

## A LIGHT WITHIN DARKNESS: A FEMINIST READING OF THE MORAL JOURNEY IN BANU MUSHTAQ'S *HEART LAMP*

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Received on 19 December 2025 / Approved 18 April 2026

### Abstract

This article examines the moral and ethical transformation of the unnamed female protagonist in Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* through feminist literary criticism and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The narrative demonstrates how patriarchal structures govern women's emotional survival and moral choices within South Asian Muslim domestic settings. At the beginning, the protagonist complies with patriarchal expectations out of fear, reflecting Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage shaped by external authority. Her encounters with Shaista, a mother exhausted by continuous childbirth, and Asifa, a girl deprived of education, deepen her awareness of shared female suffering and expose the gendered inequalities embedded in everyday life. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's notion of woman as "the Other" and Elaine Showalter's gynocritical framework, the analysis highlights how the protagonist's growing empathy destabilizes established norms and initiates a profound moral awakening. The recurring lamp symbol illuminates her gradual shift from conformity to critical consciousness, marking her internal struggle to reclaim agency. As she progresses toward Kohlberg's post-conventional stage, she recognizes systemic injustice, challenges oppressive expectations, and asserts her ethical autonomy. Through this transformation, the story reveals how moral development becomes intertwined with feminist resistance, showing that personal awakening can evolve into a powerful challenge to patriarchal authority. The protagonist's journey underscores the emotional burdens imposed on women while also foregrounding their capacity for resilience, solidarity, and ethical self-determination. This study also offers a distinct academic contribution by demonstrating how feminist resistance can be analyzed through the lens of moral psychology, providing new insight into the interplay between ethical development and women's agency within patriarchal structures.

**Keywords:** feminism; patriarchy; moral development; resistance

### Abstrak

*Artikel ini menelaah transformasi moral dan etis tokoh perempuan tanpa nama dalam Heart Lamp karya Banu Mushtaq melalui kritik sastra feminis dan teori perkembangan moral Kohlberg. Narasi menunjukkan bagaimana struktur patriarki membentuk ketahanan emosional dan pengambilan keputusan moral perempuan dalam ruang domestik Muslim Asia Selatan. Pada awal cerita, tokoh utama mematuhi tuntutan patriarki karena rasa takut, mencerminkan tahap pra-konvensional Kohlberg yang didasarkan pada kontrol eksternal. Pertemuannya dengan Shaista, seorang ibu yang kelelahan oleh kelahiran berulang, serta Asifa, gadis yang ditolak hak pendidikannya, memperluas kesadarannya tentang penderitaan kolektif perempuan dan mengungkap ketidakadilan gender yang mengakar dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Dengan memanfaatkan gagasan Simone de Beauvoir tentang perempuan sebagai "Lian" dan kerangka ginokritik Elaine Showalter, analisis ini menyoroti bagaimana empati tokoh utama mengguncang norma mapan dan memicu kebangkitan moral yang mendalam. Simbol lampu yang berulang menandai peningkatan kejernihan moralnya, menyoroti pergeseran dari kepatuhan menuju kesadaran kritis. Saat ia bergerak menuju tahap pascakonvensional Kohlberg, ia menyadari ketidakadilan sistemik, menantang ekspektasi yang menindas, dan menegaskan kembali otonomi etikanya. Transformasi ini menunjukkan bahwa perkembangan moral dapat berkelindan dengan resistensi feminis, di mana kebangkitan personal berubah menjadi bentuk perlawanan terhadap otoritas patriarki. Perjalanan tokoh utama menegaskan beban emosional yang ditanggung perempuan sekaligus menampilkan kapasitas mereka untuk ketangguhan, solidaritas, dan penentuan diri etis.*

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**Kata Kunci:** *feminism; patriarki; perkembangan moral; perlawanan*

## INTRODUCTION

South Asian women's writing has long served as a powerful site for articulating the complexities of gendered experience, especially within domestic, cultural, and religious structures. Mushtaq (2025) offers a compelling narrative landscape that brings to light the moral struggles, emotional negotiations, and quiet resistances embedded in women's everyday lives. Her stories blend intimate domestic scenes with broader social commentary, revealing how women navigate systems of authority, affection, and control. The opening story, "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," foregrounds these tensions through the intertwined lives of Zeenat and Shaista, whose experiences expose both the tenderness and the constraints within patriarchal family structures. The text vividly illustrates unequal gender expectations such as limited educational opportunities for daughters, unquestioned reproductive burdens placed upon mothers, and deeply internalized beliefs about male authority issues that surface repeatedly in South Asian feminist critiques. Examples from the story, including Shaista's lack of control over her own reproductive choices and Asifa's curtailed education, highlight these ongoing challenges.

