

Reviewing Heart Lamp from the Lens of Women's Writing

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Author's Name : Banu Mushtaq

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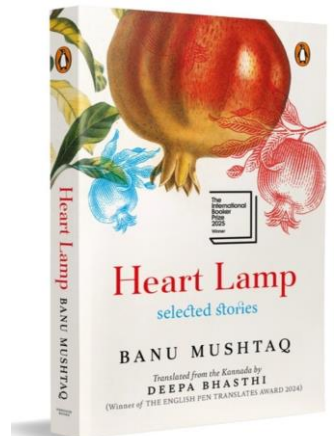
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'Heart Lamp' is not just about any particular people or community or any religion, but it is about the shared experiences, agonies, silences and brutally strangled desires of women. The work as a translation is highly praiseworthy, along with the translator Deepa Bhashti, to retain all the nuances of colloquial language which kept alive the essence that Banu Mushtaq wanted to provide through this collection.

Banu Mushtaq has ensured the diversity of experiences by portraying the stories of women belonging to various age groups, backgrounds, and social realities. She has poignantly portrayed the female experiences by representing their voice herself as a woman. It can be seen as one of the best examples of 'écriture féminine' (women's writing) which is given and explained by Helen Cixous in The laugh of Medusa.

Cixous states, "Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing...When I say "woman", I am speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" (875-876). Here she is urging women to create a history of their own as the history which has been written till now, there is no mention of women's struggles, their achievements, their experiences in that version of history. Women have been obliterated from the history which has been written in "the phallogocentric tradition" (Cixous 879). This is what Banu Mushtaq has done through this collection of short stories; she has created a history of women with their lived experiences.

Each story of the collection, starting from the story of Zeenat and Shaista, followed by several subsequent women characters, provides a vivid portrayal of women's reality in a constrained patriarchy. The stories are about different experiences of women coming from different social strata, but all share common experience of social subjugation. Collectively, these stories depicts how women have been treated as the "other", the

“subaltern” in the terms of Gayatri Spivak, to male characters in a patriarchal society, as if men are the center and females are seen in the light of this center.

One of the significant points which it highlights is the neglect of education and pressure of early marriage on women. Banu Mushtaq has poignantly portrayed how women are denied education and married off early and keep on serving their partners as slaves, even when they mistreat and leave them, still the women have no choice but to endure everything due to lack of any other financial security. Poverty of women is one of the main concerns which becomes a hurdle for them to leave the toxic relationship. She depicts how patriarchy works with its underlying power structure by ensuring to deprive women of all her means of independence be it financial or emotional, to ensure her servitude towards her male counterpart.

Violence against women is considered so casual, in every small fit of anger, husbands are allowed to exercise physical violence against their spouses. Even some women have internalized it and consider it ‘okay’, because that is what has been instilled in their minds. These subtleties are considered causal in conservative society, it is the actual ground reality which is portrayed by the author. It also denotes the insecurity which has been created in women regarding themselves, they started taking themselves for granted in front of unjustified actions of their spouse.

Banu Mushtaq has addressed the taboo topics and one of them is divorce, specifically in the context of conservative Indian society, by adding the colloquial proverbs like “The house that your dholi goes to should be the house from your dhola comes out”. She has used colloquial colors in her language, which made it way more effective. She shows how women are stuck in toxic marriages and are not allowed to get divorced and return to their parents' house, just for the sake of the ‘honour’ of their family. The burden of family honor always and only falls on women, which keeps restricting their boundaries of freedom.

The house duties and family responsibilities have all been given to women. No matter what, she becomes the one who is responsible for fulfilling the needs of family members and taking care of them. She is burdened with unending physical labor and emotional burden, and still her efforts are always unacknowledged. Even if she is a working professional and earning equally to her husband, she is still expected to do all the house labour and take care of her children and family by herself, because somehow it is considered ‘a woman's duty to take care of her family and nurture children’. After marriage, when her husband decides to leave her, he is free to do so, and she has to bear the burden of all her children. Banu Mushtaq has ensured to carefully pick all these undiscussed topics around the life and struggle of common women, and portray them all in her stories so as to make her readers aware of all the ordeals a woman has to face just for being a woman in an orthodox patriarchal society.

Mushtaq has depicted how the body of a woman has become the place of possession of her husband, which he uses however he wants, without any concern for the consent or feeling of his partner. “My body was his playground, my heart a toy in his hand” (Mushtaq), here the main concern intended to discuss is that even ‘the own body’ which is the most private and least possession one could have, is denied to women. They can't make decisions about their own body, about their own sexual and motherhood decisions, as these are all decided by her husband, her in-laws and society. It entails the ways patriarchy reinforces itself to control the life of women.

Along with many of the above discussed things, the desires of women is another significant aspect which Mushtaq brings to light. It is portrayed in the story of 'Yaseen bua' who, even after being crushed under the rough and heavy wheel of poverty and patriarchy, still desired something for herself, just one desire which she wanted to fulfill firmly. It makes women human, not a 'Devi'¹ figure who likes to sacrifice her whole being. Just like any ordinary human, women too have desires which they want to fulfill.

Apart from shared experiences, Mushtaq has effectively portrayed the differences of women led by the different privileges. So the idea of class and social hierarchy along with political themes has also been discussed. It is to show how men are immersively concerned with political and outside concerns but is still called that 'he is raising his family just by providing money'. When the actual truth is, it is a woman who actually shed her blood and sweat for her family and children, and still remains the unacknowledged bearer of these responsibilities.

By concluding the above discussion, it can be ensured that it is a collection of resistance against the ages-long silence which has been imposed on women. Deepa Bhasthi, the translator of the book, also called the writings of Mushtaq 'Bandyā', in her translator's note, which means the literature of resistance in Kannada, against the domineering upper class and patriarchy in male writing, which has portrayed women as per their perception till now. Mushtaq has written the female writing as per female tradition, to give a firm voice to all the unacknowledged women, and added to the creation of women's history.

This collection is recommended for all readers who are keen to dig into the engraved narratives of women, and want to have a better understanding of their actual experience beyond the mainstream patriarchal narrative about them. The language is simple yet poignant with its own flow, that added to its quality as a women's writing, beyond the constraint and structure of male dominated language.

Reference

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¹ Devi is used in the Indian context of Hindu religious belief. It is used for a female figure who is ready to sacrifice her whole life for others.