



Narrating Everyday Violence: Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp and the South Asian Muslim Women's Question

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Abstract

Violence is not always visible or explosive; rather, it can manifest in subtle and cumulative ways, which makes it even more difficult to recognise or resist. Trauma is often woven into the fabric of daily life, masquerading as care, duty, and even love. Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, a collection of twelve stories in translation, portrays the emotional attrition, coercive reproductive practices, and gendered violence against women within the Muslim communities in South India. Across the twelve short stories, women's bodies become sites of silent, invisible depletion, corroded gradually by the pressures of patriarchal structures of family, faith, sexual expectation, and reproductive duty. These women are not granted the language of protest or complaint, nor do they have the privilege of naming the pain. Mushtaq's voice here offers feminist testimonies of gendered harm, which is naturalised within formal institutions of marriage, motherhood, and faith. Mushtaq's plain and oral storytelling style mirrors the way everyday trauma operates in the lives of these women, which often goes unheard, or even worse, is dismissed. This paper examines how the stories in *Heart Lamp* offer a critical site for theories like feminist non-Western trauma studies, politics of invisibility, and vernacular trauma, and situates them within the continuum of South Asian women's writing that documents narratives of trauma without spectacle.

Keywords: Body, Coercive motherhood, Faith, Legal system, Vernacular trauma, Domesticity

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From Law to Life: The Ubiquity of Gendered Violence

In dominant trauma discourses, pain is often manifested as spectacle, in the form of visible collapse, moments of crisis, or violent revelation. But some South Asian women's writings present secluded worlds that resist such dramatic disclosure of trauma. Instead, it is absorbed in the patterns of everyday life as normalised and often ritualised repetition that is acknowledged as the standard feminine conduct. Banu Mushtaq's 2025 International Booker Prize-winning anthology, *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*, a Kannada collection of twelve short stories translated into English by Deepa Bhashti, offers a poignant archive of what could be termed as vernacular trauma. What I call 'vernacular trauma' should not be mistaken for grand linguistic declarations of violence and atrocities occurring at the state or national level; rather, they are granular, everyday events of local life through institutions of marriage and religion, often narrated through constraints. It is a culturally situated form of gendered pain that emerges in familiar, domestic spaces, often unrecognised by the bearers themselves. Mushtaq's characters like Shaista, Sakeena, Aashraf, and Mehrun become survivors not of spectacular assault but of trauma that is sanctioned and normalised within the bounds of family, community, and religion.

Ethnographic research on Muslim women's experiences of violence in India and in transnational contexts has extensively charted the embodied as well as visible forms of violence: from domestic abuse to state negligence and communal marginalisation. A study conducted in Hyderabad and Seattle shows the ubiquity of violence on women, both spectacular and invisible, operating in "gender and sexual minorities" at the intersections of "class, religion, caste, race, Indigeneity, disability" and how "it is often invisible, systematically maintained, and normalised 'slow violence'" (Piedalue 373-74). Studies also show Muslim women subject to marital violence

which is often manifested by religious leaders who try to keep women confined to “structural and cultural prisons” in the South African context (Rasool and Suleman 39-49). Another study examines “the socio-economic positioning of Muslim women” based in India and the UK and navigates gender-based violence in the contexts of communalism and radicalisation, and approaches it at a structural and interpersonal level (Chantler et al. 163-83). Salwa Mansuri’s article is particularly relevant because it invokes the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005, and exposes police inaction, legal precarity, and trivialisation of domestic violence as a potential reason for low arrest rates in India (Mansuri 1-76).

While these studies examine both reportable and embedded forms of violence, Mushtaq’s *Heart Lamp* assays more internalised and ambivalent forms of injury that defy any form of codification. Her characters do not and cannot speak in legal idioms or pathological registers. Their wounds remain invisible even to themselves. In many cases, the only agency that can be hoped to intervene and solve the gendered violence these women suffer is the *mutawalli* or the trustee of the religious fund (called *waqf*) created by a Muslim patron for the cause of education, charity, and religion, but this agency also fails to acknowledge and provide justice to women on the basis of “theological assumptions on which the superstructure of men’s alleged superiority to women has been created” (Hassan 59). Mushtaq’s voice, though not overtly activist, performs an ethical function by exposing the silenced inner worlds of the marginalised Muslim women, emerging as testimonial literature. A few other South Asian texts that centre Muslim female protagonists serve as a resonant counterpart to Mushtaq’s anthology of short stories in its exploration of women’s lives shaped by familial and religious constraints. Together these texts invite the reader to rethink the relationship between silence and voice, invisibility and narration, and pain and survival. Works like this emphasise the need to consider “Islamic feminism as a discursive