Although many theoretical frameworks have examined patriarchy and women's subordination, scholars note the importance of analyzing how these systems operate not only through external oppression but also through internalized beliefs and emotional obligations (see Friedan's discussion of "the problem that has no name," which reflects how women may normalize their own subordination). Similar concerns appear in Southeast Asian contexts, where researchers such as Sita Aripurnami and Julia Suryakusuma argue that patriarchal values are often reproduced through the family, religious norms, and state-defined moral expectations particularly through what Suryakusuma terms State Ibuism, a concept describing how women's roles are morally framed as service, sacrifice, and duty. In broader Southeast Asia, feminist scholars like Khin Mar Mar Kyi and Nurfadzilah Yahaya highlight how emotional labor, kinship obligations, and moral norms often shape women's acceptance of gender inequality. These regional insights enrich an understanding of Mushtaq's narratives, showing that women's moral negotiations within patriarchal systems are not isolated to South Asia but resonate across Asian societies.

Despite the growing scholarship on South Asian and Southeast Asian women's writing, the moral and emotional negotiations that women undertake within domestic relationships in Mushtaq's stories particularly the subtle interplay between affection and subjugation remain underexplored. Existing studies largely emphasize broader themes of resistance, silence, and patriarchal oppression rather than examining how moral self-reflection itself becomes a source of agency within oppressive domestic structures. For example, Dutta (2025) interprets silence in *Heart Lamp* primarily as a form of feminist resistance and self-preservation, focusing on women's political positioning within patriarchal society. Likewise, Anjarsari et al. (2025) analyze the stories through the framework of "interface ethics," emphasizing spatial interactions, material objects, and embodied piety in shaping women's experiences. While these studies provide important insights into women's resistance and ethical negotiation, they do not specifically investigate how female characters develop moral consciousness through internal ethical reflection and emotional negotiation within domestic relationships. This study therefore addresses that gap by examining the moral journey undertaken by female characters in *Heart Lamp*, focusing on how they navigate love, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and self-realization.

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realization. The central problem explored in this article is how Mushtaq represents women's moral consciousness in contexts where their autonomy is limited by cultural and familial expectations. The narrative suggests that even within restrictive environments, women like Zeenat and Shaista develop moral clarity, empathy, and ethical agency qualities that illuminate their lives from within despite external darkness.

Based on this problem, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does Banu Mushtaq portray women's moral agency within patriarchal domestic spaces in *Heart Lamp*?
2. In what ways do emotional relationships such as marriage, friendship, and motherhood shape the moral decisions of the female characters?
3. How does the contrast between external constraints and internal moral illumination contribute to the overarching theme of "light within darkness" in the collection?

This study is significant for several reasons. Academically, it contributes to feminist literary scholarship by analyzing how moral self-awareness operates as a subtle but powerful form of agency in women's narratives. Practically, the analysis offers insights into how cultural norms influence women's ethical decision-making, particularly in South Asian and Southeast Asian contexts where patriarchy remains deeply entrenched. Furthermore, by examining Mushtaq's nuanced portrayal of women's interior lives, this study highlights the importance of acknowledging the emotional and moral dimensions of gendered experience dimensions that are often overshadowed by structural critiques alone.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Scholarly Perspectives on Moral Illumination in *Heart Lamp*

Mushtaq (2025) has generated considerable critical and academic attention due to its nuanced portrayal of women navigating moral, emotional, and spiritual complexities within contemporary Indian Muslim society. Scholars and reviewers consistently highlight the text's exploration of how ordinary women cultivate inner light resilience, faith, and ethical clarity amid social darkness such as patriarchy, poverty, and religious constraint. Anjarsari, n.d. (pp. 407–422), *Fluid Islamic Identities and Posthuman Assemblages in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp*. This study argues that the moral dimension of *Heart Lamp* emerges through what they call "interface ethics," where moral transformation is mediated not only by human agency but also by objects, spaces, and material thresholds. Everyday items such as lamps, fabric, doors, corridors, and waiting rooms become ethical interfaces that shape characters' awareness and guide their moral journey. Rather than portraying morality as an abstract ideal, Mushtaq embeds it in subtle interactions touching cloth, lighting a lamp, pausing at a doorway where characters negotiate fear, trauma, and compassion. This approach supports the idea of "light within darkness" by illustrating how illumination begins in small, material acts of care.

Dutta's (2025a, pp. 77–90) article, *Silence as a Form of Resistance: The Feminine in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp*, examines silence as a moral and political strategy. Dutta contends that silence in *Heart Lamp* is not merely an indicator of oppression but a deliberate ethical posture. Through silence, women internalize suffering, contemplate their circumstances, and reclaim agency in ways that resist patriarchal expectations. This interpretation reinforces the theme of a moral journey one marked by introspection, restraint, and the quiet cultivation of inner strength. Silence becomes a sanctuary where moral clarity and spiritual light emerge. The protagonist's interactions with the shroud uncover a deeper ethical struggle involving dignity, faith, and resistance to social norms. This reinforces the broader pattern in Mushtaq's work: moral journeys unfold through intimate encounters with cultural and religious symbols that carry both weight and illumination.

