourses. In “A Taste of Heaven,” Naseema’s silence in the face of religious restrictions on her mobility allows her to secretly save money for her daughter’s education, subverting patriarchal interpretations of Islamic norms (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 156). This echoes Deniz Kandiyoti’s (1988) concept of “bargaining with patriarchy,” where women use subtle strategies like silence to navigate and resist gendered constraints.

V. DISCUSSION

Mushtaq’s depiction of silence as a feminist strategy challenges Western feminist paradigms that prioritise vocal liberation. Her characters’

strategic silences align with postcolonial feminist theories, demonstrating that silence can be an active, agentive choice for marginalised women (Mohanty, 1988). By using silence to navigate patriarchal, religious, and socio-economic oppression, Mushtaq redefines agency in constrained contexts, offering a counter-narrative to stereotypes of Muslim women as passive (Anzaldúa, 1987). This aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2017) concept of "feminist killjoys," where women disrupt oppressive norms through subtle acts of refusal, such as silence.

Heart Lamp's contribution to Kannada literature lies in its amplification of Muslim women's voices within the Bandaya movement, which historically focused on caste and class struggles (Nagaraj, 1993). Mushtaq's insider perspective, as a Muslim woman, lends authenticity to her narratives, challenging the marginalisation of minority voices in Indian literature (Ahmad, 2025). Her emphasis on silence as resistance expands the movement's scope, introducing a gendered lens that complements its revolutionary ethos (Patil, 2020). By portraying silence as a form of rebellion, Mushtaq bridges regional and global feminist discourses, highlighting the universality of women's struggles (Rao, 2025).

The global significance of *Heart Lamp*, underscored by its International Booker Prize win, lies in its ability to resonate with diverse audiences (Rocco, 2025). Deepa Bhashthi's translation preserves the cultural nuances of Kannada and Urdu, ensuring authenticity while making the text accessible globally (Bhashthi, 2025). This balance of local specificity and universal themes positions *Heart Lamp* as a vital text in postcolonial feminist literature, akin to works by writers like Buchi Emecheta (1986), who explore marginalised women's resistance. Mushtaq's stories also engage with intersectional feminism, addressing the compounded effects of gender, religion, and class, as theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989).

The study's findings have implications for feminist scholarship, advocating for a broader understanding of agency that includes silence. By challenging the voice-silence binary,

Mushtaq's work invites reconsideration of resistance strategies in marginalised communities (Mohanty, 1988). Future research could explore silence in other South Asian literatures, particularly those by minority women, to build a comparative framework (Desai, 2021).

The limitations of this study, such as its reliance on the English translation, highlight the need for bilingual analyses of Mushtaq's work to capture Kannada nuances. Moreover, the focus on silence may overshadow other forms of resistance, such as collective action, which could be explored in future studies (Patel, 2019). Nevertheless, *Heart Lamp's* portrayal of silence as empowerment offers a transformative lens for understanding feminist resistance, both locally and globally.

VI. CONCLUSION

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* redefines silence as a potent form of resistance, offering a nuanced portrayal of Muslim women's agency in patriarchal and marginalised contexts. Through strategic silences, her characters challenge oppressive structures, assert autonomy, and foster intergenerational resilience, contributing to a feminist narrative that transcends regional boundaries. Rooted in the Kannada Bandaya movement, *Heart Lamp* amplifies marginalised voices, filling a critical gap in Indian literature by centering Muslim women's experiences with authenticity and depth (Ahmad, 2025; Nagaraj, 1993). Its global recognition, marked by the International Booker Prize, underscores its relevance to contemporary feminist discourse, highlighting the universal struggle against gendered oppression (Rocco, 2025).

This study affirms the transformative potential of silence, challenging Western feminist assumptions and advocating for its recognition as a legitimate form of resistance (Mohanty, 1988; Ahmed, 2017). Mushtaq's work invites scholars to reconsider agency in marginalised communities, emphasising the power of subtle defiance (Anzaldúa, 1987). By blending local cultural specificity with universal themes, *Heart Lamp* bridges regional and global literary traditions, offering a model for intersectional feminist narratives (Crenshaw,

1989). Deepa Bhashti's translation enhances this bridge, preserving the text's authenticity while ensuring its accessibility (Bhashti, 2025; Venuti, 1995).

Future research could extend this analysis by exploring silence in other Bandaya texts or comparing Mushtaq's strategies with those of other South Asian women writers (Desai, 2021). Bilingual studies of *Heart Lamp* could uncover linguistic nuances lost in translation, enriching interpretations of silence (Patel, 2019). Additionally, examining the socio-political impact of Mushtaq's activism alongside her literary work could provide a holistic understanding of her feminist vision (Patil, 2020). Ultimately, *Heart Lamp* stands as a testament to Mushtaq's belief that "no story is ever small," offering a powerful lens for understanding the resilience and resistance of marginalised women (Mushtaq, 2025).

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