

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Shroud: Indian Society, Community, And Social-Hierarchy Reflection**

Dr. Y. Praveen Kumar

Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, Government Degree College, Medak
Cell:9490065269, Email: aravtipraveenkumar6@gmail.com

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Abstract

Banu Musthaq is an Indian Kannada short story writer and a lawyer. She is a social activist who fights for the rights of women. This research paper tries to examine the short story *The Shroud* from her award-winning and internationally acclaimed short story collection *Heart Lamp*. This is an excellent collection of powerful narratives that explores the complex Indian society social structure of Indian society. The analysis focuses on how the story illuminates the penetrating class, gender, and religious dynamics that influence community relations and individual lives through the moving forgotten depiction promise. It has profound consequences in the story *The Shroud*, which demonstrates how systematic oppressions can dehumanize the marginalized while simultaneously imposing a remarkable psychological burden on the privileged, offering a microcosm of Musthaq's broader literary engagement with societal injustice.

Keywords: *The Shroud*, Indian Society, Community, Social-hierarchy, Banu Musthaq, Muslim, *Heart Lamp*

Introduction

The significant voice of Banu Musthaq in contemporary Indian literature is distinguished by her multifaceted background as a known writer, activist and lawyer from the southern Indian state of Karnataka. Her literary career ranges decades, with stories written from 1990 to 2023. Her stories are the reflections of a sustained engagement with her region's social realities. She is known for her social service to the movement and contributions to the progressive protest literary circles, the *Bandya Sahithya movement*. It is famous for its acute critique of caste, class, and religious suppression. With this movement, she emerged as one of the most powerful women writers, relentlessly fighting for women's rights and promoting all forms of caste and religious conquest.

Research Question

The research question will help in exploring through a close reading of the story, *The Shroud*. The analysis of the characters and their relationships, and consideration of the broader social and cultural contexts in which the story set, so the research question, how does Banu Musthaq in her short story

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Shroud mirrors and critique the social hierarchies and class dynamics in Indian society, focusing on the experiences of marginalised communities? This research question is the rudder in writing this research paper.

Banu's short collection *Heart Lamp* consists of twelve short stories. All these were written in Kannada by her. All these stories were translated into English by Deepa Bhashti. The collection has gained widespread critical acclaim. Adding to the book's glory, it won the International Booker Prize in 2025. It is the most significant milestone in Kannada literary history, since it is the first work of a short-story collection to receive this prestigious prize. The collection is an excellent portrayal of the everyday lives of women and girls within Muslim communities in southern India. It moves deep into the themes of patriarchy, gender inequality, and flexibility. The craftsmanship of Musthaq is finely penned. All her stories represent a concentrated distillation of her core and enduring thematic concerns, particularly around the inhumane treatment women experience under systemic oppressions. The very nature of this collection, drawing from decades of her work, suggests that the themes presented are not isolated but reflect the consistent and deeply felt artistic and activist concerns that have defined her literary career. The observation that specific major plot points and themes, such as a husband leaving for a younger woman, recur across stories, is not a narrative weakness. Besides, this repetition serves as an artistic presentation choice. It reinforces the pervasive, constant, and overwhelming nature of the societal oppressions that are facing women.

The Heart Lamp has a wonderful collection of short stories, among which *The Shroud* is the classic example of Banu's skilful writing. The story is a poignant mirror image of the Indian social hierarchy, community dynamics and social injustice mirror image. It is a microcosm of her broader Indian society critique. The story is the narration of illuminating pervasive class, gender, and religious obligations' influence on community relations and the individual moral landscapes. The tale powerfully narrates how systematic oppressions lead to the marginalized dehumanization, as well as imposing a profound psychological burden on the underprivileged.

The short story *The Shroud* resonates remarkably within Indian literary tradition. A spontaneous and immediate evocation of Premchand's seminal story, *Kafan*. It is widely recognized for its powerful critique of poverty, caste, and societal apathy surrounding death rituals. Her title selection is spontaneous or intentional, but it is a homage or a thematic change, establishing a known dialogue with this established literary legacy. The interconnectedness enriches the analysis by situating her work within a broader socio-literary tradition. It has allowed a deeper appreciation of how she contributes a distinct contemporary perspective to address societal issues. It attracts the reader to consider Mustaque's unique voice in addressing themes that have long preoccupied Indigenous writers. Furthermore, it offers a unique lesson on everlasting struggles.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Banu Mushtaq's literary prowess is inextricably linked to her extensive professional background as a journalist, lawyer, and women's rights activist. Her years immersed in these professions provided her with unparalleled firsthand insights into the complex societal tensions and injustices prevalent in India, particularly those afflicting women and marginalized communities. This direct engagement with human rights issues and social disparities forms the foundational wellspring for her literary voice. Her stories are not merely observational narratives but deeply informed, authentic critiques stemming from a tireless commitment to social justice. This professional immersion lends her fiction an exceptional authority and empathy, transforming her literary output into a potent instrument of sustained social commentary and advocacy. Furthermore, her association with the Bandaya Sahitya movement, a progressive protest literary circle known for its sharp criticism of the caste and class system, positioned her as one of the few women writers to emerge from this influential movement, further solidifying her role as a voice for the voiceless.