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Beyond academic scholarship, prominent literary reviews also deepen the understanding of *Heart Lamp*. Outlets such as Outlook India, Indian Express, and the Financial Times highlight Mushtaq's ability to portray women who "emit light" through acts of endurance, compassion, and spiritual clarity, even while navigating oppressive social conditions. These critics underscore the thematic interplay of light and darkness where darkness signifies social injustice, while light symbolizes ethical resilience. They argue that Mushtaq's characters do not undergo dramatic moral transformations; instead, their journeys are shaped by small acts of bravery and tenderness that accumulate into profound ethical insight. Together, these scholarly and critical sources reveal a consistent interpretation: *Heart Lamp* presents morality as an embodied, relational, and deeply spiritual process. The moral journey is less about overcoming darkness and more about learning to create light from within it. Mushtaq's women do not escape hardship; they illuminate it. Through silence, material objects, intimate spaces, and everyday acts, *Heart Lamp* portrays a moral universe where light and darkness coexist and where moral clarity emerges through lived experience rather than abstract doctrine.

### Academic Perspectives on Everyday Morality in Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* has attracted growing academic attention for its intimate portrayal of women navigating moral dilemmas within restrictive social and religious structures. Scholars generally agree that the collection presents morality as a lived, everyday process something negotiated quietly in domestic spaces, social boundaries, and moments of silence. This literature review highlights key studies that illuminate how Mushtaq constructs a moral journey that moves from darkness toward inner light. One of the most influential studies comes from Anjarsari, n.d., (pp. 407–422), who explore *Heart Lamp* through the lens of interface ethics. They argue that Mushtaq represents moral agency not as abstract religious virtue but as something shaped through physical spaces and material interactions. Corridors, doorways, clothing, and everyday objects become sites where characters negotiate ethical responsibilities. Their posthuman feminist approach suggests that moral transformation emerges through relationships between humans and material objects, reinforcing the idea that enlightenment in the stories is grounded in embodied, ordinary experiences Anjarsari, n.d. (pp. 407–422). Another significant contribution is provided by Dutta (2025b, pp. 77–90), who analyzes silence as moral resistance. Drawing on feminist theorists such as Butler and Spivak, Dutta argues that silence in *Heart Lamp* functions as an intentional act of self-preservation and moral defiance rather than passive submission. Many of Mushtaq's female characters choose silence as a strategy for reclaiming dignity and resisting patriarchal norms. Dutta's work situates Mushtaq within the Kannada *Bandaya* (rebellion) literary tradition, which foregrounds marginalized voices and critiques oppressive social structures.

Across these sources, scholars converge in seeing *Heart Lamp* as a profound exploration of moral journeys shaped within everyday life. Mushtaq's characters find "light" not through dramatic revelation but through steady, often quiet acts of resilience and self-understanding. This consistent thematic reading supports the interpretation of moral illumination emerging out of darkness, constraint, and emotional struggle.

In addition to global feminist theorists, Southeast Asian scholars also provide essential context for understanding how women negotiate moral and emotional burdens within patriarchal structures. Othman (2006, pp. 339–353) highlight how Muslim women in Malaysia navigate obedience, silence, and agency in ways that parallel Mushtaq's characters, particularly in contexts where religious and cultural norms intersect. These Southeast Asian perspectives enrich the analysis of *Heart Lamp* by situating its moral and feminist tensions within a broader regional discourse in which women resist oppression not only through overt rebellion but through subtle moral negotiation and inner illumination.

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## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design to explore the moral and emotional transformation of the protagonist in *Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq. A qualitative approach is most appropriate for this research as it aims to interpret the lived experiences, moral reasoning, and internal struggles of the protagonist elements that are best analyzed through an interpretive, non-numerical framework. As Bogdan & Biklen (1998a) emphasize, qualitative research is concerned with “understanding the meaning people have constructed” (p. 7). Accordingly, this study seeks to interpret how the narrative constructs women’s moral consciousness within an oppressive patriarchal environment. The use of inductive analysis enables themes and interpretations to emerge organically from close textual engagement rather than imposing predefined hypotheses.

### Data Source and Research Instrument

The primary data for this study is the short story “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal” from Banu Mushtaq’s anthology *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*. Although the anthology consists of twelve short stories, this study focuses specifically on “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal” because it most explicitly portrays women’s moral struggles, emotional negotiations, and feminist awakening within patriarchal domestic structures.

