

## The Politics of Women's Pain in *Heart Lamp*: A Feminist Medical Humanities Perspective

Pallavi Gadge 1, Dr. Waheed Sultan Bhat 2

1. Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Sandip University, Nashik Maharashtra, India

2. Associate Professor, Department of English, Sandip University, Nashik Maharashtra, India

### Abstract

Feminist medical humanities is a transdisciplinary discipline of the humanities that examines the intersections of gender, disease, emotional or suffering and social arrangements through literature and culture. This paper looks at the politics of experiencing pain in terms of feminist medical humanities in the work *Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq. The narrative does not only tell of women's suffering, it also acknowledges that women's suffering is a social phenomenon which is constructed through patriarchy, cultural oppression, gender discrimination and emotional silencing. The study emphasizes the ways women's bodies are targeted and controlled within patriarchal social systems, subjected to judgment, and experiencing emotional violence. The approach used in the research is qualitative using a textual and thematic analysis. The analysis of *Heart Lamp* is mainly done through primary sources, but also relies on secondary sources related to feminist criticism, trauma studies, and medical humanities scholarship. Themes include the experience of suffering, emotional pain, silence, psychological oppression, social stigma and survival. It also examines how women take on the roles of the men determined by their culture and how cultural systems become synonymous with women's pain. Medical humanities turn into critique of patriarchy that medicalizes, silences and controls women's bodies and emotions through feminist medical humanities. The study emphasizes the need of literature for cultivating empathy and emotional consciousness and critical consciousness of women lived experiences.

**Keywords:** pain in women, emotional trauma, psychological suffering, illness, patriarchy, feminist Medical Humanities, Survival

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Feminist medical humanities is an transdisciplinary and feminist approach to the study of the interplay of gender, disease, emotional distress and social institutions in the context of literature, culture, history, and medicine. Feminist medical humanities is the study of emotional, psychological, social and cultural aspects of women's suffering, while traditional medical studies are primarily about biological aspects of disease. Critically examines the impact of patriarchy on women's experiences of illness, trauma, pain and health care. This field is also a reminder of the emotional and physical pain women face in society, which is overlooked, normalised, and/or silenced. Literature is a frequently important medium in which women's suffering and emotional experiences with which social and medical discourses are often disengaged. As a result of literary narratives, readers have insight into the lived reality of women suffering from emotional trauma, bodily pain, social stigma, psychological oppression and identity crisis. The literature of women's sufferings makes women more vulnerable by attributing feelings and experiences often denied them in a patriarchal society. In a lot of literature, the female body is a place of control, judgment and social control in which subjects like illness, fertility, motherhood, beauty and emotional health are tightly linked to cultural expectations and gender norms.

Woman's emotional trauma, and social suffering is a subject that has more and more been discussed in contemporary Indian literature, particularly translated regional literature. Such writers as Banu Mushtaq depict the women's lives in the context of restrictive social systems in which emotional suffering is intertwined with the oppression of patriarchy, religion, class, caste and discrimination on the basis of gender. *Heart Lamp* is a portrait of the suffering of women not only as a personal condition but as a political and social one in relation to the unequal systems of power. The words show us that emotional or physical suffering, silence, and survival are key components of the lived experiences of women. This study therefore tries to explore the perspective of the feminist medical humanities to study women's pain in *Heart Lamp*. It examines the text as a depiction of emotional distress, psycho-traumatizing experiences and social stigma as well as women's solidarity

in a patriarchal system. Literature is also shown to be a crucial medium in cultivating the empathy and critical perception of women's experiences of pain and survival.

### **1.2 Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp***

Banu Mushtaq is an eminent Kannada script writer, journalist, lawyer and social activist whose literary works are mainly focused on the life, plight and emotions of the outcaste women of Indian society. Her writing is inspired by the issues of gender inequality, patriarchy, caste discrimination, religious conservatism and women's rights. Mushtaq's fictional works bring to life women who may not be heard in society. Her style of writing is emotional realism, social criticism and empathy; thus, she is one of the important contemporary writers of Indian regional literature. Her stories are inspired by her work as an activist and a lawyer, who works closely with women from marginalized communities. *Heart Lamp* is a series of twelve short stories which were originally written in Kannada from 1990 to 2023 by Deepa Bhashti and translated into English. The collection has been published internationally after winning the 2025 International Booker Prize, making it the first Kannada language publication and first short story collection to win the award. The stories are mostly about the life of the women and girls in the Muslim community of southern India and how they are handicapped by the patriarchal social system. The collection focuses on emotional distress, physical pain, domestic oppression, issues of reproduction, social stigma, family honour and survival.

*Heart Lamp* is set in the social and cultural realities of the south which includes multiple oppressions for women based on gender, religion, class, and expectations of social roles. The stories highlight how women's life, body, emotions and identities are controlled by the patriarchal systems. Emphasizing family environments, marriage, motherhood, social judgment and emotional loneliness, the text uncovers the ways in which women's suffering is determined by larger social frameworks. Mushtaq's stories also bring to the fore the entanglements of religion, caste, and gender in the construction of women lived experiences.

