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The Blitz of Trauma in *Heart Lamp*: Interrogations of the Ages

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ABSTRACT

Trauma is a psychological index of one's mental make-up and physical infliction leading to final catastrophe of individual. It has been available in the world of literature right from its inception in different forms. Sometimes, it is in the form of a defective social structure, sometimes it is in the form of gender disparity, sometimes it is termed as racial discrimination, sometimes based on language, region, religion, etc. – but, all the time it is self-created – a man-made disaster. In the novel *Heart Lamp* Banu Mustaq dwells on the Muslim society, especially the Muslim woman.

Crusade for the cause of women has been a subject of deliberation for the intellectuals and the custodians of the society: Banu Mustaq stands in the same row, with her *Heart Lamp,* the winner of the International Booker Prize, 2025, with her twelve stories, originally written in Kannad, and translated into English by Deepa Bhasthi. Each story speaks volumes, centered on the predicament of the Muslim women: in different phases of her life – in the name of religion, culture, social obligation, and other prevalent prescriptions of life. It is the voice of the marginalized section of the society, usually termed as the other, the weaker, the subaltern, the disempowered, the excluded, the belittled, the ostracized, etc. Such concern has been identified differently by litterateur: as gender issue, as patriarchal mess, as power imbalance, as intersectionality, as thwarted rebellion, as identity contest, etc. This paper intends to establish the need to demolish the perception regarding women in general and that of Muslim in particular, projecting the present, with a mission to have a better morrow, of a balanced social structure of sane and rational equations.

Introduction:

Though trauma literature is taken as a 20th century phenomenon, as formalized concept of psychology, such as, Sigmund Freud, influencing the following generation of literature, its genesis can be traced in our earlier texts of classical literature, Shakespeare, Gothic literature, etc.

Banu Mustaq is a committed Bandya writer who happens to be an advocate and a journalist, besides being a writer. As introduced in the beginning of the book *Heart Lamp*:

> Banu Mushtaq is a writer, activist and a lawyer from Karnataka. Mushtaq began writing within the progressive protest literary circles in the southwestern India in the 1970s – 80s. Critical of the caste system, the Bandaya Sahitya movement gave rise to influential Dalit and Muslim writers, of whom Mushtaq was one of the few women.

Banu Mustaq is a strong progressive writer who voices the suppressed language of Muslim girls and women, fragile and vulnerable, imprisoned in the Muslim community and appears as a mighty rebellion, against the social custodians, in different guises, as husbands, as maulvis, grandmothers and religious teachers. She questions, not a man but his so-called creator, in the beginning of the story, *Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord*:

> After creating crores and crores of tiny organisms like me over lakhs and lakhs of years, after establishing heaven for our good deeds and hell for our sins, oh lord who sits waiting for us: Prabhu you must be on your way now to enjoy the sweet fragrance

> of the garden of heaven. Or perhaps you are issuing orders to the angels, who stand there with hands folded, radiant faces glow. I may be a mere tiny fragment of your soul, but I do have the right to make request, don't I? (199)

So goes the stories of Banu Mustaq, and her book *Heart Lamp*.

Argument:

In all the twelve short stories there is a discrete reflection of the contemporary world, particularly the Muslim society and the present status of the Muslim women. In her first story of this book, titled "*Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal"* we have a glimpse of 'women enslavement' where she is not allowed to have proper education and a woman is taken as a child – producing workshop, nothing more nothing less; not only that, with dishonest coddling of love and dedication the husband swindlers her; and in the final stage and just after her death, most surprisingly, goes for the second marriage. We get a new definition of love, patriarchy and marriage. Regarding the status of husband and wife, it is said, "----- for us Muslims, it is said that, other than Allah above, our *pati* is God on earth ---- No matter which religion one belongs to, it is accepted that the wife is the husband's most obedient servant, his bonded labourer" (8).

Another remarkable point is regarding the girl education: "My sweet Asifa has had to say goodbye to her studies because of me------ I made her stop studying because girls do not need much education. A high school certificate is enough----- we can get her married off next year" (8-9).

The baseless commitment of a husband can be noticed: "If I were an emperor, I would have built a palace to put even the Taj Mahal to shame, and call it Shaista Mahal" (12).