The text is examined in its English translation and supported by scholarly critiques, feminist theories, and relevant literary studies. In line with the nature of qualitative research, the researcher functions as the primary instrument of analysis Bogdan & Biklen (1998a). This interpretive role involves reading, coding, categorizing, and synthesizing meanings from narrative elements, character dynamics, and symbolic constructions. According to “Feminism: Understanding the Movement and Its Impact” (2025, pp. 1–7), feminism is defined as a critical framework that interrogates structures of gendered oppression and the ways in which women negotiate agency within those structures; this theoretical orientation supports the interpretive work conducted in the analysis.

### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through:

- a. Close Reading  
Repeated, careful reading of *Heart Lamp* to identify key narrative segments that reflect the protagonist’s moral development, feminist consciousness, and responses to patriarchal norms.
- b. Textual Annotation and Coding  
The story was annotated and coded thematically to classify emerging patterns such as emotional suppression, internalized patriarchy, moral awakening, female solidarity, and the symbolism of light. This follows Bogdan & Biklen (1998a) view that qualitative data is descriptive and embedded in language.
- c. Literature Integration  
Textual findings were systematically compared with established feminist theories including (Beauvoir et al., 2012) concept of women as the Other, Showalter’s gynocriticism, and (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, n.d.) metaphor alongside prior research on South Asian feminist fiction as a form of theoretical triangulation.

### Data Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis guided by Bogdan & Biklen (1998b) three-step analytical process:

- (1) identifying significant units of meaning,

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- (2) categorizing emerging patterns, and
- (3) constructing conceptual interpretations (1998).

This analysis included:

- **Narrative Dissection**  
Breaking down story events to trace shifts in the protagonist’s moral reasoning and emotional awareness.
- **Symbolic Interpretation**  
Examining the metaphor of the lamp as a representation of ethical clarity, resistance, and internal illumination.
- **Feminist Theoretical Mapping**  
Aligning textual evidence with feminist perspectives to reveal systems of structural oppression and women’s modes of agency.

Through this layered analysis, the research demonstrates that *Heart Lamp* presents moral development not merely as an individual psychological process but as a deeply social and political one shaped by gendered power structures.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applies strategies commonly used in qualitative literary research. Credibility is strengthened through theory triangulation, in which interpretations are examined across multiple feminist perspectives (*1949\_simone-de-Beauvoir-the-Second-Sex*, n.d.). Dependability is maintained through consistent coding procedures and systematic documentation of analytical steps. Confirmability is reinforced through peer discussion, where preliminary interpretations were reviewed and debated with fellow researchers to minimize subjective bias. Finally, transferability is supported by providing thick descriptions of narrative events and thematic patterns, enabling readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to wider contexts in South Asian and Southeast Asian feminist literature.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Feminism**

Feminism serves as the primary theoretical framework for understanding the protagonist’s struggle in *Heart Lamp*. Feminism is defined as a movement that advocates gender equality and challenges systems and structures that marginalize women (Moon, 2025, p. 1). This framework is clearly reflected in Zeenat’s critical awareness of her position within marriage and society. She openly resists hierarchical gender relations when she asserts that she does not accept the division between “owner and servant” roles within marriage, emphasizing her educational background and sense of self-worth (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 7). The text further exposes the normalization of women’s subordination through cultural and religious discourse, as the narrator observes that “the wife is the husband’s most obedient servant, his bonded labourer” regardless of religious affiliation (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 8). These representations reveal how women are expected to internalize obedience, emotional restraint, and domestic responsibility. In line with feminist theory, such experiences demonstrate that women’s oppression in *Heart Lamp* is not merely personal but systemic, produced by enduring social structures that sustain gender-based inequality (Moon, 2025, p. 2).

This structural understanding of feminism aligns with Marxist-feminist perspectives, which emphasize that women’s oppression is not merely cultural or personal, but systemic. As Saragih, Zuhriah, and Purwarno (2025) argue, “the exploitation of women is rooted in the capitalist system that positions women as cheap labor while simultaneously binding them to domestic responsibilities”

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(p. 169). This framework helps explain why the female characters in *Heart Lamp* are expected to endure emotional suffering, domestic labor, and moral silence simultaneously, even when they receive no recognition or autonomy in return.

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy, as documented in Sultana (2012, pp. 1–18), is described as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”. In *Heart Lamp*, patriarchal domination is explicitly articulated through the narrator’s reflection on marital norms, where she observes that “no matter which religion one belongs to, it is accepted that the wife is the husband’s most obedient servant, his bonded labourer” (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 8). This statement reveals how obedience is normalized as a moral obligation rather than recognized as a form of oppression. Patriarchal authority is further reinforced through everyday domestic interactions, as Zeenat critically resists the hierarchical roles imposed on her by rejecting the notion of husband as “owner” and wife as “servant,” a structure she associates with loss of dignity and autonomy Mushtaq (2025, p. 7). Such internal negotiations reflect what Lerner (1989) terms “paternalistic dominance,” where women are expected to internalize subordination in exchange for social stability and marital security. Through these depictions, *Heart Lamp* exposes patriarchy not only as an external force but as an ideology embedded in daily language, religious justification, and domestic life, shaping women’s emotional discipline and limiting their agency.