movement” and “on the enormous potential that this discourse obviously has for Muslim women’s agency in general as well as for the emergence of new female subjectivities in India (and elsewhere) which in turn seem to challenge and change secular-national gender discourses” (Schneider 56).

Of Mothers and Daughters: Reproductive Violence and Transgenerational Trauma

While approaching motherhood as a socially constructed normative role, it becomes imperative to integrate the theory of psychoanalysis into feminist sociology. Nancy Chodorow, while revising and repositioning Freud, accepts psychoanalysis as a theory that explains how identity, desire, and repression form in a child, or in short, as an explanation of psychological development in an individual; however, she critiques Freud’s universal claims that psychoanalysis as a theory that could explain the origins of culture and civilisation. She argues that humans may have universal psychic abilities like “splitting, fantasy, repression”, but social structures determine how these capacities unfold. In the context of motherhood, the psychic development of mothering is not only about biology but the indoctrination of the mothering structure, the gendered division of caregiving, and the repetition of domestic roles which “enable the development of an identity which comes to constitute the self, affect the nature of psychic structure formation, and organise sexuality” (Chodorow 51-4); women’s bodies often become convenient sites of religious and state control. Silvia Federici, in her rethinking of capitalism through a feminist perspective, identifies the strategic erasure of “female subjects that capitalism had to destroy”. She recalls the figures of “the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone” as problematic factors in the grand framework of capitalism (Federici 11). While her work focuses on the European context of controlling women’s bodies through institutionalised policing like witch-hunts and their regulation

during the rise of capitalism, it deeply resonates with the patriarchal waqf and mutawalli system that corrode the lives of Muslim women in South Asian societies. The need to control and monitor women and their bodies becomes a religious and political imperative to uphold the grand structure of faith, on one hand, and patriarchy, on the other, although they both, as we shall see, become a singular coercive force that becomes complicit in suppressing female subjectivities. Reproduction, in this context, goes beyond the ambit of biological function and becomes a constructed obligation marked by coercion and induced faith meant to appropriate women as upholders of family honour, social purity, and divine obedience.

In South Asian literature, the theme of coercive maternity is found in Salma's novel, *The Hour Past Midnight*, where a character named Rahima secretly undergoes sterilisation. When her husband, Kader, finds this out, he stops speaking to her because he believes that she had defied the laws laid down by religion thereby validating reproductive pressure through the institution of faith (Salma 71). In contrast to male desire and forced impregnation of women, the novel explores female sexuality, taboo and faith sanctioned by society to keep them under control. An extreme case of societal pressure on women who dare to refute these norms and the resultant honour killing is illustrated through the character of Firdaus, the rebellious daughter of Amina. She gets divorced from her much older husband, an alliance arranged by her brother-in-law, because the prospective groom is rich. When she falls in love with a Hindu married man, their neighbour Siva, and establishes physical intimacy with him, her mother makes her drink rat poison (389-90). Firdaus's refusal to be contained within the social matrix that regulates her movement costs her life. "One of the most iconic of the cultural-legal categories created to describe the deplorable state of women's rights in the Muslim world is the "honor crime," observes Lila Abu-Lughod, and argues that although enforcement of honour through violence is not

restricted to Muslim communities only, “somehow their constant association with stories and reports from the Middle East and South Asia, or immigrant communities originating in these regions, has given them a special association with Islam” (Abu-Lughod 113-14).

