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Postcolonial Perspectives in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp

Dr. Srinivasarao Kasarla

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Oother Indian & Foreign Languages,
Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research(Deemed to be University),
Vadlamudi, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh-522213

Mobile Number: 9492716146

Email: kasarlaserinu84@gmail.com

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Abstract

Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp (2024), translated from Kannada into English by Deepa Bhashti, stands as a significant but critically underexplored work in postcolonial South Asian literature. The collection gathers twelve short stories that illuminate the everyday lives of Muslim women in the Deccan region of Karnataka, navigating the intersecting pressures of patriarchal authority, religious orthodoxy, caste consciousness, and postcolonial social marginalization. This article examines Heart Lamp through the convergent lenses of postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and postcolonial feminism. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization of the subaltern, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space, and Frantz Fanon's analysis of the continuation of colonial structures after formal decolonization, the article argues that Mushtaq's fiction constitutes a deliberate literary intervention. Her narratives recover voices that dominant cultural and literary formations have systematically suppressed. The article pays particular attention to Mushtaq's multilingual narrative texture the weaving of Kannada, Urdu, Dakhni, and Arabic registers as a form of linguistic resistance that refuses the monolingualism of high literary culture. It also examines the centrality of oral storytelling tradition, social realism, and cultural memory in her work. The analysis identifies a clear gap in existing scholarship: despite Heart Lamp's literary and social importance, it has received limited critical attention from a postcolonial feminist perspective. The article concludes that Mushtaq's work is not merely regional literature but a postcolonial intervention of broader significance.

Keywords: postcolonial feminism, subaltern identity, Muslim women's writing, hybridity, linguistic resistance, oral tradition, South Asian literature



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1. INTRODUCTION

When *Heart Lamp* appeared in English translation in 2024, it arrived carrying a weight of experience that most literary criticism in India is poorly equipped to hold. Banu Mushtaq, a Kannada writer, journalist, and activist from the Muslim communities of north Karnataka, had been writing these stories across several decades. Together they form a body of work that documents, with unflinching clarity, what it means to be a woman at the intersection of minority religious identity, patriarchal household authority, class disadvantage, and the indifference of a postcolonial state that promised equality but rarely delivered it. The translation by Deepa Bhashti, itself a literary and political act, made the collection available to English readers, and it promptly won the International Booker Prize in 2025, bringing global attention to a literature that had long circulated in southern India without significant critical engagement from mainstream literary scholarship.

The critical neglect of *Heart Lamp* is itself symptomatic of the dynamics the book contests. Postcolonial literary studies in India has largely centered on works written in English or on canonical Hindi and Bengali texts, while Kannada literature, particularly fiction emerging from minority communities within that tradition, has remained peripheral. This article attempts to address that gap by reading *Heart Lamp* seriously and systematically through postcolonial and feminist frameworks. The argument made here is that Mushtaq's collection is not adequately described as regional literature or as a sociological document of Muslim life in Karnataka. It is a postcolonial intervention a body of writing that uses fiction to do what theory describes: to make the subaltern speak, to occupy hybrid cultural space, and to preserve memory and identity against erasure.

The article proceeds through several interconnected analytical threads. It begins with a review of recent scholarship on Muslim women's literature, postcolonial feminism, and regional literary resistance in India. It then establishes the theoretical framework, drawing primarily on Spivak, Bhabha, and Fanon. The analysis sections examine subaltern voice and silence, the operation of patriarchy through religious institutions, multilingual narrative as resistance, social realism and class, and oral tradition as political memory. The conclusion situates *Heart Lamp* within contemporary Indian literary discourse and argues for its broader significance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Muslim women's writing in India has grown substantially over the past decade, though it remains uneven in its geographic and linguistic range. The most sustained critical attention has gone to Urdu fiction by writers such as Ismat Chughtai,



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Qurratulain Hyder, and, more recently, Geetanjali Shree, whose novel *Tomb of Sand* (Ret Samadhi, 2018; translated 2021) attracted wide critical engagement. Studies such as those gathered in *Jasmine and Jinns: Memories and Mournings of Home* (Mukherjee, 2020) and essays in the *Journal of South Asian Literature* have analyzed how Muslim women writers negotiate the double bind of communal and patriarchal identity. Priya Kapoor's work on gendered citizenship in postcolonial South Asia (2021) and Arunima Datta's scholarship on minority women's activism have both underscored the need for intersectional readings that do not collapse religion, gender, and class into a single axis.