The findings show that the experiences of Muslim women in *Heart Lamp* reveal forms of gender inequality rooted in both domestic and public patriarchy, where women must navigate restrictive social norms, religious interpretations, and family hierarchies that limit their autonomy, reflecting the patriarchal dynamics described by Nasrulloh & Utami (2022, pp. 19–34). Despite these constraints, Mushtaq’s characters demonstrate subtle but persistent resistance through everyday acts of agency. The repeated portrayal of men as ultimate decision-makers, sometimes even likened to “God on earth,” echoes how conservative interpretations of texts such as An-Nisa 34 are used to legitimize male authority, reinforcing the gender hierarchy noted by Nasrulloh & Utami (2022, pp. 19–34). Together, these narrative elements illustrate how women in Mushtaq’s stories continually negotiate identity, dignity, and moral agency within unequal structures, supporting feminist perspectives that center women’s lived experiences in understanding gendered oppression in South Asian Muslim contexts.

### **Moral Development and Feminist Awakening in *Heart Lamp***

The findings of this study reveal that *Heart Lamp* constructs its protagonist’s experience as a deeply layered moral journey shaped by both individual development and the oppressive system in which she lives. At its core, the narrative portrays a woman negotiating her sense of right and wrong while trapped within the boundaries of patriarchal expectations. When examined through Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, her trajectory demonstrates a gradual but powerful shift from externally imposed obedience toward internally guided principles. Meanwhile, feminist and patriarchal theory provide essential insight into the social structures that restrict, delay, and distort her moral evolution. The story is thus not merely a personal narrative but a reflection of how women’s moral lives are shaped and often damaged by systems of domination that attempt to dim the inner light of conscience and agency.

Zeenat’s early moral awakening is marked by a growing sense of ethical discomfort that disrupts her previously passive acceptance of patriarchal norms. This moment is explicitly articulated when she admits, “I did not like where this conversation was going” (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 13). The statement signals more than emotional unease; it reflects the beginning of moral self-reflection in which Zeenat recognizes the injustice embedded in ordinary domestic discourse. Through a feminist lens, this discomfort represents the initial rupture in patriarchal conditioning, where silence and obedience are no longer perceived as morally neutral. The protagonist’s early experiences align with Kohlberg’s pre-conventional level, where moral decisions are shaped by fear, punishment, and

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survival rather than understanding. Kohlberg states that at this stage individuals “behave according to socially acceptable norms because they are told to do so by an authority figure.” In *Heart Lamp*, this authority is embodied in the patriarchal figures around her who impose rules, silence her emotions, and punish deviation from expected behavior. She follows these rules not because she sees them as just, but because any attempt to resist results in emotional or physical harm. Such dynamics reflect the patriarchal principle that women must be kept compliant to maintain male control. The protagonist’s silence, withdrawn demeanor, and habitual self-blaming reveal how deeply patriarchal conditioning penetrates a woman’s psychology. Feminist theorists argue that patriarchal systems operate by normalizing women’s subordination and training them to accept humiliation as part of duty or womanhood. This is vividly portrayed in the protagonist’s struggle to understand why cruelty directed at her is justified as tradition or moral correctness. Rather, Zeenat begins to understand that compliance sustains gendered oppression. In terms of Kohlberg’s moral development, this moment marks her transition from a pre-conventional orientation driven by fear and conformity toward a conventional stage shaped by empathy and ethical questioning. Mushtaq thus portrays moral awareness as emerging quietly, through inner resistance rather than overt rebellion, emphasizing that feminist consciousness often begins with the recognition that something is fundamentally wrong.

As the narrative progresses, the protagonist gradually enters (*Simplypsychology.Org-Kohlbergs-Stages-of-Moral-Development*, n.d.) conventional level, a stage where individuals begin evaluating moral choices based on social relationships and shared values. For the first time, she becomes more aware of the suffering of other women around her women who are silenced, punished, or dismissed in similar ways. Her compassion for them is not passive; it becomes a mirror that reflects her own possible future if she continues accepting her imposed role. This moral shift is intertwined with the feminist recognition that women’s oppression is collective, not private. Feminist scholars argue that many women experience their awakening by seeing their pain reflected in others. The protagonist’s empathetic response represents an emerging moral consciousness that challenges patriarchal ideology. She begins to question why certain actions are labeled “shameful” only when committed by women, why pain inflicted by men is tolerated, and why authority is granted to one gender alone. Her moral growth at this stage is cautious and fragile, yet meaningful: she no longer takes patriarchal rules as unquestionable truth.