Mushtaq's personal experiences profoundly inform and mirror the thematic concerns explored in her writing, lending her narratives an authentic and visceral quality. She has openly discussed her struggles with marital conflict, domestic confinement, and postpartum depression, even recounting an incident where she contemplated self-immolation out of despair—an act of defiance that ultimately spurred a turning point in her life. These deeply personal hardships are not isolated individual experiences but represent the systemic oppressions faced by many Muslim women in southern India. Her courageous act of writing and publishing these stories, despite facing severe personal danger, including a fatwa and a knife attack for challenging chauvinistic religious interpretations, underscores her fierce honesty and unwavering courage. In a society where being outspoken is considered the greatest disqualification for a woman, Mushtaq's decision to articulate these unflinching narratives, knowing the potential repercussions, transforms her pain into a powerful political statement. Her very act of authorship, given her lived experiences and the societal pressures she has confronted, becomes a testament to the transformative power of voice against systemic silencing, making her work a profound call for collective resistance.

Mushtaq's narrative style is characterized by its unflinching and direct approach, enabling her to confront harsh realities without evasion. Yet, her storytelling is simultaneously praised for its dry and gentle humour, witty, vivid, colloquial, moving and excoriating qualities, creating a rich and engaging reading experience despite the gravity of her themes. Critics commend her work for its emotional depth and cultural specificity, noting how exquisitely she captures the contradictions and textures of Muslim life. She deliberately refuses both the flattening of Muslim women into silent sufferers or mere tropes in moral arguments. Instead, she meticulously crafts nuanced characters who endure, negotiate, and occasionally push back in ways that hold genuine significance for their lives, rather than merely making headlines. This approach emphasizes her focus on lives lived at the edges, on unnoticed choices, on the strength it takes simply to persist, thereby elevating the ordinary

RESEARCH ARTICLE

struggles of marginalized women to great importance.

At the core of *Heart Lamp* lies a relentless exploration of patriarchy, gender inequality, and the insidious ways religious authority is wielded to perpetuate oppression. Mushtaq's stories are predominantly set within fairly rigid Muslim communities where religious authority is often weaponized against women, serving as an aggressive extension of larger patriarchal structures that marginalize and suppress them. The narratives vividly illustrate how gender norms and roles are rigidly upheld to limit women's access to autonomy, both bodily and financially. A recurring and deeply unsettling theme is the pervasive societal acceptance that the wife is the husband's most obedient servant, his bonded labourer, further compounded by the stark male ignorance of women's struggles, which are viewed as custom.

Banu's works are intertwined with the Bandaya Sahitya movement, extending its critique beyond gender to encompass the pervasive issues of caste, class, and systemic oppression in Indian society. She cautiously details how poverty exacerbates marginalization, and when intertwined with complex social hierarchies in caste. It leads to the individuals' dehumanization. It creates a tragic reality where material things have become priceless and human beings worthless, and people's feelings are on sale. The profound marginalized deception is encapsulated in the poignant observation. If there are people to help the rich, the poor have God, reflecting a society where divine intervention is the last, often futile, hope for those abandoned by human compassion.

Despite the overwhelming bleakness and brutality depicted, Mushtaq's stories consistently rise to show the empowerment of collective rage and resistance. Her characters, though beleaguered, find ingenious ways to express autonomy and push back against societal expectations. Examples include women pursuing medical procedures against their husbands' wishes or engaging in acts of collective defiance, such as throwing rocks at a man in the story *Black Cobras*. The central theme of making one's voice heard, or the forces that try to silence it, resonates throughout the collection, with Mushtaq passionately encouraging women to speak up, even when society deems being outspoken... the greatest disqualification for a woman. Her characters are consistently portrayed as astonishing portraits of survival and resilience, and the title, *Heart Lamp*, is intended to give light and hope to these women, symbolizing their enduring spirit.

The perceived repetitiveness of specific themes and plot points, such as husbands abandoning their wives for younger women, is not a narrative weakness. Instead, this artistic strategy serves to underscore the pervasive, constant, and systemic nature of the oppressions faced by women in their society. It is a deliberate choice to emphasize that these are not isolated incidents but deeply entrenched societal patterns. Similarly, Mushtaq's dry and gentle humour is not merely for comic relief. As Mushtaq herself states, feminist writing need not always be about disappointment, sorrow,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

and struggle.