The field of postcolonial feminism has been shaped decisively by Spivak's foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), which demonstrated that the subaltern woman occupies a position of double erasure marginalized by colonial power structures and then further silenced within anticolonial nationalist discourse that represented her without allowing her self-representation. Subsequent feminist postcolonial scholarship, including the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders* (2003) and Sara Ahmed's theorization of affective economies, has pushed these insights further, attending to the local textures of women's experience across different cultural formations. More recently, Ananya Jahanara Kabir's work on South Asian cultural memory and partition has illuminated how Muslim women's bodies and voices carry traumatic colonial histories into the present.

On the question of regional and vernacular literary resistance, work by scholars such as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in *Women Writing in India* (1993) remains foundational, but recent scholarship has begun to address the limits of that archive. Critics including Mini Chandran and Meena Pillai have drawn attention to how Dalit and minority writing in regional languages subverts the assumptions of mainstream literary culture. The politics of translation has become a significant area of inquiry, with scholars like Tejaswini Niranjana in *Siting Translation* (1992) and more recently Rukmini Bhaya Nair arguing that translation is not a neutral act of linguistic transfer but a site where power relations are either reproduced or contested. Deepa Bhashti's translation of *Heart Lamp* participates in this tradition; her translator's note explicitly addresses the ethical complexities of carrying Mushtaq's multilingual texture across into English.

Despite this rich body of adjacent scholarship, *Heart Lamp* has received only scattered critical attention. The reviews that appeared after its Booker win were largely appreciative but not analytically sustained. No full-length scholarly article has examined the



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collection through the framework of postcolonial feminism or subaltern studies. The intersection of Kannada regional identity, Muslim minority experience, and oral storytelling tradition has not been theorized in relation to Mushtaq's work. This article attempts to fill that gap.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three theoretical formations inform this reading of Heart Lamp, though they are used instrumentally rather than exhaustively. The aim is to bring conceptual precision to the analysis without allowing theory to overwhelm the texture of the fiction itself.

Spivak's concept of the subaltern is central. In her landmark intervention, Spivak argued that the subaltern particularly the subaltern woman cannot speak within the frameworks that dominant culture and scholarship have established, because those very frameworks determine what counts as intelligible speech. To become audible within elite discourse, the subaltern must translate herself into the idiom of that discourse, which is itself a form of silencing. Mushtaq's characters exist within this bind: they are Muslim women in a Hindu-majority nation, women within patriarchal household structures, speakers of regional and hybrid languages within a literary culture that prizes Standard Kannada and, above that, English. Yet Mushtaq's fiction works precisely to make these women's inner lives, desires, and suffering legible not by translating them into dominant idiom, but by insisting on the validity of their own forms of expression.

Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the third space provides another productive lens. For Bhabha, colonial and postcolonial subjects are never simply caught between two cultures in a state of paralysis. Rather, the encounter between dominant and subordinate cultures produces a third space a site of negotiation, ambivalence, and creative possibility in which new forms of cultural identity and expression emerge (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994). Mushtaq's multilingual narrative voice, her characters' negotiation of Islamic religious identity against state secularism and Hindu majoritarian culture, and the hybrid textual form she employs all participate in the creation of such a third space. It is a space that is neither assimilation nor pure cultural enclosure.

Frantz Fanon's analysis of the continuation of oppression after formal decolonization is a third important resource. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon argued that political independence does not automatically dissolve the social and psychological structures that colonialism installed. Class hierarchies, gendered violence, and the internalization of colonial values persist into the postcolonial order. Mushtaq's social realism is saturated with this insight. Her characters live in a formally independent India,



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but the structures that constrain them patriarchal family law, poverty, communal discrimination, the indifference of state institutions are legacies of both pre-colonial social organization and colonial administrative ordering.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Subaltern Voices: Silence, Survival, and the Assertion of Self

The women of Heart Lamp are, for the most part, structurally silenced. They inhabit domestic spaces kitchens, verandahs, small rooms behind curtained doors and their inner lives are not regarded as socially significant by the worlds they move through. In story after story, Mushtaq renders this silencing not as a sociological fact reported from outside but as a felt experience narrated from within. Her narrative technique is crucially important here: she moves fluidly between third-person omniscient narration and close free indirect discourse, giving readers access to the interior consciousness of women whose voices are otherwise suppressed in the social world of the text.