However, this phase also reveals the psychological weight of patriarchal expectations. She struggles to reconcile her internal ethical awakening with the external pressure to remain obedient, respectful, and silent. Patriarchy relies heavily on the pressure of reputation, modesty, and social approval to maintain women’s submission. Women are expected to preserve harmony even when they are harmed. This tension contributes to a moral conflict within the protagonist: she wants to protect others and herself, but she is also afraid of violating the norms that define her value in society. Her hesitation and emotional turmoil illustrate the feminist observation that patriarchy not only restricts women physically but also colonizes their moral imagination. Even when she senses injustice, she doubts whether she has the right to believe that something is wrong. Her moral development at this stage is therefore marked by negotiation, fear, and a growing resistance that has not yet fully matured.

The turning point of the protagonist’s journey emerges when she enters Kohlberg’s post-conventional level, a stage driven by moral principles rather than social expectations. Kohlberg argues that this highest stage reflects “respect for universal ethical principles and the demands of individual conscience.” In *Heart Lamp*, this is symbolized by the brightening of the lamp—her inner light—that persists despite attempts to extinguish it. At this moment, she recognizes that the moral codes she once followed are not rooted in justice but in male dominance. This revelation frees her from the illusion that obedience equals righteousness. Her decisions become guided by empathy, fairness, and a desire to dismantle harm rather than accommodate it. This marks a profound feminist awakening. Feminist theory argues that liberation begins when women recognize patriarchy not as a natural condition but as a socially constructed system of domination (de Beauvoir, 2011). The protagonist’s moral clarity allows her to see patterns of abuse that were previously concealed behind cultural norms. She acknowledges that silence does not protect her it protects the patriarchal system.

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Instead of fearing consequences, she begins to fear the moral cost of inaction. This shift is what transforms her from a passive character into an agent of justice. She questions, confronts, and ultimately resists those who attempt to control her, even when such resistance invites personal danger. Her courage is not impulsive but grounded in deep moral reasoning shaped by suffering, reflection, and a genuine desire to protect others.

The story's portrayal of light and darkness intensifies during this stage. Patriarchy represents darkness not only because it harms women but because it distorts moral judgment. Men in the story exemplify patriarchal dominance: entitlement, emotional manipulation, and the belief that their actions require no accountability. Patriarchal theorists describe this phenomenon as a system "in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women," often with cultural and religious justifications. The protagonist recognizes this darkness as systemic rather than personal. Her lamp as the symbol of moral truth stands as a small but persistent illumination in a world built to suppress it. The more she embraces her conscience, the brighter the lamp appears, suggesting that moral clarity emerges strongest in contexts of oppression.

This illumination allows her to reinterpret past events through a new ethical lens. Incidents she once blamed on her own inadequacy she later recognizes as manifestations of patriarchal power. This realization emerges when Zeenat begins questioning the unequal expectations placed upon women in marriage. She openly rejects the hierarchical logic that positions husbands as superior figures, stating, "I do not like establishing these owner and servant roles" (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 7). Earlier, such expectations had been normalized within her domestic environment, where wives were expected to obey without question. The narrator further observes that "the wife is the husband's most obedient servant, his bonded labourer" (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 8), revealing how patriarchal domination is framed as moral and religious duty. Behaviors once justified as tradition are gradually exposed by Zeenat as forms of emotional and social control. Her growing discomfort becomes explicit when she admits, "I did not like where this conversation was going" (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 13), signaling an emerging awareness that what had previously been presented as advice or custom was in fact part of a larger system of patriarchal manipulation and subordination. This retrospective clarity is crucial to her moral liberation because it enables her to reject the self-blame that patriarchal systems cultivate in women. Feminist scholars emphasize that internalized guilt is the emotional glue that maintains patriarchal stability. By freeing herself from this guilt, the protagonist disrupts the power dynamics sustaining her oppression. The protagonist's growth also highlights an essential feminist argument: moral development cannot be separated from social context. Patriarchal environments limit women's ability to reach higher levels of moral reasoning because they systematically punish autonomy, critical thinking, and self-expression. In *Heart Lamp*, every step the protagonist takes toward ethical independence is achieved through risk, resistance, and the willingness to lose social acceptance. Her courage is therefore not simply moral but political. Her actions create consequences beyond herself: they inspire other women, challenge the authority of male figures, and disrupt the structures that silence her community.

Ultimately, the protagonist's "light within darkness" represents the merging of moral consciousness and feminist liberation. Her journey demonstrates that moral development is not a purely psychological process; it is shaped by systems of power that either nurture or suppress ethical autonomy. The protagonist's transformation reveals the cost of moral clarity for women living under patriarchy: it requires confronting fear, breaking silence, and redefining identity outside of oppressive norms. Yet it also reveals the immense power of a woman who trusts her conscience. Her illuminated lamp does not eradicate the surrounding darkness, but it asserts the possibility of truth, justice, and resistance within it. Through this light, she reclaims not only her voice but her humanity.