Iftikhar further reiterates his credibility: "Every cell in my body is alive because of the strength of your name. Every heartbeat of mine is because of your energy and vigour" (13).

But what happens finally: " I married her the day after Shaista's *fatiha* was over. She is from a poor family. I needed someone to look after the children after all, that is why" (22).

These are a few glimpses that continues and repeated again and again in all her stories. In the second story *Fire Rain*, another issue of legal share of a woman in the paternal property is raised along with the status of woman:

> Anna, this is the share over which I have rights according to Allah and the Prophet's Shariat; I am not asking you for a share in the property you have worked hard and earned yourself. -------- One sixth of our father's property belongs to me. (24)

And the scathing attack on woman: "Why should he tolerate the words of a woman, burkha-clad, of little value------ you shut up and do your work---" (27).

Another story *Black Cobras* moves on in the same pace with same intensity, where we find a character Amina who has given birth to "seven children in ten years of marriage" (43) Amina grumbles: "Others are not married at my age. But I am already a woman." (43) The positivity is shown in Yakub's statement where he explains: "You must not misunderstand me. God's law says get married not just to one woman, but four. -------Did she give birth to even one boy------ so I married to another woman" (44).

Another victim is Aashraf whose stand is questionable:

> She was ready to fight for their right to live their lives. She stood alone to ask why she

> was being punished for no fault of her own. But the doors of Allah's house had not yet opened for her. The pale face of her children who sat around her kept her determined. When her voice continued to go unheard, she had resorted to create scene. (46)

Zulekha is a progressive lady who retorts:

> In this day, in this age are there still people like this ---- do you know Aashraf , if a daughter is born, it is as if the Prophet himself has saluted the house ----the prophet himself had only daughters ------- Bibi Fatima was his life. (48)

This community is victim of superstitions, as Amina asks: "They say that those who get an operation done to stop getting pregnant will not reach *jannat*. Is that true, Ashraf" (49)?

Aashraf writes many applications to *mutawalli sahab* but remains unresponded. She yells:

> If I want – oh no – I don't want, not for me, I don't want my husband even – but my children need food ---- -----where could she find the money for that? Injections, pills, tonic, the doctor's fees every day, and on the top of everything she had to wait her turn to see the doctor too. (49 – 50)

On the other hand, Yakub remains untouched by the unflinching distress towards his wife and children:

> His past does not rise up to dance in public. The present doesn't touch him. The future doesn't move him, nor is it a mystery. He does not have to remain shyly in the shadows. He does not have to say who he belongs to. He does not need to seek forgiveness, not ever at all, because nothing he does is a mistake. -----Yakub is going to marry again. he wants a son who can drive the autorickshaw after him, it seems. (50 – 51)

The mutawalli is in his favour: "What forbidden thing has he done now? He has done another nikah, that's all, isn't it?"

Aashraf is not at all jealous of his marriage, she wants to save the dying child; that's all. It was the question of Munni's life. Zulekha Begum tries to educate her, all according to Sharia, the Qur'an and the Hadiths. All rights are available in Islam. She convinces her: "You have a right to all this -------Do not beg. Demand justice." (54)

But nothing worked. And Munni loses her life. The mother has to face all these, all alone. This is how the Muslim society operates – guided by so called religion and social obligations. After all who cares? And why? We can sense the concern of the women: her identity and status in society. It is not a simple case of unquenched thirst of sexual appetite or inhuman patriarchal pattern of the Muslim world – but something more that needs to be addressed, and resolved immediately by the so-called guardian of society.

There is a strange case in the story *A Decision of the Heart.* The rift in the family is between Sas and Bahu, that is, the mother-in-law and the daughter- in -law: this is an usual concern in most of the Indian family. The husband tilts towards the mother who happens to be a widow. In the final stage of the story, the mother is ready to go for second marriage; she has no regret for that:

> Yes, I am getting married. It isn't wrong, is it? I am not ruining anyone's house, am I? You all should be happy. My son is taking the lead and doing with pride and love. He is making all the arrangements as if I were a young virgin bride. That is my good fortune. (83)

In fact, the daughter-in-law has convened a Panchayat to stop this marriage, but she fails as the

mother Mehboob Bi herself has no objection and she tells the Panchayat:

> There is no need for you to come and ask about this, and there is no need for us to answer either. For other things we need you and the *jamat* ; we will never reject the community. So please come to my nikah tomorrow morning. That is enough. (83)

Finally, the matter is closed. Akhila keeps on sobbing; she cannot change the mind of Mehaboob Bi and her husband, Yusuf. Perhaps she has the apprehension of Yusuf's future, who can go for second marriage like his mother. Interestingly, this story exposes another dimension of Muslim society where widow marriage, and that too, at the old age appears to be a possibility and reality.