This reveals humour as a vital tool for survival, a means to highlight the absurdity and resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity, and a way to prevent the narratives from becoming purely didactic or depressing. These artistic choices amplify the social commentary by adding nuance to the portrayal of suffering and making the resilience of her characters even more poignant.

A particularly striking aspect of Mushtaq's critique is encapsulated in her powerful assertion that for her protagonists, gender is their religion. This statement, coupled with the observation that men are entirely ignorant of the struggles of women, having been socially reinforced to view their oppression as the norm, points to a deeply internalized and culturally sanctioned system of gender hierarchy. This suggests that oppression is not merely external or imposed by specific individuals; it is woven into the fabric of identity, societal understanding, and even quasi-religious belief. This means the struggle for women's autonomy is not just against overt patriarchal structures and religious interpretations, but also against deeply ingrained cultural and psychological norms that legitimize their subordinate status. This makes the path to resistance even more complex and profound, as it requires challenging external forces and internalized frameworks that define their existence.

The Shroud is a potent Heart Lamp narrative examining Indian society's hierarchical structures. The story centers on a wealthy housewife, Shaziya, who promises to bring a funeral shroud for her cleaning woman, Yaseen Bua, while on a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. However, she forgets to do so, and upon Yaseen Bua's subsequent death, Shaziya is consumed by inconsolable guilt. This seemingly simple plot, as critics note, profoundly captures the casual violence inherent in India's caste and class systems. The immediate establishment of the stark class divide is evident in the detail that the wealthy woman finds the poor woman's money dirty, almost untouchable, a subtle yet powerful gesture that immediately underscores the chasm between their social standings.

The story skilfully narrates the wider economic and social dividend in Indian society. The funeral shroud, a fundamental necessity for a dignified burial, becomes symbolically unattainable for people with low incomes, reflecting Mushtaq's broader thematic concern that Material things have become priceless and human beings worthless. The interaction between Shaziya and Yaseen Bua starkly portrays the power dynamics inherent in the employer-employee relationship, which is severely exacerbated by their class differential. The story exposes the casual violence of class systems, where the neglect and indifference of the privileged, even if unintentional, can have devastating, dehumanizing consequences for those at the margins. This aligns with Mushtaq's overarching observation that poverty only compounds their marginalization and, coupled with the caste hierarchies, dehumanizes people. The forgotten shroud transcends its literal function to become a potent symbol of the dehumanization of the poor and marginalized. It represents not just a material

RESEARCH ARTICLE

necessity for dignified final rites, but the ultimate disregard for human worth when economic and social hierarchies dictate value. The act of forgetting, especially by someone undertaking a sacred religious pilgrimage, underscores a profound moral decay within the social fabric, where human beings are rendered worthless compared to material possessions.

The significance of the forgotten promise extends beyond a mere oversight; it represents a profound breach of implicit community trust and a failure of fundamental social responsibility. There is a striking irony in the wealthy woman being on Hajj, a religious pilgrimage undertaken to fulfill a sacred duty, while neglecting a basic human and social obligation to a less fortunate community member. This ironic juxtaposition highlights the superficiality of ritualistic piety when devoid of genuine compassion, a theme that also resonates with Premchand's *The Shroud*. Shaziya's inconsolable guilt is not merely a personal failing or a simple emotional reaction. It represents a profound psychological manifestation of the moral burden imposed by a deeply unequal social structure. This internal conflict in Shaziya suggests that the pervasive nature of social hierarchy extends beyond material deprivation to inflict a significant psychological and moral toll on those who benefit from, or are complicit in, its perpetuation. Her guilt underscores how the privileged, even if their actions are unintentional or born of oversight, are fundamentally implicated in the systemic injustices that marginalize others. This internal reckoning reveals the discomfort and moral cost that can arise from living within and benefiting from such disparities.

Examining the story through the lens of gender further illuminates the nuanced experiences of both women. Yaseen Bua, the cleaning woman, embodies the extreme vulnerability and ultimate disposability of the poor, marginalized woman within the social hierarchy. Her death, compounded without a shroud, symbolizes the ultimate dignity erasure. Conversely, the psychological burden placed on Shaziya, the wealthy housewife, whose guilt underscores the complex interplay of social status, moral responsibility, and personal conscience within a patriarchal and class-stratified society, reveals that the impact of social hierarchy is not limited to the oppressed.