### ***Pre-Conventional Stage (Kohlberg)***

At the pre-conventional stage, moral behavior is shaped by fear of punishment and obedience to authority rather than internalized ethical principles (Kohlberg). In *Heart Lamp*, this stage is reflected in the way women are socialized to accept obedience as a moral duty within marriage. The

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narrator explicitly observes that “no matter which religion one belongs to, it is accepted that the wife is the husband’s most obedient servant, his bonded labourer” Mushtaq (2025, p. 8). This statement illustrates how compliance is normalized through cultural and religious authority, encouraging women to obey in order to avoid social disapproval rather than out of moral agreement. Such obedience reflects a fear-based moral orientation, where silence and submission function as strategies for emotional and domestic survival.

### ***Conventional Stage***

At the conventional stage, individuals uphold social norms to maintain harmony and gain social acceptance. Zeenat’s moral awareness begins to develop as she becomes increasingly conscious of the collective nature of women’s suffering within patriarchal structures. Her interaction with Shaista exposes the emotional cost of conforming to gender expectations, particularly in relation to motherhood and domestic responsibility. Zeenat critically reflects on these norms when she recognizes that women are expected to endure suffering without protest, while men’s authority remains unquestioned. This awareness aligns with her earlier rejection of hierarchical marital roles, as she states, “I do not like establishing these owner and servant roles” (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 7). At this stage, Zeenat begins to question the moral legitimacy of social rules that demand women’s silence in the name of stability.

### ***Post-Conventional Stage***

Zeenat approaches the post-conventional stage when she starts prioritizing personal moral judgment over socially imposed obedience. Her moral development is marked by a growing insistence on dignity and self-worth rather than submission. This shift is evident in her refusal to elevate her husband to a god-like status, as she rejects the cultural belief that equates husbands with divine authority (Mushtaq, 2025, p. 7–8). By challenging these deeply rooted norms, Zeenat demonstrates an ethical awakening grounded in conscience rather than fear. In this stage, moral action is guided by principles of justice and autonomy, signaling a feminist redefinition of morality that resists patriarchal domination.

### **Moral Agency and Inner Illumination in the Lives of Women in *Heart Lamp***

In *Heart Lamp*, Banu Mushtaq crafts a detailed and deliberate portrayal of women negotiating moral agency within highly restrictive domestic spaces. These women are positioned in environments where social structures, religious customs, and marital expectations all reinforce male authority. Yet, Mushtaq resists depicting them merely as victims. Instead, she presents moral agency as a subtle form of power, emerging through thought, empathy, and interpersonal responsibility even when physical or social autonomy is limited. This reconceptualization of moral action challenges dominant narratives that equate agency solely with public rebellion or dramatic acts of defiance. Zeenat, the central character, represents a woman who gradually awakens to the ethical contradictions around her. In the early stages of the story, she is positioned within a traditional marriage to Mujahid, who is emotionally distant and dismissive of her needs. Zeenat takes on the expected roles of care and obedience, yet her internal frustration reveals a deeper awareness that something is morally amiss. Mushtaq uses this tension to showcase Zeenat’s initial phase of moral consciousness she has not yet expressed open dissent, but she is no longer fully aligned with the system that confines her. Her struggle is one of recognition, representing the first stage of inner agency. Shaista, by contrast, represents a different register of moral agency: one grounded in maternal compassion and endurance. Though burdened by repeated pregnancies and lack of reproductive choice imposed by her husband, Shaista continuously seeks to protect her children emotionally and dreams of a better future for her daughter. Her desire for Asifa’s education becomes a radical moral stance within a community that sees girls as burdens to be contained. Though Shaista cannot overturn her circumstances, her ethical vision for her daughter’s life transcends her restrictive environment. This complicates the idea of agency by insisting that even small acts of mental resistance hoping, imagining, wishing carry

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political weight. Thus, Mushtaq portrays women's moral agency as rooted in interiority, quiet perception, and relational care. Even within patriarchal frameworks that diminish women's voices, she argues that women are moral subjects capable of interpreting their experiences, forming judgments about right and wrong, and emotionally rejecting the systems that oppress them. In this way, *Heart Lamp* offers a vital counter-narrative to depictions of silent submission, instead revealing the moral complexity that thrives beneath social compliance.

