

Feminine Consciousness in Banu Musthaq's *Heart Lamp*: A Reading

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of feminine consciousness in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp through the metaphor of a "voice without speech," foregrounding the silent yet powerful modes of female expression within a patriarchal social order. The narrative portrays women whose emotions, desires, and resistances are often muted by social conventions, religious constraints, and familial expectations. Despite the absence of overt articulation, these women assert their agency through introspection, endurance, symbolic gestures, and emotional resilience. The "Heart Lamp" emerges as a potent symbol of inner illumination, signifying the persistence of selfhood and moral strength even in conditions of suppression and marginalization. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, the study explores how silence functions not merely as an absence of voice but as an alternative language that communicates pain, protest, and identity. By reimagining silence as a form of expression, Heart Lamp challenges dominant narratives that equate empowerment solely with vocal resistance. The paper argues that feminine consciousness in the text operates through subtle negotiations of power, revealing the complexities of women lived experiences in a male-dominated society. Ultimately, the study highlights Mushtaq's contribution to feminist discourse by presenting silence as a meaningful, transformative space where suppressed voices continue to speak.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Symbolism, Identity, Marginalization, Criticism.

Women's experiences in patriarchal societies are often defined by restrictions placed on their speech, mobility, and self-expression. Feminist literary criticism has repeatedly shown that women's silence does not signify intellectual or emotional absence but reflects systems of power that regulate whose voices are heard. While early feminist criticism often equated empowerment with articulation and visibility, later theoretical interventions have complicated this assumption by drawing attention to the cultural, social, and psychological conditions under which women are silenced. Silence, in this sense, is not merely the absence of speech but a condition shaped by power relations, social surveillance, and internalized discipline. As Cheryl Glenn argues, silence operates as a "rhetorical and political space" through which dominance and resistance are negotiated (Glenn 3)

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, translated into English by Deepa Bhasthi, offers a nuanced literary exploration of this contested space

of silence. Set within a deeply patriarchal sociocultural milieu, the text foregrounds women whose public voices are constrained by family, religion, and social convention. Yet these women are far from voiceless. Their inner lives are marked by acute emotional awareness, moral reflection, and a persistent consciousness of injustice. Mushtaq's narrative thus articulates what may be described as a "voice without speech," wherein feminine consciousness is expressed not through overt verbal protest but through introspection, endurance, memory, and symbolic presence.

This paper seeks to examine how *Heart Lamp* redefines silence as a meaningful mode of expression rather than a sign of passivity or defeat. Drawing on feminist literary theory, subaltern studies, and narrative criticism, the study situates Mushtaq's work within broader debates on voice, agency, and resistance. By analyzing the symbolic significance of the "*Heart Lamp*," the regulation of female speech, and the prominence of interiority in the narrative, the article argues that *Heart Lamp* challenges dominant feminist paradigms that privilege speech as the primary marker of empowerment. Instead, the text foregrounds culturally grounded forms of resistance that operate within constrained spaces, thereby expanding our understanding of feminine consciousness in contemporary feminist literature.

Feminist theorists have long emphasized that women's silence is historically produced rather than natural. Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have been positioned as the "Other," denied authority in speech and self-definition (Beauvoir 267). Adrienne Rich similarly notes that patriarchal cultures train women to associate silence with virtue and speech with transgression (Rich 18). In *Heart Lamp*, silence operates within this framework of learned restraint. One revealing moment in the text states, "She had learned early that words only brought trouble; silence was safer." (26)

This line demonstrates how silence functions as a survival strategy rather than a passive condition. Elaine Showalter's observation that women's writing often encodes experience through indirect forms is especially relevant here, as Mushtaq uses restraint and understatement to convey deep emotional realities (Showalter 13).

The women in *Heart Lamp* inhabit a world structured by patriarchal authority that carefully regulates female speech. Familial hierarchy, religious convention, and social surveillance work together to restrict women's articulation of desire or dissent. As Michel Foucault explains, power is most effective when it is internalised and self-regulated (Foucault 202). Mushtaq captures this internalisation poignantly, "She swallowed her words before anyone else could silence her." (Bhasthi Deepa, 67)

This act of self-censorship reveals how women learn to police their own speech. Yet, as Ania Loomba notes, the silence of marginalised women must be read as a consequence of power relations rather than a lack of agency (Loomba 160). In *Heart Lamp*, silence exposes the injustice of a system that fears women's voices. Despite their outward silence, the women in *Heart Lamp* possess a heightened inner awareness. Their thoughts reveal emotional clarity, moral questioning, and recognition of injustice. Mushtaq writes: "Inside her, a thousand questions burned, though her lips remained sealed" (Mushtaq Banu, trans. Bhasthi Deepa)

