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## Economy of Silence: Financial Control and Domestic Power in the Selected Short Stories of Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*

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**Abstract:** From historical time women played a key role in shaping and maintaining the household and kinship. They played important functions such as caregiving, emotional support, and household chores. But they have not been given due credit for their work despite their endless contribution and work in their homes. One of the reasons which makes their work invisible is that it is considered a non-economic activity. Society values only those works in which economic factors are involved. From the past to the present women's condition is getting better, but still their domestic work is not highlighted. They are financially dependent on the male figures, which makes them subjected to exploitation. This dependency is not an abstract condition; rather, it is an everyday experience for them. Economic feminism examines how economic systems contribute to gender inequality by undervaluing women's labour. It argues that inequality is not only sustained through cultural or social norms but is rooted in economic structures that recognize only paid market work while treating unpaid domestic labour as natural.

While the contemporary scholarship discusses silence as resistance and Mushtaq's critique of patriarchal interpretations of Islam, the economic aspect of her narrative remains unexplored. Through selected short stories from *Heart Lamp*— "*The Stone Slab for Shaista Mahal*," "*Heart Lamp*," and "*Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!*"—this paper examines how the paradigm of love is used as a tool to exploit women and make financial control inherent in the family. Mushtaq does not directly employ economic theory; her narratives highlight how patriarchy maintains women's dependence through material and social structures. Using insights from Nancy Folbre, Michèle Pujol, and Susan Feiner, this paper explains how domestic labour is naturalised and excluded from economic value.

The analysis also considers how South Asian cultural norms, linguistic structures, and religious beliefs reinforce gender hierarchies. Terms like *yajamana* ("owner") and ideas such as "the husband is God" position men as authority figures and women as obedient dependents. Through her female characters, Mushtaq challenges these norms and exposes how silence, sacrifice, and servitude are constructed as moral duties.

**Keywords:** *Economic Feminism, Banu Mushtaq, Heart Lamp, South Asian Feminism, Nancy Folbre, Gendered Economy*

## Foundational Overview

**B**anu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, translated from Kannada by Deepa Bhashti, is a collection of twelve short stories that won the International Booker Prize 2025. The book deals with the themes of religion, patriarchy, oppression, gender inequality, and violence, vividly portraying the everyday struggles of Muslim women in Karnataka and South India while also carrying a universal resonance that could apply to women anywhere in India or the world. (Carvalho) The characters of the story are ordinary women, not belonging to any elite class, which makes the stories relatable and appealing. Love, which is commonly accepted as a symbol of freedom and security, is, actually used to make women submissive under its cover. To understand these relationships more clearly, it is important to see how finance shapes power within the household. Finance is one of the most decisive parameters of a patriarchal society, which has historically determined the worth of a man. In society, men receive power and position in proportion to their earnings. They are treated as rational beings and are entrusted with the responsibility of earning, while women are entrusted with household chores. However, their work is never given due acknowledgment, either in society or within the family. They are treated merely as feminine beings, which renders their contribution invisible. Due to the limitation of lacking financial freedom, finance acts as a tool for their exploitation. Women are forced to obey and become dependent on male figures. As Pujol explains:

Men are autonomous, independent individuals while women are dependents who cannot stand on their own. Women are always defined as members of family units, as wives, daughters, mothers. Men make economic decisions based on their own needs and their own abilities and options; they circulate freely in the market sphere. In contrast, women have limited access to the market and even more limited access to their own utility maximizing decision-making. (20)

To understand how such inequalities emerged and persisted, it is necessary to look at the development of feminist thought. The idea of feminism was born from a basic yet revolutionary demand: equality between men and women. One of the earliest and most influential works advocating women's rights was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft famously writes, "I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves." (90) Following her foundational ideas, thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Bell Hooks played key roles in shaping feminist thought through their analyses of gender oppression and women lived experiences. Contemporary feminist scholars continue this legacy: Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, questions fixed categories of gender; Roxane Gay, in *Bad Feminist*, examines the contradictions of modern feminism; and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* imagines the political and economic dangers of denying women bodily autonomy. This historical background helps introduce economic feminism, which connects women lived experiences to the structures of economic power. The concept gained major

attention through Marilyn Waring, a New Zealand economist and feminist, whose book *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* exposed how national income systems ignore women's unpaid labour and make their contributions invisible.

This paper explores how women inside the household are controlled through money and financial dependence using the framework of economic feminism. The idea of economic feminism emerges from the understanding that economic structures are not neutral; rather, they are deeply rooted in systems of gender and power. Women's household work, care work, emotional support, and contributions to the community are consistently neglected. Folbre comments on this attitude of society, explaining that economic traditions value only money-based, paid work. (3)

While earlier studies focus on how silence functions as a form of resistance and how Mushtaq critiques patriarchal readings of Islam while validating religious faith and cultural identity, little attention has been paid to how financial dependency serves as a tool of oppression against women. This paper addresses this gap by explicitly examining the economic dimensions of women's subordination in Mushtaq's stories.