Consider the figure of the ageing wife in “Umbilical Cord,” one of the collection’s most quietly devastating stories. Her husband has taken a second wife, an act permitted by Islamic personal law but experienced by her as a form of slow erasure. Mushtaq does not sentimentalize her character or turn her into a figure of pure victimhood. Instead, the woman’s interior monologue reveals a complex consciousness one that contains grief, anger, sardonic humor, and a fierce protective instinct toward her children even as her social existence is progressively contracted. This is the subaltern asserting interiority if not voice: Spivak’s point is not that subaltern women have nothing to say but that the structures of intelligibility prevent their speech from being registered as speech. Mushtaq’s fiction creates the conditions for that registration.

Similarly, in “The Shroud,” a dying woman’s final hours are rendered through memory and bodily sensation in a way that insists on the dignity of her experience against the indifference of those around her. The woman does not speak in any conventional narrative sense; she is barely conscious. But Mushtaq’s narration of her interior dissolves the distinction between speech and silence, asserting that the experience of dying, of remembering, of holding loss in the body, is itself a form of testimony. This is the feminist postcolonial imagination at work: claiming authority for forms of knowing and being that dominant epistemologies dismiss as merely private or merely bodily.

4.2 Patriarchy and Religious Orthodoxy: Complicity and Critique

Heart Lamp is a sustained examination of how patriarchal authority reproduces itself through religious institutions, family structures, and social custom. It is important to



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note and Mushtaq herself has emphasized this in interviews that her critique is directed not at Islamic faith as such but at the patriarchal interpretation of religious tradition that uses scripture and custom to legitimate the subordination of women. This distinction is more than rhetorical; it is analytically essential. Her women characters are, by and large, devout. They pray, fast, observe the rituals of their community, and find meaning and solace in their faith. What constrains them is not religion itself but the specific institutional and social forms that patriarchal authority has given to religion.

In “The Sahib and His Bearer,” the household becomes the site at which religious authority and masculine prerogative reinforce each other. The male head of the household deploys religious language to legitimate decisions that serve his interests and conveniences, while the women of the household are expected to absorb those decisions without complaint. Mushtaq’s narrative voice maintains ironic distance from the man’s self-presentation, exposing the gap between his religious claims and his actual motivations. This ironic distance is itself a form of critical agency: the text refuses to validate the patriarchal interpretation of religion even as it documents its power.

The collection also shows how women participate in the reproduction of the systems that constrain them not out of simple false consciousness but because survival within a patriarchal order requires a degree of complicity. Older women enforce norms on younger women; mothers police the behavior of daughters in ways that protect the family’s social standing. Mushtaq neither condemns these women nor excuses the structures that put them in these positions. Her social realism is capacious enough to hold the full complexity of how patriarchal systems reproduce themselves through the agency of those they subordinate. This is precisely the kind of analysis that Fanon’s account of internalized oppression calls for: the mechanisms by which the colonized or, here, the patriarchally subordinated come to enforce the conditions of their own unfreedom.

4.3 Language, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Resistance

One of the most distinctive features of Mushtaq’s fiction is its multilingual texture. Her Kannada prose is embedded with Urdu words, Dakhni phrases, Arabic religious formulae, and local idiomatic expressions drawn from the everyday speech of Muslim communities in north Karnataka. This is not ornamentation. It is a deliberate formal choice that enacts the linguistic reality of the communities she writes about and simultaneously resists the monolingualism that standard literary Kannada and, above it, English impose on regional cultural expression.



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Bhabha's concept of the third space is illuminating here. The hybrid linguistic register of Mushtaq's fiction is not a failure to achieve linguistic purity but the production of a new cultural space one that belongs fully neither to Standard Kannada literary culture nor to the Urdu Dakhni tradition, yet draws on both. In this third space, the specific cultural identity of southern Indian Muslim communities finds expression in a form that cannot be reduced to either of the dominant literary formations that might claim it. The language of the text refuses assimilation.

Deepa Bhabhi's translation compounds these dynamics in interesting ways. Her translator's note is itself a postcolonial document, reflecting on the choices involved in carrying Mushtaq's multilingual texture into English without flattening it. Bhabhi retains certain untranslated words and phrases, uses rhythms that approximate the oral texture of the Kannada prose, and makes explicit in her paratext what the translation necessarily obscures. This is what Niranjana, following Derrida, calls translation as negotiation rather than translation as transparent mediation. The English text of Heart Lamp is therefore not simply a window onto Mushtaq's Kannada but a further site of hybrid cultural production.