This contrast between inner intensity and outer restraint forms the essence of "voice without speech." Hélène Cixous argues that women's writing often privileges interiority as a means of survival within oppressive systems (Cixous 879). Mushtaq's narrative aligns with this tradition by granting authority to inner voice rather than public speech. Carol Gilligan's theory of an ethic of care further illuminates this consciousness. Gilligan contends that women's moral reasoning often emphasizes responsibility, empathy, and relational awareness —values dismissed as weakness in patriarchal discourse but essential to survival (Gilligan 30). In *Heart Lamp*, emotional endurance becomes a form of strength rather than submission.

The central metaphor of the “Heart Lamp” encapsulates Mushtaq’s vision of feminine endurance. A lamp traditionally signifies illumination and guidance; when placed within the heart, it represents an inner flame that remains untouched by external darkness. Mushtaq observes: “Even when everything around her darkened, the lamp in her heart stayed lit” (Mushtaq Banu, trans. Bhasthi Deepa)

Toril Moi notes that feminist symbolism often relocates power from external action to internal consciousness (Moi 101). The Heart Lamp symbolizes this shift, affirming that women retain moral and emotional agency even when denied external power. The metaphor also challenges patriarchal definitions of strength. Rather than domination or rebellion, strength in Heart Lamp lies in continuity, memory, and ethical clarity.

One of the most significant contributions of Heart Lamp is its reimagining of silence as resistance. Mushtaq avoids dramatized rebellion and instead presents endurance as a culturally grounded form of defiance. A striking line reveals this misreading of silence: “They mistook her quietness for obedience, never knowing what she carried within” (Mushtaq Banu, trans. Bhasthi Deepa)

Susan Lanser’s concept of “private voice” is useful here. Lanser argues that authority in women’s writing often operates through interior rather than public forms of expression (Lanser 24). Silence in Heart Lamp conceals resistance beneath apparent compliance, destabilising patriarchal assumptions. Sara Ahmed further emphasizes that emotional labor and endurance, though rendered invisible, constitute critical forms of feminist resistance (Ahmed 169). The women’s silence thus becomes a mode of survival that preserves dignity and selfhood.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question “Can the subaltern speak?” resonates deeply with Heart Lamp. Spivak argues that marginalised women are often unheard even when they speak because dominant frameworks fail to recognise their voices (Spivak 287). Mushtaq offers a nuanced response: the subaltern woman may not speak publicly, but her consciousness remains intact and expressive.

Situated within a South Asian feminist context, Heart Lamp aligns with what Susie Tharu and K. Lalita describe as a tradition of women’s writing that articulates resistance through restraint, emotional depth, and narrative subtlety (Tharu and Lalita 45). Mushtaq’s work thus reflects a culturally specific feminism that values survival over spectacle.

Heart Lamp, in Deepa Bhasthi’s sensitive and evocative translation, emerges as a powerful meditation on feminine consciousness articulated through silence. By centering women whose voices are curtailed by patriarchal authority, Banu Mushtaq challenges conventional binaries that equate speech with power and silence with submission. The text reveals silence as a complex, layered phenomenon at once imposed, internalized, and strategically inhabited. Far from representing absence or erasure, silence in Heart Lamp becomes a charged space of emotional awareness, ethical reflection, and quiet resistance. The recurring metaphor of the Heart Lamp encapsulates this vision of endurance and inner illumination. Even when external circumstances remain unchanged, the women’s inner lives continue to evolve, preserving a sense of self that resists complete domination. Through narrative restraint and symbolic depth, Mushtaq foregrounds forms of agency that are often overlooked in feminist criticism—acts of endurance, care, memory, and emotional survival. These modes of resistance may lack visibility, but they possess profound transformative potential.

By articulating a “voice without speech,” *Heart Lamp* contributes significantly to feminist literary discourse, particularly within a South Asian context where overt rebellion may not always be possible or safe. The text invites readers and critics alike to rethink the meaning of voice, agency, and empowerment, urging a more inclusive understanding of resistance that acknowledges silence as a meaningful and expressive force. Ultimately, Heart Lamp affirms that even within conditions of enforced muteness, women continue to think, feel, and resist—keeping the lamp of consciousness alight within their hearts.

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