### **Rationale**

This paper explores the role of finance in the exploitation of women. Most scholarship focuses on how cultural norms, patriarchal readings of religious texts, and patriarchy are the root causes of the exploitation of women. The aspect of finance as a tool to exploit women is mostly unexplored. Economic feminism shifts the focus from emotion and cultural expectations to how women's labour, choices, education, and freedom are controlled through money and financial dependence. By stressing the focus on unpaid work and the lack of economic agency, this study aims to highlight that women's oppression is rooted in material conditions, not mainly in cultural expectations. Previous scholarly research explores how silence is used as a form of resistance and Mushtaq's critique of patriarchal readings of Islam. The economic side is left underexamined, which creates a gap. This paper fills that gap by applying economic feminism to the selected short stories—"The Stone Slab for Shaista Mahal," "Heart Lamp," and "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!" It explores how ideas of love, duty, sacrifice, and devotion are used to hide financial control within families. The study shows that women's silence and obedience are not natural or moral virtues, but outcomes of economic dependence and the invisibility of their domestic labour.

### **Literature Review**

From earlier times to the present, women have played a key role in maintaining both the household and society. However, their contributions have received very little attention, and recognition. Economic feminism provides a practical framework to understand gender inequality as a material issue rather

than only a cultural or emotional one. It argues that traditional economic theories ignore women's contribution to the economy and are built around masculine values, failing to account for women's labour and its significance in social productivity. (Kulper and Sap 1)

A major critique raised by feminist economists concerns the neoclassical economic paradigm, which defines the economic identity of women mainly through their roles as dependents, particularly as wives and mothers (Kulper and Sap 5). Neoclassical models assume that the family functions as a unified, harmonious unit with shared interests, but feminist theorists reject this view and argue that households are shaped by unequal power relations and conflicting interests. (Folbre 18) This framework often positions men as rational, independent actors participating freely in the market, while women are placed in domestic roles as dependents with limited access to financial resources and reduced power to make decisions about their own well-being. (Pujol 20–21)

A key concern of economic feminism is how financial dependence limits women's autonomy. Women without independent income or property often rely on male earnings for survival and, in cases of abandonment or conflict, are forced to demand support through legal channels, which further reflects their powerlessness. (Sen 38) Economic feminists argue that access to property, wages, and resources is essential for women's empowerment and cannot be replaced by moral or legal equality alone. They also note that women face additional burdens because they bear the costs of caregiving, which restricts their participation in paid labour and lowers their bargaining power within the household.

Methodologically, feminist economics challenges traditional economic data collection, arguing that official statistics fail to recognise unpaid labour, domestic work, and power relations within the household. (MacDonald 128) To address these gaps, scholars use qualitative methods such as close textual analysis, case studies, interviews, and ethnographic research to capture women's actual lived experiences in both domestic and economic spheres.

Overall, economic feminism seeks not only to critique existing systems but also to create economic models that recognise women's labour—both paid and unpaid—and ensure their financial independence and security.

### **Eco Feminism in the selected short stories of Banu Mushtaq**

#### **“The Stone Slab for Shaista Mahal”**

In “The Stone Slab for Shaista Mahal,” the implications of economic feminism are depicted through the portrayal of patriarchal control, the devaluation of women's reproductive labour, and the denial of female autonomy. The story shows this through several instances. Iftikhar asserts his financial authority and dismisses his wife's contribution, saying, “I am the one raising them. Why are you worried? Thanks to God's grace, I earn enough to look after all of them well”. (Mushtaq 10) His

confidence in saying this comes from his ability to earn. This attitude reflects how he ignores his wife's labour and even the pain of childbirth.

It mirrors what Folbre describes as the economic tradition of valuing only money-based, paid work. (3) Folbre argues that this exclusion is not accidental but results from a deliberate process: "The devaluation of housework and child care was enforced by the official terminology of economists and statisticians". (96) Similarly, Postner, in his review of Waring's book, points out that Waring offers an extensive critique of the way women's household production is excluded from economic valuation. (238)

The story further reveals another form of economic oppression, which is used to keep women dependent. Men restrict women's education, which shapes their economic futures. Iftikhar decides to stop his daughter Asifa's studies, saying, "I made her stop studying because girls do not need much education. A high school certificate is enough. There is no need for her to roam around Mysuru for college. We can get her married off next year". (Mushtaq 10-11) By denying Asifa higher education, Iftikhar shows how patriarchy keeps the chain of dependency going by blocking her ability to build skills that could help her to become independent. Polachek argued that when girls are kept away from education, they lose access to better jobs. (44-45)

