

Performing Gender: *A Butlerian Reading of Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp*

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Abstract

This research paper applies Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories* (2024), a short story collection by Banu Mushtaq translated by Deepa Bhasthi. The book brings together twelve stories written over three decades (1990–2023) that centre on the everyday lives of Muslim women in Karnataka, a state in southern India.

Butler's theory suggests that gender is not something we are born with naturally, but something we "perform" repeatedly again and again through our actions, words, and behaviours — much like an actor following a script. Society tells us how to act like a "proper" woman or a "proper" man, and we repeat these behaviours until they begin to feel natural, even though they are really social rules we have learned.

This research paper examines how the women in Mushtaq's stories perform their allotted roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and members of their community. It indicates that these identities are not biological facts, but are created and reinforced by larger social forces — patriarchy (male-dominated systems), religion, caste hierarchies, and class divisions. The women in these stories constantly work to meet expectations: they must be dutiful, obedient, quiet, and self-sacrificing. Failure to do so means facing humiliation, punishment, or exclusion.

However, the article also finds that the most powerful and memorable moments in the collection involving women occur when female characters refuse to comply with traditional societal expectations. By actively resisting, speaking out against imposed demands, or intentionally failing to meet these restrictive standards, and assert their true humanity. When a character refuses to stay silent, or a mother chooses her own needs over her family's, or a young woman questions tradition — these moments reveal cracks in the system. The norms that claim to be permanent and unchangeable suddenly look fragile, man-made, and breakable.

In conclusion, this article shows that *Heart Lamp* is not just a collection of stories about Muslim women in Karnataka. It is a powerful illustration of how gender is performed under pressure, and how resistance — even small, quiet acts of refusal — can expose the truth that the rules we live by are not fixed. They are performances. And performances can be rewritten.

Keywords: Gender performativity, Patriarchy, Women resistance, Gender roles, community expectations, subversion

Introduction: Gender as Performance

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler challenged the foundational assumption that gender is a natural extension of biological sex. Instead, Butler proposed that **gender is performative** — that is, it is not an expression of an inner truth, but a reality constituted through *repeated acts, gestures, expressions, and behaviours* that over time produce the illusion of a stable, coherent gender identity. As Butler famously writes:

"Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." (Butler, 1990)

Butler argues that gender has no original or essential core. There is no "authentic woman" behind the performance — the performance itself **is** the gender. Every time a woman dresses modestly, lowers her voice in a man's presence, sacrifices her ambitions for her children, or accepts a husband's authority without question, she is not expressing who she naturally *is* — she is *doing* gender, rehearsing a script written by culture, religion, and social convention.

This theoretical lens proves extraordinarily productive when applied to contemporary South Asian literature, particularly to **Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*** — a collection that won the International Booker Prize in 2025 and stands as one of the most important literary documents of women's experience in India. Mushtaq, a progressive activist and Kannada-language writer associated with the *Bandaya Sahitya* (protest literature) movement, does not merely narrate suffering — she dissects with surgical precision the *mechanisms* through which femininity is constructed, enforced, and, crucially, sometimes cracked. Read through Butler's lens, *Heart Lamp* becomes a deeply political text about the **daily labour of being a woman** in a world that mistakes that labour for nature.

The Core Framework

Butler's theory rests on three foundational pillars that this article will use as analytical tools throughout:

- **Performativity:** Gender is not what one *is* but what one *does* — enacted through continuous, repetitive performances of femininity or masculinity.
- **Regulatory Norms:** These performances are not free or individual; they are governed by deeply entrenched social norms that punish deviation and reward conformity.
- **Citability:** Each gender performance "cites" — that is, refers to and repeats — prior performances, making norms appear natural precisely because they have been repeated so many times.

Importantly, Butler also argues that **performativity is never fully stable**. Because gender must be contentedly repeated to be sustained, it is always vulnerable to failure, subversion, and acceptance. Every performance carries within it the possibility of parody, resistance, or rupture.

Applying Butler to Indian Contexts

In the Indian context, gender performativity does not operate in emptiness. It is layered upon structures of **caste, class, religion, and regional culture**, making it what scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw would call *intersectional*. A Muslim woman in rural Karnataka performs gender differently — and under different constraints — than an upper-caste Hindu woman in Delhi. The regulatory norms that reign over her performance draw simultaneously from patriarchal family structures, Islamic doctrine as locally interpreted, socioeconomic province, and the broader cultural script of Indian womanhood that valorises **self-sacrifice, modesty, and submission**.

Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* is situated precisely at this intersection — and it is this specificity that gives the collection its extraordinary power.

Gender Roles in Indian Society and Gender Performance in Family in *Heart Lamp*

The Daughter: Performing Sacrifice Early

In Butler's model, gender performance begins in childhood and is most violently enforced at the very moments when identity is still being formed. *Heart Lamp* opens this wound with devastating clarity.

In the story "**Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal**," the eldest daughter Asifa is described as "*more of a mother than a daughter to me*" — a comment made by her own mother with a mixture of gratitude and guilt. Asifa has left her education to care for her younger siblings, performing the role of the second mother long before she has had the chance to be fully a child. This is an ideal Butlerian moment: Asifa does not *choose* this identity — it is assigned to her through repetitive family expectation, and through her daily performance of domestic caretaking, it becomes *naturalized* as simply *who she is*.

The title story, "**Heart Lamp**," presents perhaps the most intimate statement in the collection: Mehrun, desperate to continue her studies, "*fell at the feet of her family*" begging not to be married off but refused. The family's male members prioritize marriage over education — not as an act of conscious cruelty, but as a citation of the dominant gender script, which holds that a girl's destiny is the home, not the classroom. Mehrun's plea — and its dismissal — perfectly illustrates Butler's argument that regulatory norms are maintained through **both action and silence**, through what is done *and* what is refused.

The story of **Bi Dadi** in "**A Taste of Heaven**" pushes this even further. Married off before puberty, widowed within a month, Bi Dadi spends her entire life as "*a shadow, her body, her mind, her dreams, none were fulfilled*." She performs the most invisible of gender roles: the *shadow-woman*, whose existence is defined entirely by what she is denied. Hers is a performance stripped of all agency — a gender enacted not through action, but through enforced absence.

The Wife: Performing Devotion, Enduring Abandonment

If the daughter's performance is one of preparation and sacrifice, the wife's performance in *Heart Lamp* is one of **endurance under erasure**. Marriage in Mushtaq's stories is not the fulfilment of femininity — it is its most demanding stage.

A recurring pattern across the collection is the husband who abandons his wife for a younger second wife — a scenario that unfolds with such frequency that it ceases to be anecdote and becomes **structural critique**. Butler would recognize this repetition as precisely the kind of *citational pattern* that produces norms: the more it happens, the more normalized it becomes, until the abandoned wife is made to feel that the failure is hers, not the institutions.

In "**Black Cobras**," the character Zulekha Begum — herself a woman who has survived the patriarchal household — challenges a maid trapped in a distressful marriage by educating her about what sharia law *actually* says about men taking second wives:

"Why don't scholars tell women about the rights available to them? Because they only want to restrict women." (Mushtaq, 2025)

This is a Butlerian arbitration at its most powerful. Zulekha is not simply offering legal information — she is **exposing the citational mechanism**: the way in which religion has been selectively cited, edited, and weaponized to construct a version of femininity that serves male authority. The gender norm presented as divine is revealed to be a human performance — one that can be rewritten.

The *Heart Lamp* story itself offers one of the collection's most haunting scenes: when Mehrun, abandoned by her husband, goes to her family for help and threatens to set herself on fire, her brother responds:

"If you had sense to uphold our family honour, you would have set yourself on fire and died. You should not have come here."

This response encapsulates the full horror of gender performativity under patriarchy. Mehrun's body — her suffering, her survival, even her death — is interpreted exclusively through the lens of *family honour*, which is

a *gendered* concept entirely. A woman's body, in this calculus, is not her own; it is a **vessel of collective gender performance**, and its continued existence is only valued insofar as it fulfils its script. That she dared leave the house alone, dared to *refuse* her assigned role, is read as the greater transgression.

The Mother: Performing Love Within Chains

Motherhood in *Heart Lamp* is, in Butler's terms, perhaps the most heavily *regulated* gender performance. It carries immense social value — yet it simultaneously renders women invisible as individuals. The mothers in Mushtaq's stories are exhausted, frequently pregnant, perpetually managing the needs of others, and structurally excluded from the decisions that govern their own lives.