In the next story "*Red Lungi"*, we have a glimpse of a huge family of eighteen children, eight girls and ten boys; all screaming and enjoying the summer vacation, a big headache for Razia:

> The nerves in both temples throbbed, her hot head felt like it would burst, and the veins at the back of her neck threatened to snap any time. They came, one after the other, complaining, and between complaints it was screaming and crying. And then the kind of games they played ------- abbabbaa ----- sword fighting, machine gun, bomb attacks ----- (85)

To get rid of this hustle they chalked out a plan of mass *khatna*; Latif Ahmad gave his consent without hesitation. It was a programme for the entire community, so children from the poor section were also registered. Everything goes peacefully with a bit of hue and cry. In between comes the issue of poverty. Latif Ahmad has a regret that he could not help a man in need. Here is a family who is out to help others along with going by the prescribed Muslim rituals. This is another facet of the Muslim society which is compassionate, benevolent and accommodating.

In the title story *Heart Lamp*, the same issue of marriage and the subsequent pang of being rejected by the husband is presented. This time one more issue is discovered, and that is conversion of a woman to Muslim before marriage. Mehrun is victim in this story, being abandoned by Inayat, her husband. He has eloped with some nurse, and it is supposed that when he comes back his reply will be: "I have made a mistake. I will make her a Muslim and do nikah with her." (101)

The elders of the family have no complaint against the man: Then she (the nurse) will be a *savathi* to you. And say we scold him some more. What can we do if he says, I don't want this woman called Mehrun, I will give her talaq." (101)

Mehrun's outburst becomes more bitter as she says:

> I fell at your feet, saying that I didn't want to get married. Did you listen? I said, I will wear a *burkha* and go to the college. I begged you not to make me stop studying. None of you listened to me. Many of my classmates aren't even married, and yet I have become an old woman. I have the burden of five children on me. Their father is roaming around , and I don't have a life. When a man is doing such a haram thing, are none of you able to ask him why he is doing this? -------Now he has been living with her for the last eight days. For how many more days can I tolerate this? How will I survive? (101)

That's why her final pronouncement is: "Loving him is a very distant idea. It is not about him giving me *talaq* – I will get it from him. I will not go back to that house." (102)

And the guardians say, "There is no stain that will stick to him." (102)

This is how the patriarchy works and the consequent early girl marriage, ill education, separation and talaq, leading to family dispute, conjugal disharmony and remarriage. Mehrun remains indecisive, what to do, where to go, should she end her life, but what about the children. She cannot choose. And the world goes on unseen and unheard.

Banu Mustaque has a pertinent question and she places it before us: unanswered and unresolved. Perhaps, in the beginning of the story *High- Heeled Shoe,* Banu Mustaque enters into a compromise:

> Call the world a small place, or call it big, say that the world is round, giggle hehehe and say the world has become a small village ------ say something! No matter what you say, it makes little difference. (112)

The whole story "High Heeled Shoe" is a ridiculous obsession of Nayaz with Nassema's shoes, a gift of Saudi. It culminates in Arifa's miscarriage; and she realizes:

> She was putting unnecessary pressure on her unborn child because of the high heeled shoes. Her heart melted. ---- I am not a mother, I am a mahamari, a demon. (130)

The story "Soft Whispers" is about the Urs festival and Mujawar Sahab's son; the strange way of getting the chair to rule over the society – just by following illogical pattern of society. In "Taste of Heaven" the mystery is all about the marital secrets, the ja-namaz incident and the heaven drama leading to enigmatic death of Bi Dadi. The Shroud is all about Shaiya: various rituals related to Hajj*, kafan* (death) and her relationships; possibly, she is disillusioned at every step:

> What *kafan,* which *kafan* after falling down dead? Someone or other will put you in a *kafan.* Why make such a fuss. The *kafan* had been the dead woman's last wish. (181-82).