Iftikhar's plan to "get her married off next year" (Mushtaq 10) shows that he wants Asifa's life to be limited to motherhood and household work. This plan aligns with early economic thinkers like Marshall and Jevons, who believes that women should focus mainly on household duties. (Pujol 15) Traditional economic theories also assumed that women were 'naturally' suited for domestic work and child-rearing. (Pujol 17) In contrast, traditional feminist scholars reject the acceptance of these roles as natural and argue that they are created and maintained by social expectations, cultural norms, and male authority. (Kuiper and Sap 2)

The invisibility of household work and the limits placed on women's education are not the only burdens on women's shoulders. They also carry the heavy responsibility of childbearing and childcare, often without any recognition. Shaista's experience shows the physical and emotional pressure that constant motherhood can place on women. She says, "I have become a mother of six children over the last seventeen years. If you get my daughter married off this early....". (Mushtaq 11) Shaista's words show how her repeated pregnancies have exhausted her body and limited her life choices. She is afraid that her daughter will be subjected to the same treatment if she gets married early.

Shaista's rapid childbearing reflects what Folbre identifies as the "costs of caring". "How are the costs of caring for ourselves, our children, and other dependents distributed among members of society? These costs are largely paid by women, both inside and outside the money economy". (Folbre 1) This workload of cooking, cleaning, childcare, and emotional support leaves women too tired and gives

them no room for personal growth. The expectation placed upon women to do the unpaid work of the home, while men are largely free from these duties, creates the effect that Hochschild describes as “One reason that half the lawyers, doctors, and business people are not women is because men do not share the raising of their children and the caring of their homes. Men think and feel within structures of work which presume they do not have to do these things”. (13)

Women’s autonomy over their own bodies is deprived in a patriarchal society. Shaista’s question, “Is it dangerous to get an operation done to avoid having children?” (Mushtaq 15), expresses not only her desire to avoid further pregnancy and personal exhaustion but also her longing for reproductive freedom. By controlling women’s fertility, patriarchy also controls their economic futures. It ensures that women remain tied to household labour.

### “Heart Lamp”

The short story “Heart Lamp” shows how patriarchal norms, economic dependence, and the devaluation of women’s unpaid labour shape the lives of women within the household. Folbre explains patriarchy as a system held together by “interlocking structures of constraint based on gender”. (i) When Mehrun returns to her maternal home after being cheated by her husband, her family’s response demonstrates how these constraints operate. Social norms, expectations, and lack of economic support make women politically weak and financially dependent.

Mehrun’s mother exposes the double standard of patriarchy when she says, “He is a man, and he has stamped on some slush, but he will wash it off where there is water and then come back inside. There is no stain that will stick to him”. (Mushtaq 104) Inayat, the husband, is granted both moral and financial freedom; his wrongdoing is treated as temporary “slush.” In contrast, Mehrun is expected to bear the burden of honour, obedience, and sacrifice. Her brother adds to her humiliation by saying that if she cared about the family’s honour, she “should have set [herself] on fire instead of coming here”. (Mushtaq 105)

Her lack of autonomy becomes clearer when she expresses her desire to seek talaq “I will get talaq from him. I will not go back to that house”. (Mushtaq 104) Her family immediately dismisses her wish. Her brother insists, “The house that your *dholi* goes to should be the house from which your *dhola* comes out. That is the life of a decent woman” (Mushtaq 105). Cultural norms force her to return to the same abusive home. This shows how women’s labour, dignity, and lives are controlled by social expectations that keep them financially dependent on men. Woolf’s idea that a married woman becomes “the property of her husband” is clearly reflected in Mehrun’s situation. (43–44)

Mehrun’s suffering intensifies when she realizes her identity has been built around work that no one values. The story describes her state as “But the lamp in Mehrun’s heart had been extinguished a long

time ago. Who should she live for? What was the point? The walls, the roof, the plates, bowls, stove, bed, vessels, the rose plant in the front yard – none of these were able to answer her questions”. (Mushtaq 110) Her condition reflects how women are degraded when men withdraw affection and economic support. She looks at the walls, roof, and plates but cannot find an answer to why she should continue living. Her despair illustrates that when society treats a woman’s domestic labour as natural and outside the realm of economic value, her emotional and psychological life becomes tied entirely to the man who benefits from it. (Feiner 113)

Building on her emotional and psychological suffering, Mehrun’s despair reaches a breaking point when she attempts suicide by pouring kerosene on herself. (Mushtaq 112) This act shows her ultimate rejection of an identity built around serving others. “She had been a pawn in Inayat’s games of love and lust for sixteen years”. (Mushtaq 107) Her husband had already pushed her emotionally “alive into hell” (Mushtaq 111) by saying, “You lie there like a corpse. What happiness did I get from you?”. (Mushtaq 107) This harsh treatment demonstrates how her emotional and sexual labour is devalued, as her worth is measured only by his satisfaction, not her autonomy.