The story of **reproductive rights** recurs across the collection, most pointedly in "**Fire Rain.**" Women seek *nasbandi* (sterilization) — not as liberation, but as survival strategy, desperate to stop the relentless cycle of pregnancy that depletes their health and resources. That some women must seek this procedure *against their husbands' wishes* exposes the fundamental contradiction of motherhood as a performed gender role: a woman is expected to *be* a mother endlessly, but she is denied the agency to *decide* when and how motherhood ends.

Mushtaq's mothers do not perform their role with grace and serenity — they perform it with **rage, shame, exhaustion, and grief**. This is significant. Butler argues that gender performance is never perfectly smooth; it always generates *excess* — emotions, desires, contradictions that cannot be contained within the script. The anger that runs through *Heart Lamp's* maternal figures is precisely this excess — it is the sign that the performance is *not* natural, but *imposed*.

Resistance and Alternative Gender Expressions

The Cracks in the Performance

If gender performativity is Butler's diagnosis, then *subversion* is her prescription. Butler argues that because gender must be continuously re-performed, it is always open to **parody, reappropriation, and resistance**. The moments in *Heart Lamp* when women refuse, challenge, or expose the gender scripts imposed upon them are not exceptions to the text's argument — they are its most radical affirmations.

In "**Black Cobras,**" women collectively throw rocks at an abusive man in the street — a moment of collective, embodied defiance that shatters the expectation of feminine passivity. This is what Butler calls a *dissonant performance* — an act that, by deviating from the norm, makes the norm *visible*. The violence of the response (both from the man and from the shocked community watching) confirms precisely how threatening this deviation is to the regulatory framework.

The woman who secretly obtains a medical procedure *against her husband's wishes* performs another kind of subversion: she claims sovereignty over her own body, asserting that her physical self is not exclusively a site of patriarchal gender performance. In Butler's language, she has **recited** the body — rewritten it from a vehicle of others' expectations into an instrument of her own will.

Education as Subversive Repetition

The longing for education that runs through *Heart Lamp* — Mehrun's tears, Asifa's interrupted schooling — can also be read as a Butlerian intervention. Education, in the context of these stories, is not merely practical. It represents access to **alternative scripts** for womanhood: scripts that are not authored by patriarchal family structures or selectively applied religious authority. When women in *Heart Lamp* reach for education, they are reaching, consciously or not, for the tools to *rewrite their own gender performance*.

Zulekha Begum and the Rewriting of Religious Authority

The figure of Zulekha Begum in "**Black Cobras**" deserves extended attention as a model of Butlerian resistance. As a religiously educated woman, she refuses the dominant *citation* of Islamic law that has been used to silence and control women, and replaces it with a more accurate, more just reading. This is not simply a legal correction — it is a **performative intervention**. By speaking this alternative citation in public, to another woman, she creates the possibility of a *different* repetition — one that, if it circulates widely enough, could begin to shift the norm itself.

This is what Butler means when she writes about the **political potential of performativity**: change does not come through a single heroic act of resistance, but through the slow, accumulative work of *differently repeated performances* that gradually destabilize the apparent naturalness of dominant norms.

Conclusion: The Political Weight of Everyday Performance

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* is not a political manifesto — it is something more enduring and more dangerous. It is a **record of the everyday**: the small, continuous, exhausting performances through which women in Muslim communities in southern India enact their gender under conditions not of their choosing. Read through Butler's lens, these stories reveal that every act of compliance, every meal cooked, every education abandoned, everybody scarred by over-pregnancy, every woman who stays silent when she should speak — each of these is a *political act*, a citation of the dominant gender script that keeps the script alive.

But Mushtaq also insists on the other side of Butler's argument: that the script can be disrupted. Zulekha teaching a maid her rights. Women throwing rocks together. A woman choosing surgery in defiance of her husband. Mehrun's tears at the feet of her family — because weeping, too, is a form of *bearing witness*, of refusing to perform acceptance.

Together, these moments do not constitute a revolution — Mushtaq is too unflinching for false hope. But they constitute something equally important: **proof of excess**. Proof that no regulatory norm is total, that no performance is perfectly replicated, and that within the everyday acts of women's lives — in kitchens, in courtyards, in clinics, in the street — the possibility of a different gender, a different world, is always already at work.

The title *Heart Lamp* evokes both the burning that destroys and the light that endures. It is an image that Butler herself might have chosen: fire as a sign of the violence done to women who refuse their scripts, and light as the stubborn, persistent illumination of another way of being.

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