In Monica Ali’s 2003 novel, *Brick Lane*, Nazneen’s mother’s suicide (Ali 434-36), her faith in destiny, her paranoia after losing her way in the market and her joy at being able to speak a few words in English for the first time to a stranger, asking for directions (53-61), and her sister Hasina’s independence that comes at a great cost, and Nazneen’s daughter, Shahana, who dares to choose a life of her own are some instances that at once illustrate transgenerational trauma and women’s active participation in breaking the cycle. Convergent with this theme is Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* where the character of Kaukab, the daughter of a cleric, emerges as a radical Muslim in the narrative. The indoctrination of religious orthodoxy is seen in her act of refusing to give breast milk to her infant son during the month of religious fasting. She steadfastly justifies her act before her husband, Shamas, emphasising that even an infant must learn how to fast (Aslam 140-41). The mother-daughter relationship is problematised in her treatment of Mah-Jabin, a victim of domestic abuse inflicted by her husband. She flees from Pakistan where she is married and returns to Britain to her parents. In succeeding episodes, Kaukab’s ruthless behaviour towards her and her holding her daughter responsible for her fate makes Mah-Jabin remorseful towards her mother. Kaukab emerges as a powerful embodiment of transgenerational inheritance who affects the life of her children to the point of estrangement.

Mushtaq, through her women characters like Shaista in “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal”, vehemently critiques the normalised practice of early marriage and frequent childbirth. Apparently, a loving and caring husband, Iftikhar emerges as a

mindless operator of the patriarchal agency who, under the guise of love and care, is responsible for Shaista's death during childbirth. When she confides in her friend Zeenat that family planning is not truly within her control, and when Iftikhar asserts that she need not undergo the sterilisation she had planned as long as he can provide materially for the family, the narrative exposes a regressive social structure that confines a woman's value to sexual gratification and reproduction. Her death during the birth of the seventh child and Iftikhar's remarriage to an eighteen-year-old woman immediately after the customary forty-day ritual of mourning (fatiha) clearly illustrates the everyday violence against women, often disguised as spousal and maternal duty. The story also exposes transgenerational trauma with the responsibility of all the six younger children falling on the tender shoulders of Shaista's eldest daughter, Asifa, whose educational career is cut short by her father because he believes education is unimportant for girls who are anyway to be married off at an early age. A similar case of infidelity, forced marriage, and deprivation of education to women is seen in the story "Heart Lamp" (Mushtaq 1-22). Mehrun, the miserable protagonist, is denied empathy by her paternal family because it becomes a case of family honour if a married daughter returns to her paternal home. Her husband's decision to get married to a younger woman simply because Mehrun had turned into "an old woman" (Mushtaq 101) after giving birth to five children leaves her with only one solution and that is suicide. Mehrun's desire to pursue a B.Com degree is denied before her second year exams (Mushtaq 108). The story, nevertheless, ends on a hopeful note when she is confronted and stopped by her eldest daughter, Salma, an SSLC exam candidate, at the brink of her suicide and Mehrun decides to live for her children (Mushtaq 111).

Aashraf, in the story "Black Cobra", symbolises gendered harm for birthing female children, another regressive practice of the patriarchal agency. Parallel to her character is the

mutawalli's wife, Amina, who “had borne him seven children in ten years of marriage” (Mushtaq 43). The physical and mental attrition that Aashraf suffers in the hands of her alcoholic autorickshaw puller husband, and the murder of the chronically ill female infant, Munni, as she flings out of her mother’s arms after Aashraf is kicked by her husband, highlight the horrors that these women are continuously exposed to. Aashraf endures everything yet she loses her child to domestic violence. The presence of exceptional female characters like Zulekha Begum, who is well-read and explains the Sharia laws clearly to her maid, Aashraf, makes little to no difference in a predominantly patriarchal setup. “...while the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy of Muslim women, especially those in rural areas where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world” laments Riffat Hassan while examining religious assumptions that foster negative attitudes towards Muslim women (57). Towards the end of the story, there is an upsurge of feminist consciousness when the female characters come together in solidarity, and rebel, through sarcasm and public shame, against the *mutawalli*. The final defeat of patriarchy is seen in Amina’s decision to get a sterilisation surgery (Mushtaq 60), much to the surprise and disappointment of her husband. Yet, once again, the reader is compelled to look back and ask: At what cost is this sense of female solidarity, awareness, and rebellion achieved?