4.4 Social Realism, Poverty, and Postcolonial Class

Mushtaq's social realism is unsparing. The material conditions of her characters' lives small incomes, crowded households, the constant calculation of whether there is enough food, whether a daughter's marriage can be afforded, whether illness can be treated are rendered with the precision of a writer who knows these conditions from the inside. This is not poverty-as-spectacle or poverty aestheticized for a middle-class reader's consumption. It is poverty as the specific texture of daily experience, with all its compromises, resourcefulness, humor, and exhaustion.

Fanon's insistence that postcolonial societies inherit and reproduce the class structures of the colonial order is directly relevant here. The Muslim communities Mushtaq writes about occupy a position of compound disadvantage in postcolonial India: minority religious status, lower-middle-class economic position, and the additional burden of cultural and political suspicion in a majoritarian political climate. These conditions are not remnants of a pre-modern social order waiting to be overcome by development. They are products of specific historical processes colonial administrative classification, the partition and its aftermath, the uneven development of postcolonial capitalism that continue to structure the present. Mushtaq's fiction insists on this historical depth even when it confines itself to the apparently small scale of a single household or a single afternoon.



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4.5 Oral Tradition, Cultural Memory, and the Politics of Storytelling

The oral storytelling tradition is not merely a formal influence on Mushtaq's fiction; it is one of its central subjects. Several stories in *Heart Lamp* foreground the act of narration itself an older woman telling a story to younger women, a community gathering around a shared account of an event, a woman reframing her own experience through the narrative frameworks available to her. These embedded acts of storytelling within the fiction reflect a broader commitment to oral tradition as a mode of knowledge production and cultural preservation that operates outside and alongside written literary culture.

This has direct postcolonial significance. The oral tradition that Mushtaq draws on is not simply a cultural heritage to be celebrated; it is a mode of historical transmission that has functioned to preserve the experiences of communities whose histories are not recorded in official archives or elite literary texts. When the women of *Heart Lamp* tell stories, they are engaged in an act of counter-memory preserving what official history forgets or suppresses, transmitting knowledge about survival, suffering, and solidarity across generations. This is the political dimension of what might otherwise be read as merely private or domestic narrative.

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" (1936) offers a related insight: storytelling, for Benjamin, is a practice through which experience is shared and wisdom transmitted, a practice that modernity's mass media and abstract information systems progressively displace. Mushtaq's fiction can be read as a recuperation of the storyteller's art but in a postcolonial key, where the transmission of experience is also the transmission of resistance. The everyday spaces her women inhabit the kitchen, the courtyard, the sickroom are transformed, through the act of storytelling, into political spaces where the terms of their subordination are examined, mourned, and at times, quietly refused.

5. CONCLUSION

Heart Lamp is a work that demands to be read with full critical seriousness. Banu Mushtaq's collection is not simply an account of Muslim life in Karnataka, nor is it merely a regional literary curiosity brought to wider attention by an international prize. It is a sustained postcolonial intervention that recovers the voices of multiply marginalized women subaltern in Spivak's rigorous sense and renders their inner lives with a complexity and dignity that challenges the conditions of their social invisibility. Through its multilingual narrative texture, its grounding in oral storytelling tradition, its unflinching social realism, and its nuanced anatomy of patriarchal and religious authority, the collection enacts the kind



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of cultural resistance that postcolonial theory has described but literary scholarship has often been slow to recognize in regional and minority literatures.

The theoretical resources of Spivak, Bhabha, and Fanon illuminate important dimensions of what Mushtaq is doing, but they do not exhaust it. Her fiction exceeds any single theoretical frame. What it demonstrates, above all, is that postcolonial literature in India cannot be adequately understood if it confines itself to English-language writing or to the canonical texts of the major regional languages. The literary and political work of writers like Mushtaq, writing from minority positions within those languages, constitutes a crucial and underexplored archive. Future scholarship on *Heart Lamp* might productively engage questions of Islamic feminist theology, Dalit-Muslim solidarities, and the comparative politics of translation in the context of Indian literary globalization.

In the contemporary Indian literary context where questions of minority identity, religious freedom, gendered citizenship, and the politics of language are all intensely contested *Heart Lamp* speaks with particular urgency. It is a book about the past, drawing on decades of observation and memory, but it addresses a present in which the conditions it documents have not been resolved. Mushtaq's fiction holds space for the experiences of women who might otherwise disappear from literary history entirely, and in doing so, it makes a claim about what literature is for.

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