Mehrun’s vulnerability is also shown through her lack of financial resources and dependence on her husband. When she seeks refuge with her family, her brothers’ concern is not her suffering but the potential “dishonour” and “financial” burden she represents. Folbre notes that women without economic independence are “the least able to enforce claims on the fathers of their children”. (209) Their vulnerability forces them to follow societal norms, even when these norms are oppressive.

Women’s education is a key factor in liberating them from oppression. Men curtail women’s education to maintain dependency, viewing higher learning as unnecessary for a wife whose main role is social reproduction. Mehrun asks her family to at least let her complete her B. Com, but they ignore her and marry her off. This forces her into dependence. It limits her future labour force participation and market wages, confirming Polachek’s observation that lower investment in market-oriented human capital “prevents women from obtaining the better jobs”. (44–45).

### **“Be a Woman Once Oh Lord!”**

In “Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!”, the story challenges the traditional economic idea that the family works as a single unit where everyone shares the same interests. This idea is represented through “Mr. REM”, a figure used in economic theory to describe the rational male decision-maker. Folbre explains this idea as:

He is a rational decision-maker who weighs costs and benefits. He processes perfect information perfectly. All his decisions are motivated by the desire to maximize his own utility—to make himself happy. In the competitive marketplace, where he constantly

buys and sells, he is entirely selfish, doesn't care at all about other people's utility. In the home, however, he is entirely altruistic, loves his wife and children as much as his very self. (18)

The husband in the story treats marriage as a source of profit rather than acting for the well-being of the family members. His statement, "There are people who will give me lakhs of rupees, but I ended up bringing home a beggar like you!" (Mushtaq 203), and his demand that, "You must bring fifty thousand rupees from your parents' house immediately. If not, you can never set foot there ever again" (Mushtaq 203), portray that he values his wife only on the basis of money rather than emotional and domestic contribution. The domestic sphere, which ideally offers emotional security or mutual support, here becomes a controlled economic environment where the woman remains dependent and unpaid. Her unpaid labour inside the house, which encompasses cooking, raising children, maintaining the household, and serving her husband, is treated as a natural duty rather than meaningful economic contribution. (Feiner 113) She realises that she was "only his wife, that is, free labour". (Mushtaq 207) This realisation reflects that her autonomous identity is eventually erased and she is left only as his wife and free labour who works but does not get any credit. The emotional cost of this exploitation is clear when she states that, "His greed for money swallowed all our attachments, love and affection" (Mushtaq 205), suggesting that economic gain replaces emotional connection. The financial strain extends beyond her own life. Her parents "sell everything they called their own, make a bundle of twenty thousand rupees" (Mushtaq 206), which shows how patriarchal marriage extracts wealth from the natal family even after the marriage rather than supporting them.

This pattern of financial control inside the household leads to the breakdown of altruism that traditional economic theories assume. (Ott 58) After treating marriage as a tool to gain money, the husband continues to use his power even when the narrator is physically weak. He demands the gold chain and says, "I am getting married again. I want to give it to the new girl" (Mushtaq 208), which shows how he sees marriage and relationships only in economic terms and not emotional ones. Traditional theories assume that the male head of the family acts generously for everyone's well-being. (Elson 216) But in this instance, the male head replaces his wife when she becomes economically "unprofitable," driven by "greed for money," which "swallowed all our attachments, love and affection". (Mushtaq 205) His willingness to discard his wife portrays that the family does not function as a cooperative unit; instead, it reflects his personal needs, choices, and options. (Pujol 20)

## Conclusion

Banu Mushtaq's selected short stories expose how patriarchy and economy work together to control women's lives and dictate their choices. Through the experiences of Mehrun, Shaista, and the other female characters of the stories, Mushtaq highlights how love, duty and family are often used as a moral cover for hiding and making economic exploitation natural. Her female characters are not emotionally and physically oppressed rather they are also restricted financially. Their unpaid household labour is treated as natural and invisible. Mehrun served his husband for sixteen years and in return his husband insulted her womanhood. 'You lie there like a corpse. What happiness did I get from you?' (Mushtaq 107) The stories also reveal how dowry, limited education and ideologies keep ensure that women will not become independent and be dependent on the male figures.

By applying the lens of economic feminism, this paper has attempted at showing how the family system functions like an economic structure, where women's work keeps the home running but remains unnoticed and undervalued. Mushtaq's writing exposes this imbalance and questions the cultural beliefs that glorify women's silence and obedience. Her stories speak for countless women whose labour is never recognized as real work. Mushtaq's fiction gives us a lesson that women's empowerment cannot come from moral lessons alone. It requires financial independence, education, and social recognition of their unpaid work. True equality begins when women's labour inside the home is seen as valuable as any work outside it.

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