*Heart Lamp* has great meaning in terms of the emotional and psychological realities of women. The collection makes the pain of women human by depicting the sufferings as not only individual but also as a social and political phenomenon. The book is significant for feminist medical humanities because it examines the connection between women's bodies, sickness, emotional suffering and power systems. The stories tell of the normalisation, silencing and ignoring of women's pain in patriarchal cultures. The collection simultaneously highlights the strength, emotional fortitude and survival of women in the context of oppression. *Heart Lamp* is a significant addition to feminist literary studies, trauma studies and to the scholarship of medical humanities by introducing marginalized voices in the literary discourse.

## **2. Patriarchal Structures and Women's Emotional Suffering**

*Heart Lamp* situates women's suffering as a wound not only as a personal or emotional wound, but as a political wound that emerges from the power dynamics of the patriarchy, the social expectations and cultural oppression. The suffering suffered by women in the text is socially constructed, as the society itself constructs and works to perpetuate the conditions that exacerbate women's pain. Women's emotional wounding is a result of women's bodies being regulated, their voices being circumscribed, and their individuality being denied. The stories illustrate the link between emotional and physical suffering and to unequal power dynamics in society through the day-to-day life of women.

### **2.1. Developing an understanding of the emotional invisibility of Patriarchal Expectations**

The key things that make the collection interesting are the control of women's identities by society around their roles in marriage and motherhood, to obey and honour in their role as wives and mothers. Women have to endure suffering silently to maintain family respect. They are rarely given attention or consideration to their feelings. The emotional invisibility is the political manifestation of women's pain, as society has made women's pain their normal condition, which is that of a woman. This is the emotional invisibility, the political reality of the women's pain, since women's pain is made normal by the society, it being the condition of women. This distress then is institutionalized in domestic and cultural patterns and is very much a gender issue.

### **2.2 School Exclusion and Other Forms of Insufficient Socialization**

*Heart Lamp* tells the stories of women whose pain is unnoticed even in their families. In a few stories, the women suffer from emotional abandonment, humiliation and psychological estrangement, with no sympathy or assistance being offered.

Their plight is normalized because of a lack of understanding of women as people with emotional needs and a focus on their social roles by patriarchal systems. This mirrors Elaine Showalter's claim that women have been ignored and forgotten as victims in patriarchal cultures (Showalter 1985).

### **2.3 A demonstration of the regulation of the female body and social control**

The political aspect of women's suffering is also manifested in the control of women's bodies. The physical experiences of women are always scrutinized and evaluated by social morality and cultural expectations. Their value is linked to their capacity for patriarchy in the roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper. If women do not live up to these expectations they become objects of emotional violence, of shame, of social criticism. In this representation, Mushtaq reveals how women's bodies are a subject of control in the Patriarchal culture, and of social surveillance. Emotional repression and internal trauma form a vicious cycle.

One of the most moving parts of the text, in which the women are shown to carry within them unspoken emotional wounds, is a situation in which they are not allowed to show their anger, grief or discontent. The unspoken nature of women's pain is oppression. Emotional pain is internalized because women are taught that they must bear the humiliation, rather than fight against the social expectation. This suppression over time causes emotional disintegration and psychological trauma, and loneliness.

### **2.4 Social Indifference and the Politics of Pain**

The collection further reflects the politicisation of pain in a society that overlooks women's emotional realities. Often times the physical ailment and psychological pain of women are regarded as commonplace or mundane. Their unhappiness is not acknowledged because in patriarchal systems, family honour and social order are paramount to women's health and wellbeing. The feminist medical humanities deconstruct this process as it reveals the ways in which the female body and emotions are subject to cultural construction and how this affects women's suffering.

### **2.5 Humanizing Women's Suffering through literature**

Banu Mushtaq's portrayal of the pain of women is grounded in an emotional reality and is not merely a social problem. *Heart Lamp* showcases the dark, psychological impacts of patriarchy through realistic portrayals of emotional neglect, physical pain and domestic oppression. This text can thus be understood as a potent criticism of systems that normalize women's pain and deny them emotional freedom, dignity and autonomy.

## **3. Discussion on Findings**

### **3.1. Patriarchal Construction of Women's Pain**

The research uncovers that in *Heart Lamp*, women's pain is not simply an individual emotional state but is rather a socially and politically produced state influenced by patriarchal systems, cultural expectations and gender inequality. Feminist medical humanities approach offers a perspective on how women's physical and psychological pain is inextricably linked to mechanisms of power that control female identity, autonomy and emotion. One of the key findings of the study is that patriarchal culture deems it normal for women to suffer, and that emotional pain is just a normal experience for women. The women in *Heart Lamp* should be humiliated, silenced, emotionally neglected, and subjected to oppression within their home without resistance. They suffer often without social recognition, as the importance of honour, loyalty and traditional gender roles outweighs the importance of women's emotional needs. This is a statement on the institutionalisation of emotional trauma in domestic and cultural contexts.