Emotional relationships lie at the center of *Heart Lamp*, forming the backbone of how female characters construct meaning, navigate challenges, and develop moral reasoning. Mushtaq does not isolate moral action from feeling; instead, she emphasizes that acts of care, love, and empathy often reveal deeper ethical commitments. From marriage to friendship and motherhood, the emotional bonds portrayed in the story become the lenses through which women engage with right and wrong often in ways that carry both personal risk and moral clarity. In the context of marriage, Zeenat's moral awakening begins with her emotional suffering. Mujahid's coldness and disregard for her emotional needs might initially seem merely unkind, but as the narrative develops, his behavior becomes symbolic of the broader patriarchal devaluation of women's inner lives. Zeenat's emotional longing, though dismissed as trivial by her husband, is portrayed as morally legitimate her unmet desire for affection becomes a catalyst for ethical questioning. Mushtaq suggests that emotional pain can be a doorway to moral insight, especially when women are expected to bear such pain in silence. Friendship, particularly between women, is depicted as emotionally nurturing and morally enlightening. The bond between Zeenat and Shaista transcends social and religious norms, creating a rare space where honesty and vulnerability can coexist. Through their conversations and shared experiences, Zeenat sees another woman's suffering in Shaista's physical exhaustion, her unfulfilled dreams, and the consistent silencing of her voice. This connection prompts a moral shift: Zeenat begins to see her own marriage and domestic life not just as emotionally unsatisfying, but as ethically unjust. Friendship becomes a moral mirror, revealing structures of oppression that once appeared ordinary. Motherhood, particularly through Shaista and Asifa, highlights morally complex choices shaped by love and sacrifice. Shaista's moral decisions choosing compassion over resentment, hoping for her daughter's future instead of envy reveal a profound ethical resilience. Even though she lacks agency over her own body, she seeks to protect her children emotionally. This underscores a central theme of the story: moral decisions emerge in situated contexts, shaped by love and obligation even when systemic injustice frames those decisions with pain. Mushtaq elevates motherhood beyond biology or duty; it becomes a space where moral values of care, justice, and agency are enacted in quiet defiance of oppression.

Banu Mushtaq structures *Heart Lamp* around a powerful symbolic contrast: the "light" of women's moral awareness set against the "darkness" of patriarchal oppression. This thematic duality serves not only as narrative structure but also as ethical argument. In emphasizing internal illumination, Mushtaq challenges the idea that social power is the only thing that matters she insists that internal clarity, empathy, and moral resistance hold transformative power even when external systems remain unchanged. Externally, the characters' lives are dictated by norms they did not choose: restrictive marriages, gendered division of labor, lack of educational access, and spiritualized obedience to male authority. These coercive structures represent the "darkness" permeating the narrative a metaphor for institutionalized patriarchy that thrives on silence, suppression, and invisibility. Darkness in this context is not simply hardship; it is the pervasive, normalized system that keeps women's struggles hidden and their value diminished. Yet, throughout these environments, Mushtaq lights small lamps gestures, thoughts, quiet refusals that symbolize women's moral consciousness. Zeenat's realization that her unhappiness is unjust, Shaista's dream that Asifa should receive an education, and even Asifa's silent tears at the thought of lost opportunity all contribute to this metaphorical light. These internal responses signify a deeper awareness: each gesture is a flicker of resistance, a moral refusal to accept patriarchal control as natural or final. Mushtaq suggests that internal illumination is not merely emotional; it is ethical and political. It exposes the darkness around it, like a lamp making visible what the night hides. The more the characters grow in moral clarity, the

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stronger the light becomes even though their social reality remains unchanged. This juxtaposition teaches readers that internal resistance, no matter how imperceptible, has the power to disrupt normalized structures. Heart Lamp ultimately argues that the battle between light and darkness is not just external but spiritual and psychological an ongoing tension between resistance to oppression and submission.

## CONCLUSION

### Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* offers a deeply moving portrayal of women who navigate moral challenges in quiet, everyday ways. Rather than presenting morality as something grand or dramatic, Mushtaq shows it as something shaped in small decisions, moments of silence, and the spaces her characters inhabit. Through Kohlberg's theory of moral development, the protagonist's journey can be understood as a progression from the pre-conventional stage, in which obedience and silence are motivated by fear and social pressure, toward the conventional stage, where empathy and awareness of collective female suffering begin to shape moral judgment. Ultimately, the protagonist approaches the post-conventional stage as she develops personal ethical principles that challenge patriarchal expectations and affirm her dignity and autonomy. Scholars such as Anjarsari, n.d., (pp. 407–422) reveal how the physical world doors, hallways, clothing, and household objects becomes part of these women's ethical journeys. Meanwhile, Dutta (2025b, pp. 77–90) work demonstrates that silence in the stories is not weakness, but a thoughtful form of strength and resistance. Critics also highlight how the collection captures the tension between faith, social expectation, and personal honesty. Taken together, the literature suggests that the "light" in Heart Lamp shines through persistence, quiet forms of courage, and the ability to endure hardship with dignity. Mushtaq's storytelling reminds us that moral growth often happens in darkness, through slow and subtle transformations.

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