“A Taste of Heaven” is illustrative of long-term trauma and its effects on women’s psyche. Although, it is narrated as a funny story where the old woman, Bi Dadi, is made to believe that she has reached heaven and her granddaughter is a *houri* or an angel, she survives on Pepsi thinking that is it the much-coveted *Aab-e-kausar* or the drink of heaven. We are told that two of her grandchildren mistook her old *ja-namaz* or prayer mat as a rag and used it to clean their bicycle. She had always preserved it as a prized possession. We get a glimpse of her tragic past:

... she was married off as a child. Her husband died just a month after their wedding. Someone said he had died of a snake bite, but she never found out for sure. A year after his death, she got her first period, and while there were no official restrictions in her maternal home, the family did not have a tradition of remarriage. Her body shed its layers every month and became one with the earth. Her body, her mind, her dreams, none were fulfilled. She remained an eternal virgin (Mushtaq 155).

No amount of coaxing, pacifying, and bribing with a brand new mat would bring her peace. She confides later that it was the same mat where her husband had thrown a handful of jasmine flowers as she sat there offering her evening prayers. The handling of the narrative in a matter-of-fact manner and the description of Bi-Dadi's mental state as a regular, albeit tragic, phenomenon that women are often subject to can be seen as Mushtaq's deliberate attempt at critiquing the normalisation of female subjugation. Her gradual descent into a schizophrenia-like state reveals deep-seated childhood trauma and emotional deprivation, thereby reiterating Chodorow's theorisation of identity formation and the role of social structures.

Jurisprudence of Silence: Faith, Gender, and the Failure of Redress

Mushtaq's story, "Fire Rain," begins with an agitated mutawalli, Usman Saheb, at the thought of the presence of his sister, Jameela and her husband in his house. His complacency is disturbed because of Jameela's demand for her share in their ancestral property, which she claims, must be divided equally among the six siblings. She mentions their poor and unfortunate sister, Sakeena, who is a widow and faces difficulty in marrying off her two daughters. The strained relationship between the husband and the wife is underpinned when Arifa, the *mutawalli's* wife, advises him to share with all his four sisters

their father's property. As a man, "Why should he tolerate the words of a woman, burkha-clad, of little value?" (27). He consistently evades morally pressing responsibilities, such as equally distributing his deceased father's property among his four sisters, providing financial assistance to his widowed sister Sakeena, and tending to his chronically ill son, Ansar, who becomes the sole responsibility of his wife. He instead, redirects his attention towards a comparatively trivial matter—the burial of a local drunkard, Nisar, in a Hindu cremation ground by the police. He inflates the communal implications of this incident to garner public attention and bolster his reputation as a protector of religious discipline (23-40).

The *mutawalli's* aide, Dawood, casually invokes the Shah Bano case (34), mocking those women who demand justice as puppets of the Hindu community. Shah Bano's case (1985) became a national watershed moment with a Muslim woman in her seventies approaching the Supreme Court and demanding maintenance after being divorced under triple talaq. The court ruled in her favour under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, but sparked outrage from conservative Muslim leaders who saw it as state interference in Islamic personal law. The government, therefore, had to pass the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act in 1986, which effectively nullified the court's judgement and limited Muslim women's access to alimony (Agnes 13-14). Dawood's brief but cynical allusion to Shah Bano does not merely indicate a legal precedent but also exposes the ways in which community honour and gender control become entangled, and a woman's pursuit of justice threatens the perceived sanctity of religious integrity.

In "Black Cobra", as discussed in the second section of this article, Aashraf becomes a victim of domestic abuse and deferred justice. The *mutawalli* is approached several times by Aashraf but he always finds a way to dismiss her petition and deny her justice. Yakub, her alcoholic husband, offers him a

bribe in the form of liquor and movie-watching. The mutawalli, by accepting these bribes, acts in direct contradiction to the religious code he claims to uphold. The cold indifference of the mutawalli echoes the biased treatment of the local jurisprudence on the basis of gender. The constant reference to the Sharia laws, their misinterpretation to conveniently justify acts of infidelity, polygamy, and atrocities against women show the hollowness of a system conventionally held in reverence and believed to safeguard women's rights (44, 52). Jacques Derrida, while applying the theory of deconstruction, differentiates between law and justice, identifying the former as "constructible" and therefore, facilitating the "deconstruction" of droit which he translates into "authority, legitimacy, and so on." (Derrida 15) He gestures towards the possibility of a law that contradicts law itself and he uses the phrase "enforceability of the law or contract" and then concludes that all law maintains themselves by force (5), which incorporates violence, adopting Walter Benjamin's term *gewalt*, in the latter's text "*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*" which translates as "Critique of Violence," reiterating the coercive measures that law resorts to for its application and maintenance (6). Derrida quotes Benjamin:

Gewalt also signifies, for Germans, legitimate power, authority, public force. Gesetzgebende Gewalt is legislative power, geistliche gewalt the spiritual power of the church, Staatsgewalt the authority or power of the state. Gewalt, then, is both violence and legitimate power and the supposedly originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have been authorized by any anterior legitimacy, so that in this initial moment, it is neither legal or illegal—or, others would quickly say, neither just nor unjust. (quoted in Derrida 6)

Derrida's theorisation reveals the inherent instability of legal systems. He argues that while every legal system asserts its authority to punish, it is, at a deeper level, structured by an

inherent bias—one that consistently privileges certain values over others. These favoured values do not remain neutral; rather, they become foundational or self-evident upon which the legal framework continues to operate. In the few short stories discussed above, the legal custodians or the *mutawallis* show preference to the men or the patriarchy, thus nullifying the importance of the women and their grievances as unnecessary, negligible, and even invisible. The *mutawalli's* role as a representation of local jurisprudence is, therefore, not anchored in justice, but in a selective performance of moral and legal authority. The institution of justice here is not only biased but structurally incapable of addressing gendered injustice. It is rooted in what Derrida would call “originary violence”, a foundational framework that privileges male authority as sacred law.

Beyond Catastrophe: Everyday Violence and the Ethics of Listening

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* does not anchor its narratives in large-scale historical catastrophes, the kind of event-based trauma that classical Western trauma theory is generally understood to have emerged from, such as the Holocaust or the 9/11 (Craps 2-5). Instead, it is a testimonial of domestic brutality that happens behind closed doors such as coercive motherhood, gendered institutional neglect, and the quiet burial of infant lives. These forms of violence do not erupt in public memory or leave behind a legal or national trace. Critiquing the influential founding members of trauma theory such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, Stef Craps argues that they fail to address the “promise(d) cross-cultural ethical engagement” on the basis of four main arguments:

they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas (2).

Craps, while illustrating the limitations of an umbrella theory of trauma, discusses Anita Desai's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* and the incomprehensibility of understanding the condition of various victim groups which cannot be covered under a singular, Eurocentric trauma theory (115—23). Convergent with this text is Veena Das's *Life and Words* which documents her fieldwork experiences in the urban centres of Punjab conducted between 1973 and 1974 where she researched kinship patterns as an anthropologist of Punjabi families after the Partition (Das 2). What emerged was not just the post-Partition variation in the kinship network but silent episodes of violence that marked the lives of women in these regions. She illustrates this with the example of a woman who, in her deathbed, refused to accept the shroud sent by her natal family, particularly her brother. Das reflects, the horrors of Partition "seemed to have disappeared in the distant past" but a ripple or two could be felt suddenly in the otherwise normal setting "without any notice" (11). Another case she records is that of a woman called Manjit. Her memories of the harrowing times of the Partition include her brother "leaving a packet of poison with her while he went out every day, with the instructions that she should not hesitate to swallow the contents if Muslim mobs came to the house" (73). She was barely thirteen at that time.

Das records that she was abducted during the Partition and later rescued by the Indian Army. Her marriage was fixed with a much older man. After marriage, her life was no better and she had to tolerate regular violence from her husband because she wanted to protect her daughter-in-law from the ill-tempered father-in-law, that is, Manjit's husband (81-85). The harrowing images of the Partition horror get recorded in history and public memory, but the granular events of everyday violence in the lives of these women go unmentioned. By incorporating these seemingly disparate narratives of trauma, Das demonstrates how violence is not always registered in the spectacular, but rather in the "recesses of everyday life" (164). Together, Craps and Das offer a theoretical scaffolding that helps to assess the affective landscape of Mushtaq's stories and her female protagonists, and rethink trauma not as eventful, but as vernacular, embodied, and socially sustained. Such an approach is hoped to widen the gamut of trauma studies to incorporate the silenced pain of women of the minorities in South Asia whose grievances may never enter courtrooms or headlines, but who remain as silent witnesses of unacknowledged pain.

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