### **3.2. The Politics of the Female Body**

The study also reveals that women's bodies in the text become a location of social control and surveillance. The concept of "woman" is continually linked to marriage, motherhood, morality and domestic duty. Shame, social judgment and emotional violence are forms of violence inflicted upon women when they do not perform according to the expectations of the patriarchy. The text, in this portrayal, condemns the act of reducing women to biological and social roles and overlooks their individuality and emotional needs in a patriarchal system.

### **3.3. Silence, Trauma, and Emotional Survival**

Another important discovery is that of silence as oppression and survival. In the collection, women often conceal their emotions, as in a male dominated society open expression of female anger, grief, or dissension is discouraged. Repressed emotions slowly result in psychological disintegration, isolation and internal trauma. The study thus brings the voice of silence to the fore as a potent tool that is used to subserve women on an emotional and social level by patriarchy.

### **3.4 Illness, Emotional Neglect, and Social Discrimination**

The analysis also shows that social stigma and culture attitudes regarding women are connected to illness and emotional suffering. Feminist medical humanities contribute to uncovering the emotional neglect, social discrimination, and cultural expectations that contribute to women's pain as well as physical ones. These stories reveal how society may ignore or downplay women's pain, and how women's experiences of fear, hurt and pain are overlooked in both the family and the community.

### **3.5. Resilience and Emotional Resistance**

The research also highlights women's emotional survival and resilience in an oppressive society. Although the women characters have suffered trauma, humiliation and emotional isolation, they persist and negotiate their identities in a patriarchy. They survive and are a kind of resistance to systems which try to silence and control them. Thus, the text both relates to the woman's emotional power and her suffering, while also normalizing it.

## **4. Conclusion**

*Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq is a strong statement about the emotional pain, physical pain and psychological trauma inflicted on women in a patriarchy social frame. It examines the experience of women's pain from a feminist medical humanities perspective, uncovering the social and political dimensions of pain as a condition that is not just personal or biological, but is socially and culturally constructed, influenced by gender inequality, expectations and the silencing of emotions. The stories depict the control of women's bodies, silencing of their feelings, and the denial of their individuality and autonomy in a patriarchal system. The study shows the suffering of women in *Heart Lamp* is closely linked to marriage, motherhood, domestic oppression, social honour, emotional invisibility, etc. The collection also reveals the ways in which women's bodies become the focus of social control in which morality, obedience, and respectability are continually observed and evaluated. Meanwhile, the narratives illustrate how women's endurance and resilience are acts of subtle opposition to the oppressive social structures. Banu Mushtaq brings the miseries of the women alive in realistic and emotional stories, allowing the reader to perceive the pain as an emotive experience, rather than just a social problem. The text, then, becomes a critique of the construction of patriarchy which politicizes women's bodies and normalizes women's suffering. The role of feminist medical humanities in the understanding of the connection between illness, trauma, gender and emotional survival in literature. To sum up, *Heart Lamp* is a valuable addition to feminist literary studies and medical humanities, by allowing the voice of the marginalized women. The collection invites readers to cultivate empathy, emotional awareness and critical understanding of the social conditions which influence women's lives. It finally focuses on the importance of emotional justice, gender equality and the recognition of women as human beings in literature and society.

## **References**

### **Primary Source**

1. *Heart Lamp*. Translated by Deepa Bhashti, Penguin Random House India, 2025.

### **Secondary Sources**

2. Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2004.
3. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.
4. Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press, 1993.
5. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

6. Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1978.
7. Gurav, Mohini. "Quest for Self-Identity and Survival Struggle of Adivasi Community"
8. ---. "Inherited Painscapes: A Literary Exploration of Manreet Sodhi Someshwar's Lahore." *European Economics Letters* 15.3 (2025).
9. Reflected in Narayan's Novel Kocharethi: The Araya Woman." (2018).
10. ---. "Rural Narratives in Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory Foster Women Empowerment." (2019).
11. Sonkhaskar, J. D., and Mohini Gurav. "Importance of Women's Participation in Protecting Environment." (2017).
12. Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.
13. hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.
14. Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, 1985.
15. Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982.
16. Mansi, Ms, and Mohini Gurav. "Echoes of Partition: Embodied Memory and Fragmented Identities in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*." *European Economic Letters* ISSN 2323-5233 Vol 15, Issue 2 (2025) <http://eelet.org.uk>
17. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
18. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson, 2010.
19. Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977.
20. ---. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*. Virago Press, 1985.
21. ---. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1981, pp. 179–205.
22. Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
23. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
24. Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. Westview Press, 2009.
25. Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.