Banu Mushtaq's literary craft is a powerful vehicle for her social commentary, characterized by an unflinching and direct storytelling approach that allows her to confront harsh realities without evasion. Her narrative style is simultaneously described as witty, vivid, colloquial, moving and excoriating, creating a rich and engaging reading experience despite the gravity of her themes. Critics consistently praise her work for its emotional depth and cultural specificity, noting how adeptly she captures the contradictions and textures of Muslim life in southern India. This blend of compassion and dark humour gives texture to her narratives, rendering her deceptively simple tales profoundly resonant. Perceived simplicity is a deliberate artistic strategy that allows for wider accessibility while delivering profound social critique. This approach suggests that complex and deeply entrenched societal problems can be most effectively illuminated and understood through relatable, everyday

RESEARCH ARTICLE

narratives, making the critique more impactful and less abstract. By presenting weighty issues such as caste, class, patriarchy, and religious oppression through seemingly ordinary narratives of daily life, Mushtaq makes her critique immediate, personal, and universally comprehensible.

Symbolism and irony are keenly employed as crucial tools for Mushtaq's critique. As discussed, the shroud itself in *The Shroud* carries immense symbolic weight, representing neglected humanity and the casual violence inherent in class structures. Furthermore, the dramatic irony of the wealthy woman undertaking a sacred pilgrimage to the Hajj while simultaneously failing to uphold a fundamental human obligation to her poor cleaning woman powerfully underscores the superficiality of ritual without genuine compassion. Mushtaq masterfully uses such symbolic and ironic elements to subtly, yet powerfully, underscore her social commentary, inviting readers to infer deeper meanings and moral implications beyond the surface narrative.

The translator, Deepa Bhashi, is pivotal in ensuring the authenticity and nuance of Mushtaq's social commentary to reach a global audience. Bhashi's radical approach of intentionally retaining regional words—Kannada, Urdu, and Arabic—in the English translation is not merely a technical choice but a deliberate act of cultural and social commentary. This strategy firmly grounds the stories in their specific South Indian Muslim context, actively resisting homogenization and emphasizing these lives' unique contradictions and textures. While potentially challenging for non-regional readers, this choice enriches the authenticity and cultural specificity of the work, preserving the linguistic richness and multilingual nature of southern India. This ensures that the nuanced social critique remains culturally authentic and avoids a generic, universalizing narrative, allowing the specificities of the cultural milieu to inform the broader thematic concerns.

Mushtaq's work significantly contributes to India's broader literary and social discourse on justice. Her association with the Bandaya Sahitya movement firmly positions her within a tradition of literature committed to social change. Her stories not only challenge internal patriarchal structures but also actively confront external perceptions, including Western stereotypes of Muslim women. By portraying her characters with such depth and complexity, she insists on the value of attention to lives lived at the edges, to unnoticed choices, to the strength it takes simply to persist, thereby profoundly contributing to the empathetic and critical understanding of marginalized lives globally.

Conclusion

The Shroud from Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* is a powerful and incisive critique of Indian social structures, particularly by examining class disparity, community commitments, and gender experience. The effectiveness prevails in exposing the causal violence inherent in class systems and the profound moral implications of privilege and neglect, illustrating how societal hierarchies force suffering at various stages.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Like other narratives in *Heart Lamp*, *The Shroud* underscores the persistent struggles faced by marginalized communities and women in India, demonstrating how entrenched societal norms stifle lives at every turn. Even in the face of societal disapproval, Mushtaq's overarching message about the imperative for women to use their voice emerges as a crucial path towards resistance and autonomy. Despite their hardships, her characters are consistently portrayed as astonishing survival portraits and resilience, embodying the enduring spirit that seeks light and hope in the face of disadvantage.

The short story collection, Booker Prize-winning *Heart Lamp*, portrays a significant milestone, shining a greater spotlight on Indian regional literature and fostering an environment conducive to more translations. This global recognition underscores a crucial point: while Mushtaq's stories are deeply rooted in the specific socio-cultural context of Muslim communities in southern India, their core themes of patriarchy, class disparity, resilience, and the struggle for voice resonate universally. The global acclaim for *Heart Lamp* is a powerful testament to this universal appeal, demonstrating that deeply contextualized narratives, when rendered with authenticity and emotional depth, can transcend cultural boundaries and speak to the broader human experience of oppression and survival. It is not despite the specificity of her narratives that Mushtaq's work achieves universal relevance, but often precisely because of it, as the meticulously observed local details illuminate broader patterns of human struggle and resilience that are identifiable across diverse cultures. Her cherishing legacy lies in her unwavering commitment to bringing attention to lives lived at the edges and her powerful insistence on the inherent value of persisting amidst overwhelming odds.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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