It is all mystery:

> There was no end to Shaziya's sorrow, no drought for her tears. Those who saw her face, her reddened eyes, her swollen lips, were surprised, thinking that they had never seen a woman from a prominent, rich family feel so much grief over the death of a servant. Who knows what kind of relationship they had, they thought, before shifting the burden onto God. Only God knows. Shaziya alone knew the truth; it was not Yaseen Bua's last rites being conducted, but her own. (186)

"The Arabic Teacher and Gobi Manchuri" is a humorous piece of imaginary creativity which lingers on an Arabic teacher's eccentric antics and his erratic behaviour. He is accommodated in the society in the name of 'proper religious education'; he is engaged in the families to impart Arabic for proper understanding of Qur'an. So the narrator of the story employs him for home tuition of the two girls: Asiya and Amina, with all the Islamic restrictions and prohibitions. But confusions and anxieties persist throughout the story over his several marriage proposals and his obsession with gobi manchuri (a vegetarian dish) which, finally, ruins his marriage and the ultimate break up. Perhaps, the author hints at this point in the beginning of the story, "No matter how simple some things might seem, they're not, or at least not always." (187)

The last story titled "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!" is the most seminal story of this story-book which projects the vital issue of atrocities over woman and their plight at different stages of life. The two most inconsistent aspects of women have been presented here; one is that of mother:

> They say you carry the love of hundreds of mothers for us ; the burning in one mother's heart must have touched the hundreds of other hearts within you --------did

> you not have the time to peep into my heart and see my fears, my wishes, fears and disappointments? (200-201).

And the second is: "My body was his playground; my heart, a toy in his hand. ------He devoured me. ---- As always, I am a prisoner of a soul whose doors and windows are shut." (201 - 03)

The same issue of dowery, marriage, a lot of children, unreasonable disappointments, yearnings for another marriage, all leading to chaos and disaster. And then the final conclusion: "If you were to build the world again, to create males and females again, do not be like an inexperienced potter. Come to earth as a woman, Prabhu! Be a woman once, Oh Lord!" (208)

Analysis:

Precisely, trauma literature is an evolving pattern which is shaped by different factors of personal, social, global and historical exigencies, for instance, different sorts of wars, colonization, contemporary hassles of gender discrimination, racial discontent, caste disparity, etc. We may cite the authors like Khushwant Singh – *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Manohar Malgonkar – *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) dealing with partition trauma, Arundhati Roy – *The God of Small Things* (1997) dealing with caste trauma, Shashi Deshpande – *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and Anita Desai – *Cry, the Peacock & Fire on the Mountain*: dealing with gender trauma, Kamala Das dealing with sexual trauma, etc. The communal violence and political upheavals are another set of major influences on literature available in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* & *A Fine Balance*, etc. Trauma categorized as post-colonial trauma, mainly diaspora element, is present in Jhumpa Lahiri, V. S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, etc.

It has been a persistent effort of the writers of this category such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantra Sahgal, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, etc. to explore such state of affairs and project thought provoking arguments to correct further advancement of social fabric. These writers are obsessed with the themes of gender issue, social justice, power structures, female identity, family dynamics, etc.

Roy raises socio-political issues of marginalized communities; Desai's concern is family dynamics, female identity, huge expectation and the consequent protest; Ambai dwells on female resilience; Kapur talks of female relationships in patriarchal society; Kiran Desai believes in exposing the issue of displacement and cultural identity; Shashi Despande talks of emotional and spiritual struggles, of women liberation, etc.

Noticeably, Banu Mustaq has nothing new to share with the readers, but her approach to these perennial glitches is more penetrating and touching that can drive the issue to a convincing end.

Conclusion:

Perceptibly, the predicament of Muslim women is being exposed and defined in these stories**.** Be it the case of early marriage, number of children produced, the ill consequences of patriarchy, dictates of religious gurus, guidelines of *Quran*, poor education, particularly, to girl/women, unquenchable sexual appetite leading to remarriages, different Islamic illogical religious rituals or the irrational superstitions – all lead to chaos, disharmony and mismanagement in the family, society and community at large. Banu Mustaq's candid and colossal appeal is to get rid of all these misnomers and have a healthy social fabric. This has been interrogations of the ages, reflected in the world literature down the ages.

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